

Issue 1 2021

NT

A pattern for life in God's house

Social justice

The march of time

Made in God's image

Issue 1 2021

From the Editors' desk

We leave a year behind us that will surely live long in the memory; will this one we are now entering be any less memorable? It seems as though the new U.S. Administration carries more existentialist threat towards Israel, and that perhaps means that the shadows are shortening still more ahead of our Lord's return for His Church.

I was recently thinking of how the Day of the Lord (cf. 2 Thes. 2:2) is a recurring theme of major and minor prophets alike in the Old Testament. They announced it as a day of darkness and wrath and judgement, with blessing for Israel lying beyond when peacefully back in her land. The prophetic vista scoped out stretches far beyond the discipline and then return of the Exiles from the 6th century BC onward. The full expression of 'Jacob's trouble' (Jer. 30:7 KJV) lies ahead for Israel and the surrounding nations mentioned back then. Where do we today find hope in all this? It is from the fact that the Church the Body was hidden in the Old Testament. This is the plainest way to see that the Church is 'not appointed for wrath' (1 Thes. 5:9), having no direct or immediate textual connection with the Day of the Lord there. But to what extent are current global trends part of the build-up?

Facing up to such things as the worldwide scourge (p.10) in our time, there are those, principally those without God, who seem overwhelmed by a sense of life's apparent meaninglessness (p.6); while those whose lifestyles show that they truly know God (p.4) can always find dignity in living as God's imagers (p.7). This should be the goal of all who have been bought out of the human slave market of sin (p.8). It's always good to hear of this happening to more and more people (p.16).

In one sense, none of this is new in a fallen world where generation after generation has met with triumph and disaster (p.15), but hopefully with the help of more accurate, biblical counsel from our friends than Job received (p.11), we can overcome the various temptations which those two imposters present us with (p.3).

Have a blessed New Year.

Maranatha!

Brian

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Who endures, wins

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Temptation is part of Christian life. As a true born again believer, you cannot live in this world without facing temptations. We face them daily, when we overcome them our genuine faith is manifested before God and men. Some Christians, when tempted, question God and ask: "Why me, Lord?" They ask due to a lack of knowledge and understanding of Christian principle.

Our Saviour, Jesus Christ, who is our master, faced the same challenge. He was tempted by Satan in the wilderness: *Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.*¹ Spiritual victory is often followed by testing. Jesus, in His response to all three temptations, quoted the Word of God, demonstrating the power of scripture in battling the Evil One. There was nothing morally wrong with turning stones to bread, but Satan was tempting Jesus to do a miracle outside of the Father's will. This explains why Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3. Bread alone does not sustain life; ultimately God is the one who sustains all life. It is our responsibility to trust God and remain in God's will. There are many types of temptations and challenges in life. During His time on earth, Jesus demonstrated to us how to overcome in the midst of temptations. He is our great teacher when it comes to learning how to overcome temptations.

Life is tough even at the start for some of us. Perhaps you come from a very poor family, or it was difficult for you to finish your education. Jesus knows what it feels like to have a difficult situation. He faced many challenges, but that did not stop Him from knowing His relationship to His heavenly Father and being committed to God's purpose. No matter what your problem is, your relationship with

God in heaven will help you to overcome your difficult circumstances and to achieve your spiritual goal.

Three spiritual elements that can help us to overcome temptations:

Persistence

Jesus Christ succeeded in His mission by finishing the work the Father had sent Him to do when He faced all the trials in life. Jesus was able to remain composed through all those trials because what He had in His heart was greater than all the threats, accusations and insults He faced. He knew how to persevere. You will never be successful unless you have the spirit of persistence. Fight until you feel the joy of victory.

It is obvious that God wants us to be fighters because the Bible calls us soldiers;² we are more than conquerors,³ we are warriors, we are a people who battle. Stay in the fight until you win.

Prayer

*But they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.*⁴

Prayer is where you receive the ability to continue the fight. A Christian must have a daily dynamic personal prayer life with God. Prayer helps you to have a continual communication and fellowship with God. You achieve nothing for the Lord without prayer. If you are always in touch with the Father, you will always be nourished in your life. Sometimes when you are serving God you might be criticised, pressed, opposed and become weak in faith. This is the time that we must kneel down, pray to God and cast our

burdens before Him. He will see us through, if our prayer is based on the Word of God. In prayer, we find comfort, encouragement and spiritual refreshment.

Patience

*Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.*⁵ Whoever endures, wins. We are not omniscient as God is; that's why we need to be patient and rely on God who gives guidance according to His purpose. When we are patient in the time of trials, we are able to be calm in the midst of challenges and keep moving, having a good relationship with God. Patience is the key to attaining the highest level. It's scriptural to say that the patient man is stronger than a mighty warrior.⁶

Patience brings wisdom that helps us to tackle trials.

References: (1) Mat. 4:1-11 (2) 2 Tim. 2:3-4 (3) Rom. 8:37 (4) Is. 40:31 (5) Heb. 10:35-36 (6) Prov. 16:32

Bible quotations from ESV



Social justice

Andy Seddon, Swindon, England

God created humans to know Him, and so pursuing this knowledge has got to be the greatest possible pursuit of our life both now and for all eternity. When Jesus was praying for His disciples in the hours leading up to His crucifixion, He defined 'eternal life' like this: *"that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."*¹ So knowing God involves more than just an academic knowledge, but encompasses a living, emotional relationship with God that changes our lives.

J.I. Packer makes a distinction between 'knowing' and 'knowing about' God, and warns that 'one can know a great deal about God without much knowledge of Him'.² Many Jews and religious leaders in Jesus' day were proof of this.³

True knowledge of God

How do we show that we truly know God? What will our lives increasingly look like if we have this knowledge of Him? That is what this series of articles seeks to explore based on some key scriptural texts.

Our text on this occasion is taken from Jeremiah 22:15-17:

*"Do you think you are a king
because you compete in cedar?
Did not your father eat and drink
and do justice and righteousness?
Then it was well with him.
He judged the cause of the poor and needy;
then it was well.
Is not this to know me?
declares the LORD.
But you have eyes and heart
only for your dishonest gain,
for shedding innocent blood,
and for practicing oppression and violence."*

Jeremiah is writing about (and to) Jehoiakim, a wicked son of the famously good King Josiah. Jehoiakim reigned in Judah between 609-598 B.C. not long before the eventual Babylonian captivity and exile of Judah. Egypt oppressed Judah at this time, and Jehoiakim was appointed as king by the Pharaoh (Neco) who imposed a hefty tax on the land of a hundred talents of silver and a talent of gold.⁴ Jehoiakim obtained this money by taxing

his own people⁵ which no doubt created additional hardship and poverty throughout the land, and this was whilst he lived comfortably in his 'cedar' palace, probably built or maintained financially by the same taxes. Jeremiah condemns Jehoiakim's 'dishonest gain' (v.17) and self indulgence and contrasts him with his good father Josiah who did 'justice and righteousness' (v.15), and who 'judged the cause of the poor and needy' (v.16), and then he asks rhetorically, *"Is that not what it means to know me?"* (v.16 NIV).

God, speaking of
King Josiah:

**"He judged the
cause of the
poor and
needy... Is not
this to know
me?"**

That Jehoiakim did not truly know the God of Israel is evidenced further by his arrogant and fearless disregard for God's Word and God's prophet which you can read about in Jeremiah 26:20-24.

So our knowledge of God is evidenced in our treatment of others; this applies to people both in and outside the community of God's people. In the New Testament Paul writes: *So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.*⁶ Our treatment of others is born out of our love, which in turn is evidence of our knowledge of God,

as the apostle John writes: *Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.*⁷

The focus on the vulnerable and needy

Throughout the Bible we are repeatedly drawn to God's special concern for the most needy and vulnerable in society. For example, the LORD Almighty, speaking through Zechariah, commands: *"Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor"*.⁸ This quartet of 'widows, orphans, immigrants and the poor', represents those who were the most economically and socially powerless in society; it is not so different these days.

In the New Testament, James echoes Zechariah's words: *Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.*⁹ The latter part of this verse reminds us that our personal moral purity is greatly important, but of equal importance to God is our pro-social care and concern for the needy and vulnerable.

Knowledge of God's character

Our attitude to others reflects our grasp of God's character, and this should lead to us increasingly growing to learn to love what He loves and to hate what He hates. The Lord discourages worldly boasting on the basis of 'wisdom', 'might' or 'riches', but says: *"let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD."*¹⁰ And so those who know their God should do likewise, as Micah emphasises:

*He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?*¹¹

Knowledge of God's love for our neighbour

Our attitude towards others reflects the level of our appreciation of how God feels about others. The wise man writes:

*Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker,
but he who is generous to the needy honors him.*¹²

The Psalmist also writes at length that it is the God of Jacob

*who executes justice for the oppressed,
who gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets the prisoners free;
the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; ...
The LORD watches over the sojourners;
he upholds the widow and the fatherless ...*¹³

So should our attitude and behaviour be, as far as we have opportunity.

Knowledge of God's love for His children

Our attitude towards our brothers and sisters in Christ reflects our grasp of God's deep love and identification with them.

Jesus in Matthew 25 spoke of a future day when He would return as the glorified Son of Man and would separate out the 'sheep' from the 'goats'. Many who believed they belonged to Jesus will be shocked on that day to discover they never did. The evidence is found in the way they treated others who belonged to Christ. The 'righteous' (or 'sheep') will say to Him: *"Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?" And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'*¹⁴ Conversely, Jesus, when warning His disciples of the

persecution and hatred they were going to face from enemies after his departure, explains: *"all these things they will do to you on account of My name, because they do not know Him who sent me."*¹⁵

Another instructive passage for church life is in 1 Corinthians 8 when Paul explores the behaviour of church members concerning a matter of personal conscience (eating food that has been offered to idols). Paul stresses the harm of doing something that offends a brother or sister with a weaker conscience (due to their different cultural background) just because their own conscience may allow it. Paul says: *knowledge puffs up, but love builds up*, and then immediately adds: *if anyone imagines he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know*. Paul warns therefore against destroying the brother *for whom Christ died*.¹⁶

Knowledge of God's grace towards us

New York pastor Tim Keller writes: 'there is a direct relationship between a person's grasp and experience of God's grace, and his or her heart for justice and the poor.'¹⁷ We see this in the reaction of Zaccheus the tax collector after he experienced the grace of Jesus towards him.¹⁸ Jesus commanded His disciples as He sent them out with the message of the kingdom of heaven, to *"heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give."*¹⁹ We may not have the same miraculous gifts that were given to the disciples on that occasion, but we have the same responsibility to show God's love to others freely and generously. By doing so, we show that we truly know God.

References: (1) John 17:3 (2) Packer, J.I. Knowing God, 1973 (3) See for e.g. John 5:39 (4) 2 Chron. 36:3 (5) 2 Kings 23:35 (6) Gal. 6:10 (7) 1 John 4:8 (8) Zech. 7:9-10 NIV (9) Jas. 1:27 (10) Jer. 9:23-24 (11) Micah 6:8 (12) Prov. 14:31 (13) Ps. 146:7-9 (14) Mat. 25:37-40 (15) John 15:21 (16) 1 Cor. 8:1-2,11 (17) Keller, T. Generous Justice, 2010 (18) Luke 19:8 (19) Mat. 10:7-8 NIV

Bible quotations from ESV unless stated otherwise



The march of time

Martin Jones, Hamilton, Canada

I've recently been enjoying the flurry of activity in the Churches of God Archives Facebook group. One picture featured John Swift, my great-great-great-grandfather. Sadly, I know next to nothing about him – and that's only a few generations back; if we estimate a generation to be about 20-25 years, there have perhaps been 80-100 generations since the birth of Christ. The arithmetic tells me that I've got millions more ancestors whom I know nothing of – and so do you! Just think of all the triumphs and tragedies, the toil and the tears, the dreams and the decisions that have been lost to us in the mists of history.

Those mists remind me of what the Teacher (generally thought to be king Solomon) had to say in the Bible book of Ecclesiastes. Thirty-eight times, he uses the Hebrew word *'hevel'* or *'hebel'* – which is usually translated as 'meaningless,' 'vanity' or 'futile'; that seems confusing – after all, if everything really *is* meaningless, then such a statement itself must be meaningless! But the root of the word has the thought of a mist or a vapour, like the breath on a cold winter's day, which is there one minute and gone the next without a trace – rather like our ancestors.¹

The same Hebrew word is used by David in Psalm 39:5 –

*You have made my days a mere handbreadth;
the span of my years is as nothing before you.
Everyone is but a **breath**, even those who seem
secure.*

This introduces another element to us – not only is a vapour ephemeral,² but it's enigmatic.³ Older UK readers will remember 'pea-soupers' where you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. Paths that seemed safe and secure were made scary by a seemingly

impenetrable fog. Isn't life a bit like that? The hymnwriter vividly describes his life's journey as 'groping in my misty way.'⁴ That's as true today as when he wrote it well over a century ago, and it's always been true to human experience.

A good deal of people's lives seems geared to systems, security and stability in an uncertain world. Perhaps that's why decluttering and home organisation TV shows are all the rage, why there's a desire to have a detailed financial plan, budget and will, and why scientists are so busy doing complex models to predict the spread of Covid-19. We like to feel we're on top of things.

But the Teacher is asking us to accept that, just as we think we've got it all figured out and nailed down, we'll find that our goal, like that ethereal fog, is beyond our grasp. As much as we'd like to, we'll never be able to eliminate unpredictability 'under the sun' – we've as much chance of catching the wind.⁵ But we shouldn't confuse this with the futility of atheism that says that, ultimately, everything really *is* meaningless and has no higher purpose – we're not simply locked into an endless and repetitive life cycle that's dictated by the laws of nature.

For the atheist, 'under the sun' is all there is. But at the end of Ecclesiastes, Solomon urges us to look beyond the sun, to the Creator above: *Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth.*⁶ And rather than invest our time in trying to answer the unanswerable existential questions of life,⁷ we would be much better off focusing on what God expects us to do: *Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.*⁸ Why? *For God will bring every deed into judgment.*⁹

What is fleeting and forgotten to humanity is being filed away by God for a future day – whether the Great White Throne for unbelievers¹⁰ or the Judgement Seat of Christ for believers.¹¹ So we need to be sure that whatever we're doing now isn't simply growing attractive-looking grass that will one day be burned in the fire¹² rather than earning an eternal crown – that really would be futile!

References: (1) Eccl. 1:11 (2) lasting only for a short time (3) something that is mysterious or difficult to understand (4) John Parker, PHSS 190 (5) Eccl. 1:14 (6) Eccl. 12:1 (7) Eccl. 1:17; 12:12 (8) Eccl. 12:13 (9) Eccl. 12:14 (10) Rev. 20:11 (11) 2 Cor. 5:10 (12) Luke 12:28

Bible quotations from the NIV



Made in God's image

David Viles, Hayes, England

It was just a small silver coin, and Jesus' question was simple: "*Whose image and inscription is this?*" His rejoinder astonished His hearers: "*Render... to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.*"¹ – a wonderfully concise, meaningful definition of the balanced and accountable Christian life.

The coin showed Caesar in profile, wearing the laurel wreath of victory. If the image was of emperor Tiberius, the inscription, too, was flattering – 'son of the divine Augustus'. Clearly, projecting an image was important to Roman emperors – nothing new then, even in today's image-conscious world, where people can hire an 'image consultant' to enhance their persona; or, for those less pretentious, purchase the products of the styling and beauty industry.²

Stamped with the likeness of God

So people in general are – and always have been – image conscious. We need not be surprised about this, because God Himself – in whose image every human being is created – is Himself very conscious of His image: "*My glory I will not give to another, nor My praise to carved images.*"³ To be created in the image of God, then, is to be a very exalted and privileged being indeed. The Genesis account differentiates the creation of human beings from the rest of God's wonderful creation as uniquely the considered, self-communing, deliberate effort of the Trinity – "*Let Us make man...*"⁴ – the highest point of the divine creative work. Every human being is made *a little lower than the angels ... crowned ... with glory and honor.*⁵ To take a life made in God's image therefore has dire consequences; the dignity of all human beings must be taken most seriously.⁶

The Hebrew words for image and likeness are different but synonymous – an example of the common Hebrew device of stating something in two different ways. In essence, they signify the glorious thought that every human is stamped with the likeness and ownership of God, is responsible to Him and, marvellously, possesses the potential to relate to Him. It is notable that the same words – image and likeness – are used in relation to Adam and his son Seth.⁷ We all like to look for resemblances between a parent and their child, but we recognise that they are similar yet different people; so it is on a higher level in relation to God and humanity. Therefore, each person on this earth is in some sense like his or her Maker.



But in what sense is this marvellous creature 'created in the image of God'? Much ink has been devoted to this question over the centuries and we must be careful to avoid speculation. Scripture provides one clear answer in terms of the divinely appointed destiny of humanity to rule over God's earthly creation.⁸ Just as God is the master of all He surveys, so humanity – made in His image – has authority to 'subdue' (a strong word) earthly creation. We may infer that this includes the means of doing so – not just physical strength, but also the ability to reason, to plan, to design and build, to act and think creatively and to work constructively together. The fact that God is, for example, the creator of indescribable beauty or awesome natural phenomena explains how human beings on a lower, delegated level possess the ability to create beautiful art or impressive architecture, or amazing feats of scientific and technological endeavour.

Tarnishing and burnishing

Then came the Fall. According to one cynic, 'God made man in His own image, and man returned the favour'.⁹ The devastating outcome was the tarnishing of God's image in human beings. That image – the image and glory of God¹⁰ – remained, but the divine spark was obscured, sullied by sin. Praise be, then, to God – bending all His effort to burnish, restore and immeasurably enhance His image in redeemed humanity, predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son.¹¹

References: (1) Mat. 22:20-21 (2) Worth in 2019 a staggering US\$532 billion. Bethany Biron, Business Insider, 9 July 2019. (3) Is. 42:8 (4) Gen. 1:26 (5) Ps. 8:5 (6) Gen. 9:6. Note that this exalted status continues to be the case, even after the Fall. (7) Gen. 5:3 (8) Gen. 1:28-30 (9) Frank Wedekind, 1864-1918, in effect paraphrasing Rom. 1: 20-32 (10) 1 Cor. 11:7 (11) Rom. 8:29

Bible quotations from NKJV

The market place: redemption

Stephen McCabe, Belfast, N.Ireland

Our English word ‘atonement’ comes from a Middle English word that means to be ‘at one’ (at-one) or in harmony with someone.

The word that is usually translated as ‘atone’ in our Old Testament can mean to ‘wipe clean’ or ‘appease’. Scholars debate as to whether the root meaning of the word is ‘to cover’, ‘to ransom’, or ‘to wipe clean’. An early, and helpful, use of the word (demonstrating some of these nuances) is seen in Genesis 32, where Jacob seeks to make peace with Esau (after having provoked his anger many years before). He says, “*I will **appease** him with the present that goes before me. Then afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me.*”¹ The thought is that the gift that Jacob sends ahead of him will atone for his previous wrongs before Esau; that Esau’s anger will be appeased; that the gift will ‘wipe clean’ the anger on Esau’s face; that the gift will purchase acceptance with Esau (we would say that Jacob is trying to ‘redeem himself’ in Esau’s eyes); that there will be satisfaction for previous wrongs – and the result of all of this will be a reconciliation between the two estranged brothers. A rich picture of atonement in Genesis!

Scripture gives us different pictures that help us explore what God has done for us through the atoning work of Christ. One of those pictures is the market place – using the language of redemption or purchasing. The verb translated ‘to redeem’ in our Old Testament involves the idea of ransom – the exchange of money, or an object of value, to buy something back.

Redemption in Exodus

The language of redemption is used to describe God’s work to bring the Israelites “*out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery*”.² The Lord declares to Moses, “*I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage. I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgements.*”³ Moses, after their flight from Egypt, in his song of Exodus 15, says, “*In Your lovingkindness You have led the people whom You have redeemed.*”⁴

How did that redemption work? The Lord said it was by ‘an outstretched arm and with great judgements’. The ultimate judgement in the liberation of Israel from Egypt, following the judgements that afflicted the land in various ways, was the death of the firstborn males in

...you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ. 1 Pet. 1:18-19

Egypt. The price of redemption in the Exodus account is ultimately seen in the forfeiting of the lives of Egypt’s firstborn. The firstborn males in Israel were delivered from this judgement through the blood of the Passover Lamb as a sign on the houses where they lived so that, when the Lord saw the blood, He passed over them. As a result of this fearful judgement, and Egypt’s reaction to it, God’s people were bought back for Him. In Exodus 13 (following the account of their departure from Egypt), the Lord then claims ownership of every firstborn man or beast among the Israelites.⁵ Firstborn males in Israel were given to God perpetually in recognition of the redemption from Egypt, and when these sons would ask about this, Israelite families were to point them back to the Exodus, and the death of the firstborn in Egypt. Rather than the death of all the firstborn animals and sons in sacrifice to the Lord (the latter explicitly forbidden in the Law⁶), the Israelites redeemed their firstborn sons for a price.⁷

Israel were redeemed from the burden and bondage of Egypt. Israel could not have redeemed themselves from the oppression they were under in Egypt. They had no means to buy or negotiate their own way out. It was God who ‘heard’, ‘remembered’, ‘saw’, and ‘took notice’ of them⁸ – it was God who acted to secure their redemption from slavery. It’s also helpful to note what they were redeemed for. In simple terms, the purpose of Israel’s liberation from Egypt is described by the Lord in Exodus: “*Let My people go, that they may serve Me.*”⁹ That service would be something wonderful – they were to be a people set apart for God, serving Him and enjoying His love, with an inheritance (the land which was promised to the patriarchs) and a future. God viewed them, and they were to consider themselves, as His “*own possession*” or “*special treasure*”¹⁰ as a result of the redemption.

New Testament perspectives

The language of redemption as seen in Exodus (redeemed from slavery, redeemed for the service of

God) sets the tone for what follows in Scripture, and is picked up strongly in the New Testament.

Paul takes us through a remarkable re-framing of the ‘exodus’ journey from Romans 6 to 8. In Romans 6 those who are in Christ are freed from slavery to sin – *when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed. For the outcome of those things is death. But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life.*¹¹ Paul is emphasising that slavery to sin and slavery to righteousness cannot co-exist. The outcome of being enslaved to sin is death (and separation from God). The outcome of slavery to God is holy living and eternal life in Christ. This redemption which liberates us from slavery to sin is not something we could have done ourselves, but is *the free gift of God.*¹² Romans 7 points us to Sinai, but emphasises our freedom from the Law (as per Galatians 4, where, in what would have been shocking to Jewish readers, Paul describes Sinai as bearing children who are to be slaves¹³) through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus (and our unity with Him)¹⁴, demonstrating the superiority of the New Covenant over the Old. Romans 8 then brings us to a place of sonship and inheritance (*...you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ*¹⁵) and even the ultimate completion of our redemption – *having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.*¹⁶ So we quickly move from slavery to adoption as sons, and sharing the inheritance of God (all things) with the rightful heir Himself! (With a completion of that redemption still to come – discussed below.) In Roman society, for a slave to make the journey to being freed, adopted by his master, and gaining an equal inheritance with his biological/natural sons was a very rare thing (though not unheard of) – but what God has done for us in redeeming us for Himself is something of immeasurably more value.

This is the spiritual reality of our redemption experience here and now. In the language of Paul, this is how we are to ‘reckon ourselves’¹⁷ – and that should change how we live. We are often encouraged to ‘be our own person’ today. But see what Paul says: *do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.*¹⁸ Doesn’t that run against the grain of the world? You are not your own – you belong to someone else, because you have been purchased at a very high price. And that’s key to the thought

of redemption – that a price has been paid. What was the price? Peter tells us: *you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold... but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.*¹⁹ The song sung to the slain Lamb in Revelation 5 declares the purpose of our redemption: *“You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God, and they will reign upon the earth.”*²⁰

Our full redemption

We live in the ‘now’ and ‘not yet’ with God. We have our redemption right now, but we await with certain hope the redemption of our bodies. John speaks about it beautifully in his first letter – *Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.*²¹ We are children of God right now – but we can’t even grasp what we will be when the full redemption of our bodies comes! We do know that we will appear glorious, as He is revealed in glory.²² Everyone who has this hope purifies himself. This is our future – so ‘reckon yourself’ to be so now.

References: (1) Gen. 32:20 (2) Ex. 20:2 (3) Ex. 6:6 (4) Ex. 15:13 (5) See Ex. 13:1-16 (6) Deut 18:10 (7) Num. 18:14-16 (8) Ex. 2:24-25 (9) Ex. 8:1 (10) Ex. 19:5 NASB/NKJV (11) Rom. 6:20-22 (12) Rom. 6:23 (13) Gal. 4:24 (14) Rom. 7:4-6 (15) Rom. 8:15-17 (16) Rom. 8:23 (17) Rom. 6:11 NKJV (18) 1 Cor. 6:19-20 (19) 1 Pet. 1:18-19 (20) Rev. 5:9-10 (21) 1 John 3:2-3 (22) Col. 3:4 (23)

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gor%C3%A9-MaisonEsclaves1.jpg>

Bible quotations from NASB

Freedom from Slavery Monument with Maison des Esclaves (House of Slaves) in background, Gorée Island, Senegal²³



A worldwide scourge

Peter Hickling, Cromer, England

This page in the magazine is intended to look at current worldwide problems from a Christian point of view, to encourage those of us who are Christians in our faith, and to try to answer the questions of those who are not. Few of our readers in any country of the world would doubt what the main worldwide problem is; at the time of writing, the Covid-19 virus has led to tens of millions of illnesses and over a million deaths. It has disrupted the economies of many countries, particularly the most advanced ones, and more hardships are still to come – many will lose their jobs, and perhaps their homes.

If you believe that there is a God, what sort of a god is he?

The Bible is quite unequivocal about this; it says that *God is love*.¹ A statement like this cannot stand on its own; it must be authenticated by actions. This is true on a human level; if I say that I am honest, and you know that I tell lies, you will doubt anything that I say. The words and actions of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, supported all His claims. Scripture tells us that *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son*.² The Gospels give detailed records of all that Jesus did and said, supporting His claims to be God in human form. For instance, He said, *“I and the Father are one.”*³ There are many references to the actions and words of Christ in the Gospels which authenticate His person and nature; they are summed up by the apostle John, when he wrote: *Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*⁴

Why does a loving God let this pandemic happen?

God loves His children, just as you love yours. Does that mean that He always gives them what they want? Do you? You must have read many stories of people who had deprived childhoods and were stronger in their adult lives than they would have been if they had had everything easy.

The expression is not so often used today, but we used to often hear it said that someone had many ‘trials’ in his life. Like so many expressions in the English language this came from Scripture: James wrote, *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.*⁵ A ‘trial’ in this sense is not merely a problem, as we might say “S/he’s a trial to me,” but a test.

An outstanding example of this in the Bible is that of Job. He was rich, with extensive flocks and herds, and seemed

to have everything he might want. God said to Satan, *“Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?”*⁶ Cynical Satan answered the LORD and said, *“Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.”*⁷ God gave Satan permission to take away all Job’s possessions, but Job passed the test. Even though his wife said, *“Curse God and die,”*⁸ Job’s response was he *arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.”* In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.⁷

Is it hard to suggest that this pandemic may be a trial? That God may have permitted it so that people will turn to Him, rather than to possessions? Most of us in the developed world are rich compared with our brothers and sisters in Africa and Asia: perhaps the possibility of danger to our lives might make us, our friends and our neighbours reassess our priorities.

References: (1) 1 John 4:8 (2) John 3:16 (3) John 10:30 (4) John 20:30-31 (5) Jas. 1:2 (6) Job 1:8 (7) Job 1:9-11 (8) Job 2:9 (9) Job 1:20-22

Bible quotations from ESV



The three friends

David Webster, Liverpool, England

The Bible book of Job addresses one of the great world issues: the problem of suffering and how a good God can allow people to suffer. However, those wanting a neat answer to this age-old problem will be disappointed. What we get is a reminder that (a) God is sovereign and in ultimate control (b) there is evil and sadness in our world (c) there is a great adversary, Satan.

Is all Scripture truth?

The Bible is God's Word and all of it came from God and is both accurate and useful for instruction!¹ But that doesn't mean we can take any text from God's Word and assume the words are true. We need to interpret Scripture correctly and be aware that, sometimes, words are spoken which are neither true nor from God. The context of every Bible verse and passage is important. Job is one of the wisdom books of the Bible. And some of the words in Job are not true!

'The reader of the book of Job learns what is simply the world's wisdom, seemingly logical but actually wrong, and what constitutes God's wisdom and what builds confidence in God's sovereignty and righteousness.'²

The books of Job and Ecclesiastes are good examples of where we need to be very careful of taking a text at face value!

Jumping to conclusions

We are looking at Job's three friends who *set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathise with him and comfort him*³ after he had experienced terrible loss. The expression 'a Job's comforter' has come to mean 'a person who under the guise of giving comfort aggravates distress'.⁴ This is probably to misrepresent the friends. They saw how Job's life was in ruins, his health was broken and his peace of mind was destroyed. For a full week they sat with him in respectful silence showing that they cared, doing what the Christians in Rome were later encouraged to do: *weep with those who weep*.⁵

Because he is suffering, **Eliphaz** concludes that Job must have done something wrong and should now submit to the discipline of the Almighty.⁶ **Bildad** seems to suggest that Job is receiving justice from the hand of God. Not only must Job have sinned but his family as well:

Does God pervert justice?

Does the Almighty pervert what is right?



*When your children sinned against him, he gave them over to the penalty of their sin.*⁷

He assumes that Job has turned away from God and he and his children deserve the disasters that have come upon them.

Zophar is convinced that Job has sinned and in a big way – he is the most condemnatory of the 'friends'! God *recognises deceivers; and when he sees evil, does he not take note?*⁸ He accuses Job, by insinuation,⁹ of oppressing the poor, leaving them destitute, seizing houses and getting rich by dishonourable means. The implication of 11:6 is that Job deserves even worse than he got!

"Suffering means God is punishing you!"

Who, being innocent, has ever perished? asked Eliphaz¹⁰ and the three friends spent a lot of energy trying to convince Job of this. But God vindicated Job¹¹ and the Lord Jesus explicitly refuted the idea that pain and suffering is necessarily the result of wrongdoing. Speaking about a local disaster the Lord said:

*"Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no!"*¹²

And of the blind man:

*"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him."*¹³

We do suffer as a consequence of our foolish actions and God does, of course, discipline us¹⁴ but let's not make the same error of judgment that Job's friends made when we see difficulties and suffering coming into the lives of God's people by assuming they must have done something bad.

(1) See 2 Tim. 3:16-17 (2) Fee & Stuart, How to Read the Bible for All its Worth (Second Edition), Scripture Union (3) Job 2:11 (4) Concise Oxford Dictionary (5) Rom. 12:15 ESV (6) Job 5:17 (7) Job 8:3-4 (8) Job 11:11 (9) Job 20:6-19 (10) Job 4:7 (11) Job 42:7-9 (12) Luke 13:4-5a (13) John 9:3 (14) Heb. 12:5-11 Bible quotations from the NIV unless otherwise stated.

100 years in Africa

Missionary profiles



Eric Sampou, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Early Impressions

From the African viewpoint, the brethren to be introduced below displayed a high standard of holiness and godliness. They were men of humility, usefulness and reliability. In spite of the rigours and strains of Africa, they had come to point us to Christ and to teach us truths about the kingdom of God.

What visions they had! Yet could they have imagined that there would later be churches of God in Ghana, Liberia, Malawi, Kenya, Mozambique and Zimbabwe also?

They came into Nigeria and discovered that we had so many tribes and that we spoke 500 languages. English became our *lingua franca*.

They experienced emotional upset and depression in a strange land, but the Lord stood with them.

So many were ill due to the tropical climate with its unwanted warmth and oppressive heat. Our lives were primitive. We lived in huts of mud, bamboo or wood and corrugated iron with thatched roofs, and certainly not without mosquitoes, cockroaches and ants.

Yet from the ranks of the idolaters whom they had come to work among, some were chosen, elect of God and came to be found among those worshipping God in His holiness and glory.

Thomas Wallace (1887-1925) was born in Barrow-in-Furness, a town in Cumbria, north west England. In 1881, his parents, John Wallace and Ann Stewart had moved to Barrow, though married in Dundee in Scotland.



Tom Wallace (right) with George Stockwell, 1921

In 1915, Tom secured a job of 'national importance' with Elder Dempster & Co. at the Nigerian Dry Dock & Engineering Co. on the Forcados River near Warri, Delta State, Nigeria. He saw this as an opening from God for gospel outreach work there.

Some years later, in 1921, he was commended to work full-time on behalf of the Churches of God; he resigned his post at the Dry Dock Co. and his wife and two sons joined him in Ibadan to work now for the Lord alongside Edwin Matthew. Tom Wallace's early interest in evangelism remained strong.

Emily, his wife, became ill and had to return to England with their children. By this time, the Lord was working in several ways to bring about a developing evangelical work in Nigeria, but the Churches of God's missionary work there had really begun with Tom Wallace from Barrow.

Tragically, Tom was 'called home' on 7 December 1925 at the age of 38 and his grave is in Ibadan, Nigeria.

Edwin Matthew (1865-1924) was born in the English village of Wickham Skeith, Suffolk, to James Matthew and Betsy Chandler.

Edwin read missionary stories about David Livingstone, Hudson Taylor, Henry Townsend, Hope Waddell and Mary Slessor before the First World War. His thoughts were of Africa. Often when he spoke at a meeting, it would be about Ebed-Melech, the Ethiopian eunuch, Simon from Cyrene, or some other African-related Bible story. He had a strong interest in missionary work in West Africa.

Edwin became a London pharmacist and, in 1896, married Elizabeth Jarvis in Wandsworth, London. In 1899, he and Elizabeth sadly lost a son, Samuel, at 9 months and followed later by their second son, David, at less than two years of age.

Henry Elson noted that, at the time of the separation of Churches of God from the wider Brethren Movement, Edwin wholeheartedly identified himself with the 'remnant who sought to give effect to the truth of the house of God.' He took a decisive stand at that time.

By 1901, Edwin Matthew was an overseer in the Church of God in London, in the company that met in Battersea. His brethren remarked of an exceedingly gracious and lovable personality, a man of a gentle and humble presence, but nevertheless one who had a purpose of heart and a tenacity of purpose which led him to

accomplish not a little. He was commended by the Conference of Overseers of Churches of God to full-time service in preaching and teaching God's Word in 1919.

Edwin's heart was deeply exercised for many years towards work overseas and he never lost an opportunity for pressing the claims of that work. His vision and persistent purpose for the inception of this work was instrumental in its commencement. However, much work had to be done in the British Isles before the Community was sufficiently consolidated so as to be properly free to launch out in Gospel work overseas. When the happy moment arrived, Edwin and Elizabeth Matthew along with Fanny, wife of JPA Taylor, and William Terrell (1896-1961) sailed to Nigeria on the HMS Zaria from Liverpool on 17 March 1920 and on 5 April 1920 they arrived in Lagos.

By October 1922, Edwin was compelled to return to the UK on account of illness due to the tropical climate. However, he improved sufficiently in the UK for him to be able to return to Nigeria in May 1923 to resume his work in the preaching of the Gospel and the making of disciples. The periods of comparative good health were interspersed with attacks of his blood pressure trouble, sometimes with great severity and often his indomitable spirit made him persevere when assuredly one less zealous than he would have given up.

It was his joy to witness the baptism of three disciples in 1924 – the firstfruits of evangelical work in Ibadan.

On the 5 June 1924, Edwin Matthew gave his last address. By the following Tuesday his condition had deteriorated and the doctor was called. On 14 June 1924 the Lord called Edwin Matthew 'home', and he was buried there in Ibadan.

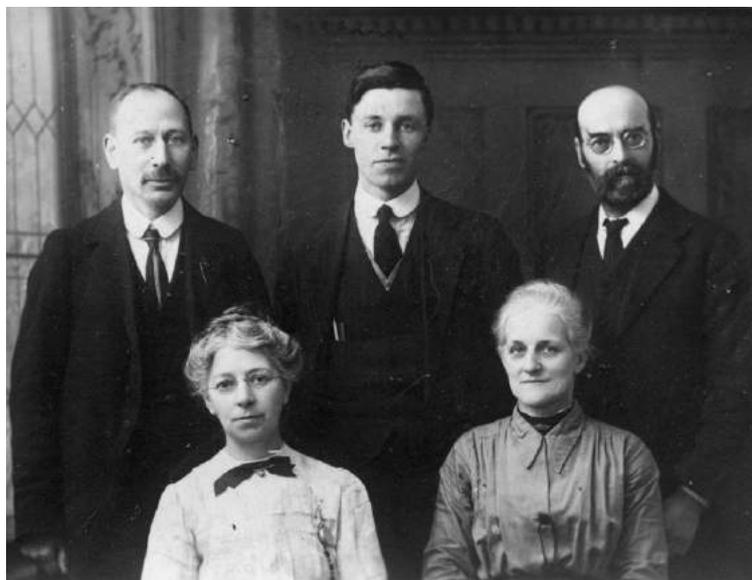
John Park Allan Taylor (1869-1965) was a missionary who was born in Galway, Ireland on 2 May 1869. His Scottish parents, Colin Taylor and Margaret Allan, had moved to Barrhead in Scotland when John was eighteen months old.

In Nigeria, he became known for his efforts to improve local living standards in the communities where he worked, helping to change the beliefs of many and to introduce western education.

John Taylor was accepted for full-time ministry in 1919 by what was then known as the British Isles and Overseas Conference of Overseers in the churches of God; his going to West Africa was already in view.

He was married to Annie Piggott in 1896 in Edinburgh, Scotland, but she died on 8 February 1906, aged 33. Then in 1908, he married Fanny Crowder in Greenock, Scotland, and he came to Nigeria with her. Sadly she died on 4 November 1922.

In 1925, he married Rachel McFarlane at Old Mill Street, Lagos. She was 29 and he was 56. Both lived until old age. In 1890, he had been received among the Open Brethren in Barrhead, but stood with the Churches of



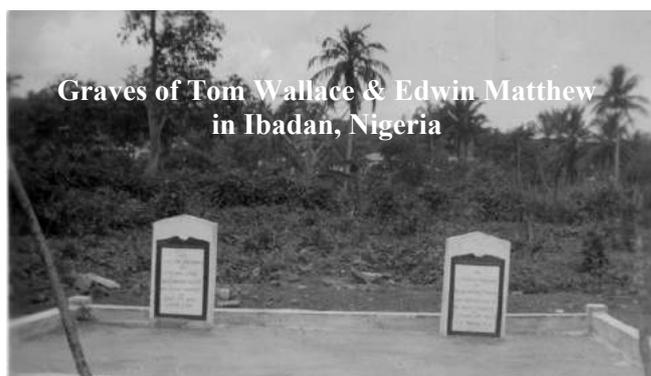
Back row: JPA Taylor, William Terrell, Edwin Matthew
Front row: Fanny Taylor & Elizabeth Matthew

God at 'the separation' of 1892-94. In 1905, he had been recognised as a 'leading brother' in Scotland.

He was one of the five pioneering missionaries who came to Nigeria on the HMS Zaria in March 1920. He was also privileged to visit the Church of God in Grand Cess, Liberia. JPA Taylor previously had an important post in the ceramic industry, but had greater interest in missionary work. Much prayer was offered to God by the fellowship of Churches of God at the time. It was with great joy and much blessing to us that the Assembly in Lagos was planted on 8 May 1921. JPA Taylor's last visit to Nigeria was in February 1949, when he was 80 years old. He died on 5 November 1965 in Middlesbrough, England.

The tropical climate brought unwanted warmth and oppressive heat day and night. When it rained, it bucketed; sometimes with lightning and thunder, yet JPA Taylor loved Akarakumo, a village near Badagry, in Lagos State which was a place of palm trees, lagoon, sandy beach by the Atlantic and forest behind the village. They were privileged to see those who had been once idol worshippers now singing praise to our God as they worshipped on Lord's Days.

Africa is very appreciative of all the sacrifice and the huge cost that these pioneers paid, together with all the strenuous work and hardship they endured for us to be in the Fellowship today, and celebrating – by God's grace – the centenary of Churches of God on Nigerian soil.



Can you help me with this?

Tattoos and other body art

Geoff Hydon, Mount Forest, Canada

Body art seems to be increasingly popular. Whether it improves appearance or not is a very personal matter, but there are some aspects that deserve careful thought by any Christian. We may know someone who has a faith-based tattoo, like the crown of thorns, or a Bible word, and these displays may have led to witnessing opportunities. Are there any compelling reasons not to use body art?

First we should note this is a very old, pre-Christian, activity. Historically, it is known to have been used in various cultural settings for beautification of the body, acting as a supposed protection against bad spirits, as an identifying mark to distinguish between tribes, or to show a particular status. It is still commonly used in a similar way by gangs and sometimes in prisons. But, while those examples do need to be borne in mind, our concern is principally with its use by everyday people, especially Christian disciples.

Recent surveys suggest more people are now choosing to have body art (tattoos and piercing) than in previous decades.¹ It is now considered a mainstream practice in the western world. It's interesting that in a 2015 survey of 450 Colorado students, the majority of those who had used tattoos made their decision without accurate information as to associated health risks, and sometimes without being able to state just why they did it.²

In terms of religious practice, although common in some religions, Jews and Muslims usually are forbidden to use body art (because of its association with idolatry); the Roman Catholic church permits body art if it is not sacrilegious, blasphemous or obscene. More importantly, let's see if we can find clear Bible-based examples or principles to apply.

Bible expectations and observations

- Disciples' bodies are 'temple of the Holy Spirit';³ they belong to God.
- We have a responsibility to imitate good, not evil.⁴
- Moses' Law prohibited tattoos/cuts that symbolized idol worship.⁵
- Paul said that the violence against him left him branded by the marks of Jesus⁶ (but they were not self-inflicted).
- Christ Himself bears in His body the marks of Calvary;⁷ the marks of injury suffered. Christ-

likeness calls for readiness to suffer on His behalf, not to copy the marks of suffering.

So I should ask myself:

1. How does my heart and my conscience convict me? Do I have freedom in Christ and a clear conscience before the Lord regarding the decision?⁸
2. Am I passing judgment on a brother or sister because I don't personally feel I have freedom in Christ to do this myself?⁹
3. Will I still want this image on me years from now? Our views on many things change over time. It is very difficult when young to weigh up future risks and benefits.¹⁰
4. Will it be honouring to my parents (in the Lord),¹¹ and/or will my future spouse want me to have this?¹² There are examples of men who had the name of a girlfriend tattooed, but eventually married another woman!
5. A Christian needs to earn a living.¹³ How will it affect me getting work?
6. Will I cause another brother/sister to stumble if I display body art?¹⁴
7. Is my decision based on faith and will the result be glorifying to God?^{15,16}
8. Am I just imitating majority thinking, or those who act selfishly?¹⁶
9. Have I properly considered the health risks, e.g. allergy, disease?¹⁷

Although there are clearly significant cautions to be taken into account, in the final analysis for disciples in churches of God this matter is one to be determined by individual conscience. And whatever we may feel ready to do, or not to do, let's aim to have a testimony that attracts others to the Person we follow!

References: (1) E.g. 2015 data Harris Poll:

<https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/tattoo-takeover-three-in-ten-americans-have-tattoos-and-most-dont-stop-at-just-one-300217862.html> and BMC Italian data: <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2458/10/73> (2)

<https://sociologylectures.weebly.com/uploads/8/8/7/3/8873683/tattoo-researchpaper.pdf> (3) 1 Cor. 6:19 (4) 3 John 11 (5) Lev. 19:28; Deut. 14:1 (6) Gal. 6:17 (7) John 20:27 (8) Rom. 14:1-10 (9) Rom. 14:13,21-22 (10) Ps. 119:59 (11) Eph 6:1-3 (12) 1 Cor. 7:4 (13) 2 Thes. 3:12 (14) Rom. 14:21 (15) Rom. 14:23; 1 Cor. 10:31 (16) 3 John 11 (17) 1 Cor. 6:19-20

Meeting triumph and disaster

An interview with Peter Hickling, Cromer, England

‘If you can meet with triumph and disaster

And treat those two impostors just the same...’

Many people can remember those two lines of Kipling’s ‘If’, but may not have a reason for calling triumph and disaster ‘imposters’. It is an example of Victorian ‘stiff upper lip’ stoicism which is not currently fashionable, but there is a response to them which arises from Christian faith. Christians believe that there is a God who controls everything, and ultimately designs that *for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose*.¹ If we believe that, we must accept that sometimes God does things whose purpose is known only to Him, and we must accept them because we trust His omniscient goodness. A human example of this sort of thing is “Do your children always agree that what you want is good for them?” You may think that what I am writing is rather abstract, and separate from actual experience, so I have been prevailed upon to answer some questions about my own life. I was very reluctant to do this, because I am no exemplar, but it may help some who have gone the same way:

NT: Have you known ‘triumph’ – moments of success and accomplishment in life?

I went to Liverpool University, where I obtained a degree in Civil Engineering, and met my wife Dorothy, who was in the Liverpool church. Later I went to Salford University, and while in the North West of England visited many churches. We had three children, Jocelyn, Duncan and Martin. We had a comfortable existence.

NT: What about ‘disaster’ – times of failure or loss?

Several, regrettably. My father died in January 1988 while driving his car, and we set off to drive across the country from Southport to my mother in Cromer. At a crossroads a driver on the minor road drove straight across into the side of our car, giving me serious head injuries, from which Dorothy was told that I had less than 20% chance of surviving. People prayed for me around the world, and I did live, but Dorothy, who was injured herself, had to look after me – I couldn’t walk or speak or get dressed.

A further disaster was the death of Duncan in 2009. He had been very active in the Church of God in Cromer, running two youth groups, as well as going into other Districts, even to Canada. The Church of God in Cromer cannot now sustain a youth work, and we cannot understand why Duncan was taken away: we can only say, with Job,

*The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.*²

NT: Didn’t you ask why?

What good would that do? There is no way of finding an answer; the only Christian response is to trust God, who knows the end from the beginning. It may be that he had other things for me to do; perhaps I was unduly self-reliant, perhaps he was teaching me to trust.

NT: Those were single events, that might teach you a lesson. Is there anything else?

The biggest trial of all, which we cannot see any end of, is that Dorothy has been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease, cannot go out on her own or drive and has a very limited memory. We are told that there is no cure, only palliative measures.

NT: What can you do about that?

We can pray. Over the years there have been many killers which were thought incurable at the time which have been much reduced or eliminated; e.g. smallpox, which has killed 300 – 500 million people, but which now only exists in a few laboratories. Is a cure for Alzheimer’s impossible? Perhaps it is unlikely in our lifetime (since we are in our eighties), but it is not wrong to ask.

NT: What about the coronavirus pandemic?

It is a worldwide scourge; over a million people have died and 50 million have been infected. Those of us who live in areas of low infection can be thankful; many who have been infected have only had mild effects, and can be thankful for that too – that was the apostle Paul’s message; *give thanks in all circumstances*.³ Of course, I can’t give any help to people who refuse to believe that there is anyone to listen to them – all they can do is to relapse into a sterile stoicism.

References: (1) Rom. 8:28 (2) Job 1:21 (3) 1 Thes. 5:18

Bible quotations from ESV



Seed sowing

Information supplied by Topesa Issa, Malawi



“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies ...”¹

There was a very large crowd at Phalula that day, perhaps two to three hundred people. It was Mary Katimba’s funeral on a hot day in the so-called ‘warm heart of Africa’ – Malawi. Brother Patson Katimba and his family members were very satisfied with the strength of the support and with the words of tribute and clear sounding of the believer’s certain hope in Christ. The preacher’s initial impression of Malawian funerals was that they are heavily influenced by the multitude of family and friends in attendance. According to custom, it was a long drawn-out affair over two days with a lot of waiting around. Then, at the graveside particularly, there were prolonged bouts of loud wailing, lamentations and throwing of oneself on the burial mound as family members, each in turn, gave full vent to their emotions. In the West, Christian funerals are closer to a celebration and in that way give a dignified witness to unbelievers of the Christian hope. Here, however, the preacher’s scriptural note of triumph at a believer’s homecall to glory, seems almost negated by this cultural performance. To cap it all, a sector of the womenfolk seated in front of the preacher audibly reacted against the thirty minutes length of translated preaching. Understandable perhaps, if you’ve already been there for 24 hours and it’s been a long time since breakfast! It had not helped that there had been a delay of somewhere between one and two hours because a local ‘headman’ had not got himself organised. But events start when they start in rural Africa.

But if there was a sense of disappointment from the preacher’s perspective, there was to be a brighter sequel. Eight months later, came the news that the message proclaimed that day had ‘touched many’. At the funeral at Phalula some had ‘received the word’.

At this, two of the overseers from Lilongwe visited Phalula. It is situated partway between Lilongwe and Blantyre and is the home village of Patson who is the Chairman of the elders of the Malawian churches of God. The visiting elders from Lilongwe encountered a group of about twenty in number.

After their visit, the members of this group began calling Brother Topesa daily, begging him to visit them and share the Word. They were taught the ‘7 steps’ of the New Testament pattern for Christian discipleship.² During Bro. Topesa’s visit, he also taught the three aspects of salvation (believers are saved from the **penalty** of all their sins; can be saved from the **power** of their ongoing sins; and, at the Lord’s return, will be saved from the **presence** of sin). Instruction was also clearly given explaining the Christian believer’s eternal security: that once saved, someone can never be lost.³ There was great joy at hearing these things plainly outlined from Scripture. The request from them is now for interviews: they desire to give their testimonies. To hear of this was belated encouragement for the preacher, because the lasting impression at the funeral time had been the reaction of one group of women who objected to the length of the preaching. In a fallen world, a sense of opposition is often a good sign because Satan opposes only what God is powerfully doing. When Satan is busy, God is even busier – and He will prevail.

The sowing of a body in the ground led to productive sowing of the good seed of the Word of God.⁴ If so, how true for those who received the Word that it is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting!⁵



It’s at least possible that there may be the planting of a Church of God in this place at some point. Phalula is not far from the location of the Church of God at Ntcheu. Joining the dots further, Phalula is within Balaka district, and Topesa next received an invite to preach to a group of people in Balaka town. These people were aware of the Church of God at Mwanakhu.

References: (1) John 12:24 (2) Acts 2:41-42 (3) John 10:28 (4) Mark 4:3-8 (5) Eccles. 7:2