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Cover picture: Apollo 11 moon landing July 1969
(Graphics by Emma Perfitt and images courtesy of NASA)

Note: All Bible quotations are taken from the New King James Version
except where another version is indicated after the text.
LIGHT on a new World was first published in July 1969 and this is the 40th anniversary issue of the magazine. The purpose of the magazine as stated in the very first issue is to ‘be the means of awakening its readers to a realisation that God has revealed His purpose with this earth and that He is going to reconstitute it and make it a new world’.

An anniversary is a celebration of a past event, whether it is a birthday, wedding day or some other important milestone that has been reached. It is an opportunity to reflect on the past and the changes that have occurred with the passage of time.

By coincidence, the Apollo 11 mission was also launched in July 1969 to land the first men on the moon. It was an astonishing moment both for the astronauts and for those privileged to see the event on television. As Neil Armstrong put his left foot down on the moon’s surface he made the famous statement: ‘That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind’.

Whilst we can marvel at this great human achievement, it has not
proved to be the giant leap for man that was envisaged, as the world actually faces even greater problems now than it did 40 years ago. We are reminded of the words of the prophet Isaiah: ‘Thus says the LORD: “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool”’ [Isaiah 66.1].

Again we read in the Psalms: ‘The heaven, even the heavens, are the LORD’S; but the earth he has given to the children of men’ [Psalm 115. 16].

The Bible teaches us that the earth has been given to mankind as a habitable planet and God’s plan for the human race concerns the world in which we live and no other.

As publishers of the magazine, we never envisaged in 1969 that the mailing list would encompass all of the world’s continents and help men and women to search the Scriptures to find the truth of God’s plan of salvation. It was our duty to tell others about our wonderful hope, a hope for the future that can be uncovered by Bible study. The first issue of ‘Light on a new World’ included an article entitled ‘Can we rely on the Bible?’ This is reproduced on page 5. It gives a number of lines of evidence for putting our complete trust in the Bible and 40 years after those words were written, we can still have the same assurance that it is indeed the inspired Word of God.

Also in the first issue we quoted some sobering words of Sir Walter
Scott that Lord Byron wrote on the first page of his Bible and which still ring true today:

‘Within this awful volume lies
The mystery of mysteries.
Happiest they of human race
To whom God has given grace
To fear, to read, to hope, to pray
To lift the latch and find the way.
Better had they ne’er been born
Who read to doubt or read to scorn.’

When we look back over those 40 years, we realise that the world has not changed for the better and is beset by many insoluble problems in spite of the best efforts of well meaning politicians and leading world figures.

We are reminded of the words of a Psalm: ‘Do not put your trust in princes, nor in a son of man, in whom there is no help’ [Psalm 146.3]. We have to conclude that it is beyond man to change the world in order that it may become the peaceful paradise promised in the Bible — a world so many people want to see.

In spite of the anniversaries that we have been able to enjoy during our lives, we know that ultimately our lives come to an end, as we read again in God’s Word: ‘For in death there is no remembrance of you; in the grave who will give you thanks?’ [Psalm 6.5] The reality of these words struck me as I walked round a churchyard recently and looked at the headstones, some of which referred to people who died over 150 years ago. I wondered who celebrates their lives now, assuming they still have some extended family alive today.

The person whose life has been remembered for over 2,000 years is
the Lord Jesus Christ. We need to remember every day how his perfect life can offer us hope for the future and give real purpose to our lives now.

We have the promise repeated many times in the New Testament Scriptures that Jesus will return to the earth. When he does return, then all our personal and family anniversaries, which may mean a lot to us now, will then be of no significance as the world is changed for the better. Then rather than looking back and marking off our days it will be possible to enjoy the present and look forward to the future with certainty. Jesus asks us to pray to his Father ‘Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’ [Matthew 6.10]. Each day that passes brings us one day closer to that special day appointed by God when Jesus will come to set up the kingdom of God on earth. That day has been guaranteed by God as we read in the book of Acts:

‘...he (God) has appointed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all, by raising him from the dead’ [Acts 17.31].

That day will be like no other – will you be among those who Jesus will recognise as his friends and be invited to celebrate with him and share that glorious future in a new world?

Correspondence Secretary
Can we rely on the Bible?

Many years ago in Australia, a family went into the ‘outback’ for a day’s picnic. When, after several days they had still not returned, the alarm was raised and a search party sent out. The missing family was as last found – they had wandered round and round, completely lost and had died of thirst under the pitiless sun. One of the search party walked up to the tree under which the bodies lay and plunged his knife into the trunk. Fresh water spurted out, sufficient to supply all their need had they only known it was there for the taking!

The parallel to this little tragedy is being repeated day after day before our eyes. Men and women are wandering aimlessly through life, some young and carefree, many with various difficulties and troubles, others in the last stages of endurance, all needing ‘living water’ – a way to escape the death which ever threatens to overtake them. Yet, in their midst, if only they could recognise it, is an ample supply of that vital substance, ‘living water’, or in plain words, everlasting life.

The Bible is the guidebook to life – not just a prolongation of this life but a better life altogether – to a new life here and now as a preparation for the eternal life which Jesus will confer on his friends when he returns to earth. The Bible is God’s specific provision for us in our extremity as dying creatures and it is a great tragedy that people are perishing around us every day, ignorant of the means of salvation from death, a salvation within their easy reach.

Convinced Christians will accept this assessment of the Scriptures, which are able to make us wise for salvation through faith
which is in Christ Jesus’ [2 Timothy 3.15]. They are fully aware of the reverence which Jesus himself had for the Old Testament writings, which he frequently cited as the true and authoritative Word of God. The same Spirit of God likewise controlled the writing of the New Testament, so that we now have in our Bibles the whole counsel of God, the infallible revelation of His will and purpose.

However, to many people, the issue is by no means so clear cut. In one way or another they will pose the question which forms the title of this article: ‘Can we rely on the Bible?’ Can we trust its claims to be the Word of the living God? What real evidence is there of its truth and reliability in such vital matters? The paragraphs which follow attempt to outline some of the firm grounds for complete confidence in the Bible as the divinely-provided guidebook to eternal life. (It is proposed to pursue each of these themes in considerably more detail in subsequent issues, God willing).

THE EVIDENCE OF ARCHAEOLOGY

Our first argument for trusting the Bible is based on its accuracy as history. Some four thousand years span the period between the books
of Genesis and Revelation, and particularly over the last century, archaeological investigations have repeatedly tested the reliability of the Biblical record. In general it can be confidently stated that the accounts of Abraham and the patriarchs, of the Exodus, of the times of the Judges, the Kings and the Exile, all fit exactly into their places as there described in a multitude of details and bear the plainest evidence of accurate contemporaneous accounts. ‘No archaeological discovery has ever controverted a biblical reference. Scores of archaeological findings have been made which confirm in clear outline or in exact detail historical statements in the Bible.’[Nebron Glueck: “Rivers in the Desert” Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1959 page 31]. A few anomalies await further discoveries to resolve them – a factor common to all fields of scientific research.

Details of archaeological confirmation are innumerable and have filled many books. As a small sample we have the corroboration of the accounts in the books of Kings and Chronicles in such matters as:

- The rebuilding of Hazor, Megiddo and Gezer by Solomon to serve as trading centres for horses, and hence the large-scale provision for stabling in these cities [1 Kings 9.15].

- Confirmation on a stele found at Megiddo of the invasion of Rehoboam’s Kingdom by Shishak (Sheshouq I).

- The existence of Ahab’s palace decorated with ivory [1 Kings 22.39].

- The discovery of Hezekiah’s tunnel, built to provide Jerusalem with water during times of siege [2 Chronicles 32.30], and even of the lintel of Shebna’s tomb [Isaiah 22.16].

- The fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians can now be dated to the precise day in history; even the daily ration appointed to Jehoiachin, king of Judah, previously deported to Babylon has
been confirmed in the Babylonian administrative archives [2 Kings 25.30].

The list is endless, and ample evidence of the trustworthiness of the Old Testament is now available to any impartial enquirer. This is equally true of the New Testament record. For example, Luke’s account in the Acts of the Apostles has been most thoroughly checked by Sir William Ramsey and many others, and has been shown to reflect most accurately the social and political background of the Roman world in the first century after Christ.

The authenticity of the text of Scripture and the reliability of its transmission over two thousand years has been signally confirmed in recent years by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Amongst them are two or three manuscripts of the book of Isaiah as well as larger or smaller portions of most of the other books of the Old Testament and although these are a thousand years older than hitherto extant copies, they still show for all practical purposes the identical texts of the later Hebrew manuscripts.

THE TESTIMONY OF JESUS

The kind of confirmation cited so far will not, of course, be available for the earliest Bible history, especially for the creation record. Our next argument however, covers the whole of Old Testament history and may be summarised as follows:

* The resurrection of Jesus is one of the best attested facts of history. It was witnessed to in the first place by twelve men who emphatically stated they had seen Jesus repeatedly after his crucifixion and burial, in broad daylight in a variety of places, and had talked and eaten with him. [Luke 24.5,30,42; John 21.12; Acts 10.41; 1Corinthians 15.5-8]. There was no human advantage in their testimony, rather the reverse, for several paid for it with their lives.
If then Jesus did rise from the dead, he is by that very fact ‘declared to be the Son of God with power’ [Romans 1.4] and is unique in history. As such his declaration and promises are infallible.

Both before and after his resurrection, Jesus affirmed the truth and reliability of the Old Testament accounts, both in general and specific reference [see for example Luke 16.31, 17.26-30; 24.25-27; 24.44]. Interestingly enough, many of the specific points of confirmation support just those subjects most disputed in modern times, viz, the creation, the flood and the building of Noah’s ark, the destruction of Sodom, the record of the lives of Adam and Eve, Abel, Abraham, Moses and many others. We have therefore, ample endorsement of Old Testament history from one who has had unparalleled divine authentication.

THE EVIDENCE OF FULFILLED PROPHECY

Our third argument is based on the fulfilment of many detailed predictions in the Bible. Many of these are concerned with the survival or disappearance of empires, nations or cities; not one has been falsified. For example, Jeremiah wrote that Babylon should become and remain ‘a heap’ exactly as it happened and has continued to this day [Jeremiah 51.37]. Egypt was to sink to inferior status among the nations, but to continue its existence [Ezekiel 29.15]. Edom, however was to disappear entirely as has indeed taken place [Jeremiah 49.17,18; Obadiah 18].

The events and circumstances of the first coming of Jesus were predicted in the greatest detail in the Old Testament and find their confirmation in the New Testament. Such striking confirmation affords the strongest guarantee for the fulfilment of the promises concerning his second coming and the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth [Matthew 19.28; 25.31; Luke 1.32-33; Acts 1.11; 3.21 ].

Similarly, the history of Israel has been fully documented in
advance. The predictions of subjugation and exile because of disobedience to God’s law have been literally fulfilled, as have in some measure the equally longstanding prophecies of the return to their own land ‘in the latter days’ [Jeremiah 31.10; Ezekiel 38.8, 12-16]. This latter-day return of the Jews and the setting-up of the State of Israel is one of the most remarkable and irrefutable evidences of the fulfilment of Bible prophecies. It shows clearly that God is still controlling the destinies of the nations towards the end He has foreseen and purposed.

CONSISTENCY OF THE BIBLICAL RECORDS

Our final argument is in part subjective. It concerns the impact which daily systematic and prayerful reading of the Bible has on the enquiring mind. Many of the recorded incidents have a ring of truth about them which makes the reader instinctively feel they are authentic accounts; Luke’s account of the riot at Ephesus is a case in point [Acts 19.22]. Allied to this is what might be called the psychology of Scripture – the wisdom of divine arrangements in human affairs. For example, anyone who considers the selection of Peter as the apostle to be sent to convert the first Gentile [Acts 10] must admit that the Spirit’s choice here was both essential and unerring.

Again, as we read through the Scriptures year after year we find in every part consistency and intricate pattern. Many of the so-called inconsistencies and contradictions melt away as the overall design of the purpose of God is grasped more fully. In sum, the most satisfying proof of the Bible’s truth and inspiration comes by patient, persistent study. This is the personal conviction and experience of a great number of devout readers in every age, and if anyone is still disposed to doubt, the simple answer is – try it for yourself!

OBJECTIONS CONSIDERED

All kinds of objection have been raised to the conclusions indicated above. The Bible has, for example, been accused of scientific errors. Many today argue that modern study of the universe and the theory of evolution are quite incompatible with the ‘folk-lore’ of the early
chapters of Genesis. We freely admit that the two viewpoints are opposed, but would respectfully point out that modern scientific theories are so frequently amended or even superseded that their opposition at once loses a great deal of its force.

In particular, the theory of evolution is by no means so convincing as many of its supporters imagine. There are so many gaps and contradictions in the theory that a well qualified minority of scientists have rejected it altogether. We strongly suspect that the theory appeals to many because it would appear to eliminate all need for the supernatural – in keeping with the philosophical and atheistic trend so apparent today. The creation account in Genesis is very simple, orderly and dignified in contrast to the Babylonian creation myths. It has served every generation of readers (imagine the first century disciples trying to cope with modern scientific theories and terminology, even if such were accurate!) and it is the foundation upon which the revelation of God’s plan of salvation is built stage by stage in subsequent pages. The creation record is an integral pattern which the committed Christian is bound to accept because Jesus endorsed it unequivocally.

Against these objections it is only fair to stress the Bible’s remarkable anticipation of modern discoveries in various scientific fields. The Law of Moses had a code of hygiene far in advance of its time, and only recently has the wisdom of its dietary laws, for example, been fully appreciated. Again, when we read in the book of Job that the earth hangs on nothing [Job 26.7] we must remember the great contrast between this simple statement of fact and the myths of the ancient world prevalent at the time the book was written.

Sometimes moral difficulties are raised as to the divinity of Scripture. For example, it is contended by some that a God of love would never have ordered the indiscriminate slaughter of the Canaanites by Joshua and his army. Those who argue in this way overlook the fact that other aspects of God’s character ought to be taken into consideration, especially His justice and righteous anger. The Canaanites had sunk into every kind of depravity in spite of being given much time to repent. Few will deny that the Creator who gives
life also has the right to withdraw it, by whatever means He chooses. There is no discrepancy here between the God of the Old and New Testaments; the same moral characteristics are witnessed to by both records (compare for example Exodus 34.6,7 with Matthew 10.28 and Hebrews 10. 26-31) It is man’s reasonable duty to submit humbly to a law and authority far higher than himself.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion it should be pointed out that experienced Bible readers are far more aware of the various difficulties than is the average critic. In spite of such difficulties, they find a wealth of evidence for the trustworthiness of the Bible which completely outweights the objections of its critics. They come to realise with the Psalmist that ‘the sum of thy Word is truth’ [Psalm 119.160 RSV] and that this same Word by its influence upon their daily thinking and conduct is able to transform their lives and thereby ensure their acceptance in the day of judgement and reward when Jesus returns.

In the Bible then, we have a treasure of incalculable value in these uncertain times; a way of escape from the corruption which ‘is in the world through lust’; the opportunity to share in ‘the divine nature’ [2 Peter 1.4]. The tragedy is, as we stated at the outset, that men and women fail to recognise this means of salvation which is in their midst. Is there any good reason, however, why you should, in effect, suffer the same fate as that unfortunate Australian family?

(late) Jim Broughton

FREE SPECIAL ISSUES

This article, which was written 40 years ago, includes references to Biblical Archaeology (pages 6 and 7) and the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls (page 8). Both of these subjects are covered more fully in special issues of Light on a New World.

Send for your free copy of each to the Correspondence Editor – see inside back cover for address details.
What did Jesus Mean?

‘Everlasting Punishment’

In the parable of the sheep and goats Jesus said of the goats ‘...these will go away into everlasting punishment’ [Matthew 25.46]. What did Jesus mean by this? Did he mean, for example, that the destiny of the wicked is everlasting and conscious torment in a fiery hell, as many believe?

We will first look at the context of these words of Jesus; then we will examine the words themselves as they are in the original language of the New Testament and finally we will look at them in the light of the rest of Bible teaching.

THE CONTEXT OF THESE WORDS OF JESUS

In Matthew chapter 25 we see that Jesus is talking about his return to the earth in glory and the following verses go on to show that Jesus will judge the nations [verses 31-33]. Jesus says that he will separate some (the sheep) from others (the goats). To the sheep – that is, to the righteous – he will say, ‘Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’ [verse 34] while to the goats – the wicked, he will say, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire’ [verse 41].

Jesus concludes his narrative with a final reference to these two classes of people: ‘And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life’ [verse 46].
So here is the destiny of both the wicked and the righteous at a future date. Jesus is talking about his return to the earth and the judgement of the nations, when the righteous will enjoy eternal life with Jesus but the wicked will suffer everlasting punishment.

That is the context of Jesus’ words about ‘everlasting punishment’.

A LESSON IN NEW TESTAMENT GREEK

This phrase, ‘everlasting punishment’ occurs only this once in both the NKJV and KJV. The NIV translates the phrase as ‘eternal punishment’. We need to examine these two words separately.

In the original Greek of the New Testament, the word ‘everlasting’ is ‘aionos’ and W. E. Vine in his lexicon shows that it means ‘eternal’. The Greek word ‘aionos’ is used twice in verse 46 and translated in the English text firstly as ‘everlasting’ and then ‘eternal’.

The Apostle Paul used this same Greek word when he wrote about the return of Jesus. In his second letter to the believers in Thessalonica, he told them that Jesus will come ‘in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting (‘aionos’) destruction from the presence of the Lord’ [2 Thessalonians 1.8, 9]. Christ’s punishment is clearly retributive and will be absolute and final and as a result it will be ‘everlasting’ – in other words it will last for ever.

We will now consider the word ‘punishment’. In New Testament Greek, the word is ‘kolazo’ and its primary meaning is ‘to prune’. The Emphatic Diaglott gives the meaning as ‘cutting off’ - that is, as in the cutting off of the branches of a tree. The righteous will live for ever with Jesus but the wicked will be cut off from Jesus and from everlasting life – which means eternal death.
The Lord Jesus Christ used a similar figure to this in his analogy of ‘the vine’. He said to his disciples: ‘I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit...If anyone does not abide in me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned’ [John 15. 5, 6]. In other words, those who do not abide in Christ will be cut off from him and totally destroyed.

The Old Testament describes the destiny of the wicked in a similar way: ‘For evil-doers shall be cut off; but those who wait on the L ORD, they shall inherit the earth’ [Psalm 37. 9].

So far then, we see no evidence that the wicked will suffer conscious everlasting torments in hell. That idea has to be read into Jesus’ words concerning ‘everlasting punishment’.

THE DESTINY OF THE SOUL

We believe this idea of everlasting torments in hell arises out of a wrong understanding of the nature of the soul. Many Christians believe that they possess a soul that is immortal and that upon death the soul of the righteous goes to heaven to enjoy eternal happiness, while the soul of the wicked descends into hell to suffer eternal fiery punishments.

The fact is that nowhere in the Bible do we find the words ‘immortal’ or ‘never-dying’ soul. The Bible plainly states that ‘the soul who sins shall die’ [Ezekiel 18.4]. The soul therefore is not immortal.

The Bible shows how God created man from the dust of the earth and breathed into him the breath of life and man became a living soul [Genesis 2.7 KJV]. Notice that it doesn’t say ‘ever living soul’ or ‘immortal soul’, simply a ‘living soul’.

God’s purpose with men and women is that they should obey him and give him pleasure [see Revelation 4.11 KJV]. Tragically, however, the first human pair chose to disobey God and were condemned to suffer
and die. Death, then, is a punishment for sin and therefore cannot be a gateway to a happier and eternal existence in heaven. If that is the case then the serpent’s lie to Eve, ‘You will not surely die’ [Genesis 3.4] is true!

Further, why did God drive Adam and Eve out of the garden of Eden and place a barrier there to prevent them from taking the fruit of the tree of life if, when they died, their souls went on living anyway? [Genesis 3.23,24].

The New Testament tells us that ‘the wages of sin is death’ [Romans 6. 23] and reminds us of the origin of sin and death: ‘…just as through one man (Adam) sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned’ [Romans 5.12]. The stark reality is that all men and women are condemned to death because of sin.

THE DEAD HAVE NO CONSCIOUS EXISTENCE

Now we are told unequivocally in the Bible that the dead do not have a conscious existence. The wise man Solomon wrote: ‘For the living know that they will die; but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten…Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going’ [Ecclesiastes 9.5,10].

How then can the dead enjoy a conscious existence in heaven? Or how can the sinner endure the popular concept of hell as a place of eternal fiery torment?

THE FIRE THAT SHALL NEVER BE QUENCHED

But, some might protest, surely Jesus taught: ‘if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched – where their worm does not die and the fire is not
The original Greek word used here for ‘hell’ is ‘gehenna’. Gehenna was the name of a place near the ancient city of Jerusalem. It was a valley just outside the city walls used for the burning of the city’s rubbish. Waste from the city was thrown over the walls into the valley below and was burned to keep down smell and prevent the spread of disease. Because the waste of the city was never-ending, the fires burned continually. As well as the city’s rubbish, the bodies of criminals were also thrown over the wall into the valley of Gehenna to suffer a similar fate in those constantly burning fires.

So then, Gehenna, or ‘hell’ as it is translated in our English Bibles, is a symbol of total destruction and no more than that.

SODOM AND GOMORRAH

Jude, a servant of our Lord Jesus Christ, wrote concerning the absolute destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. He says these ancient cities ‘are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire’ [Jude verse 7]. No-one would suggest that Sodom and Gomorrah are still burning today! It’s clearly a figure of speech for a complete and utter destruction from which there is no escape.

THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS

The objection is also sometimes raised — ‘But what about the story of the rich man and Lazarus?’ [Luke 16.19–31] This is clearly one of the parables of Jesus and is not intended to be taken literally. It teaches us that life has not been given by God for self indulgence but to serve Him and Christ and each other.

Are we to believe that there is communication between immortal souls in heaven and those in hell? And will all the righteous really fit in ‘Abraham’s bosom’? And what good would the tip of a finger with water upon it do in a blazing fiery furnace?

Furthermore, Abraham, the father of the faithful, has not ascended into heaven but is in the grave, still awaiting the fulfilment of the
promises made to him. We read in the letter to the Hebrews: ‘These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, they were assured of them...’ [Hebrews 11.13]. Jesus also said: ‘No one has ascended to heaven...’ [John 3. 13]. In the parable, Lazarus could not literally be in ‘Abraham’s bosom’, so neither was the rich man literally conscious after death in fiery torment.

The words of Jesus are figurative language based on a Jewish belief in life after death derived from Greek ideas concerning an afterlife. They are intended to focus on the fact that even something as fantastic as that – someone in heaven communicating with another person in hell and alleviating their suffering with a drop of water – even that could not convert the rich man’s family if they would not believe the Scriptures.

The teaching of the Bible is that the dead are completely unconscious – they cannot communicate!

THE TRUE HOPE OF THE BIBLE

The Bible reveals the real truth about God’s purpose with the earth and mankind. The long sad and tragic history of man’s disobedience will not prevent His purpose being fulfilled. God intended the world to be inhabited by men and women who believe His word and obey him [see Isaiah 45.18]. That is why God sent his only beloved son Jesus Christ, ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life’ [John 3. 16].

God has offered mankind the escape from sin which results in suffering and death. By accepting Jesus as our saviour, God has promised that He will forgive our sins and give us the gift of eternal life.

THE RETURN OF CHRIST AND FUTURE JUDGEMENT

According to God’s plan, Jesus will return to the earth to set up His
everlasting kingdom. The responsible dead who have lain unconscious in the grave will be raised – both the righteous and the wicked. There will be a judgement of the righteous and the wicked. The righteous will be invited to share eternity with Christ in his kingdom but the wicked will be cut off, thrust out from God’s kingdom to suffer eternal oblivion in death.

The Apostle Peter wrote: ‘… the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment’ [2 Peter 2. 9]. Notice that word ‘reserve’. It cannot be true then that wicked souls go to hell when they die. Peter says their destiny is reserved to the day of judgement. When that day finally comes, all sinners will receive their wages – eternal death, never to rise again.

Finally, look again at the quotation in Matthew chapter 25 verse 46. Notice that Jesus speaks not of everlasting punishments (plural) but ‘everlasting punishment’ (singular). In this parable, Jesus is describing the destiny of sinners who will be punished, not by continuous torture in hell-fire, but by a return to an eternal grave at the time of judgement.

THE WAY OF ESCAPE FROM DEATH

God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked for he is a God of mercy as we read in the book of Exodus [see Exodus 34. 6,7]. God is calling on all men everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to Him that they may be saved. He has graciously provided the means for our salvation in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The choice is ours to believe, submit to baptism and seek for eternal life in God’s kingdom, or to reject God and His word and be faced with the everlasting unconsciousness of death.

Maurice Collishaw
Nottingham, UK
A SUMMARY OF CHRISTADELPHIAN BELIEFS

* There is only one God the Creator
* Jesus Christ is the Son of God
* The Holy Spirit is the power of God
* The Bible is the inspired Word of God
* Man is mortal and dies because of sin
* Resurrection is the true hope of believers
* Salvation is only possible through Jesus
* Belief and Baptism are essential for salvation
* There is only one true Gospel
* The Gospel was preached to Abraham
* Abraham’s descendants, the Jewish people, are God’s witnesses
* The kingdom of Israel was the kingdom of God in the past
* Jesus will return to re-establish the kingdom of God on earth
* The reward of the righteous is eternal life to be enjoyed on earth
WHAT are we to make of Lot’s character? Why were the events of his life written for us in the Bible? Was he a faithful and righteous man? Was he always looking for the easy life? However, before we get ahead of ourselves, let us be reminded of who Lot was. Perhaps the record of his life will not be familiar to everyone.

WHO WAS LOT?

Lot was Abraham’s nephew and went with him, when he left his home at Ur a city of Mesopotamia (now in Iraq).
Later, Lot continued with him to Canaan (now Israel), but once established there, they separated: Lot took the fertile land of the Jordan valley, settling in Sodom, while Abraham stayed in the hill country to the west [Genesis 13.8-12].

Lot seemed to be a man who prospered in the world. His flocks grew so abundantly that territorial disputes arose between his herdsmen and those of Abraham. This might have ended badly, but Abraham was too wise to allow this falling-out to escalate. Instead he gave Lot first choice of which direction he would take. Lot opted to go to the fertile plain described as being like ‘the garden of the LORD’ [Genesis 13.10]. He did this for the benefit of good grazing land but moved close to Sodom, even though it had a bad reputation which he may have been aware of.

When Sodom was attacked by a confederation of kings from Mesopotamia, Lot was taken prisoner. Abraham, out of duty for his relative, went and rescued him, refusing to take any share in the ensuing plunder. Later, when Abraham learned from three angels that Sodom was to be destroyed, Abraham pleaded for the ‘righteous’ in the city. Lot, his wife and daughters were led to safety when Sodom was destroyed, although Lot’s wife famously looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt. Despite being given permission to stay in Zoar - a smaller town, Lot fled to the mountains and the last we hear of him, he is living in a cave with his daughters.

‘So what?’ you might say. ‘Lot’s life sounds eventful, but is there anything to praise or criticise? Are there any lessons to be learned?’
To answer these questions, we need to consider what the Bible has to say about Lot and let that be our guide. The Apostle Peter comments on Lot’s experiences in these words:

‘If he (God) condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard) – if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgement’ [2 Peter 2.6-9 NIV].

So according to Scripture, Lot was a righteous man, distressed by what was going on around him and God rescued him from that situation.

EVENTS IN LOT’S LIFE

With this thought in our minds, we will review some of the notable events of Lot’s life and consider how righteous or otherwise Lot’s actions were. And let us be presumptuous enough to pass a verdict on his actions – not because we are to judge others, but because we need to examine Lot’s actions and learn from them.

* Lot chose to leave the comfort of urban life in Ur and follow his Uncle Abraham (and his father Haran) to the land of Canaan [Genesis 11.31]. Presumably, Lot believed that Abraham had received a message from God, or at least he trusted him and hoped for a better life. Shall we say that this action was righteous?

* They settled for a while in Haran, a town called after the name of Lot’s father. Abraham left Haran and headed towards Canaan
When the dispute arose over grazing land for the flocks, Lot could have deferred the choice to his uncle, as his senior, but instead, Lot made the choice. This, in itself does not seem wrong, but Lot chose the plain, where there were cities rather than the hills and better grazing land for his animals.

Not only that, but rather than give the cities a wide berth, Lot settled near to Sodom, potentially the most notorious of these cities. This perhaps shows a lack of sound judgement and cannot really be deemed righteous [Genesis 13.5-13].

By the time the four kings attacked Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot ‘was living in Sodom’ [Genesis 14.11,12]. Rather than putting a good distance between himself and this depraved city, Lot was now actually living within its walls. This was a very dangerous decision and not very righteous!

When the angels come to get him and his family out of Sodom, Lot was found sitting in the gate. [Genesis 19.1]. This suggests that Lot had set himself up as a judge in Sodom (this is confirmed in Genesis 19 verse 9). We might not all have the choice of living in the best neighbourhoods, but it does not mean
we have to become involved in everything that goes on there. God says ‘come out from them and be separate’ [2 Corinthians 6.17]. So it seems that Lot had somewhat compromised his principles and standards.

* However Lot had not completely lost his standards. When the angels, appearing as men came to Sodom, Lot offered them hospitality [Genesis 19.3]. Perhaps he insisted so strongly because, not knowing they were angels of God, he knew only too well the fate that might befall them in the city square. Perhaps this was an act of righteousness.

* The men of the city intended to sodomise these visitors – that’s where the word comes from. This is abhorrent to God as we learn from both the Old and New Testaments [Genesis 18.20,21; Leviticus 18.22,20.13; Romans 1.24-32]. Perhaps Lot was righteous in his attempt to rescue these ‘men’ from this fate, but how did he propose to do it – by throwing his two virgin daughters to the mob! [Genesis 19.7,8]. It was the custom of the times to defend guests at all costs. But if we take his words literally it was hardly the action of a righteous man!

* As the destruction began, Lot was told to head to the mountains [Genesis 19.17]. First, Lot wanted to turn into Zoar, God granted his request and Zoar was spared. But then Lot changed his mind and decided to flee to the mountains [Genesis 19.30]. It seems that he did not really trust God’s promise.

* In the mountains, Lot’s daughters made him drunk and slept with him, both getting pregnant in order to preserve the family line. On that sad note, the story of Lot comes to an end. We are told no more about Lot or his life – only that his children became the fathers of two nations, the Moabites and the Ammonites [Genesis 19.36-38]. If Lot had stayed in Zoar, his daughters would have doubtless met and married husbands and perhaps Lot would have married again.
HOW DO WE INTERPRET LOT’S CHARACTER?

It is hard to know what to make of Lot and the events that shaped his character. On the one hand, he was Abraham’s nephew, and like Abraham, he had willingly left Ur with its idolatry and evil practices – this certainly was a good start. Moreover, when Abraham pleaded with God to spare Sodom, he did so on the grounds that destroying the city might mean killing the ‘righteous’ along with the wicked. Abraham therefore counted Lot among the ‘righteous’ and God then sent angels specifically to get Lot and his family out of Sodom before its destruction. So here too was an indication that Lot was righteous.

On the other hand, some of Lot’s actions were questionable at best. Given a choice of where to live in Canaan, he had moved into Sodom and things really went down hill from there. Many Jewish and Christian writers – and even the Koran – call Lot righteous, as the inspired Apostle Peter did in the passage we quoted at the start of this article, yet others are less complimentary. Lot’s character seems to be a mixture of good and bad. Humanly speaking, perhaps we are not so different.

Lot’s life is inextricably linked with that of his uncle Abraham and whilst Abraham was not perfect, he was faithful to God and was chosen by God to become the father of a great nation [Genesis 12.1-3]. Abraham was the direct ancestor of Jesus Christ, the ‘seed’ (descendant) through whom all nations would be blessed:

‘The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ.’[Galatians 3.16 NIV].

So Lot was always going to struggle to come up to the high example set by his uncle Abraham.
There is a parallel, or type to consider in these events. We often find these in the Bible, where a past event gives us an insight into a future event, or a past character gives us a glimpse of a future one. Abraham is a type of Christ. He intercedes with God to save his relative from the destruction that was to come upon Sodom. Jesus intercedes with God to save those related to him through baptism from the destruction that is to come upon the world at his second coming [2 Thessalonians 1. 6-10].

The example of Lot is representative of mankind. If we are honest, we can probably see similarities with ourselves. When we choose the easy way rather than the more difficult, are we not like Lot? If we sit and bemoan the state of the world but do not separate ourselves from it, are we not like Lot? Abraham watched the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah from a safe distance but Lot was right in the thick of it. Whose example would we be best to follow concerning the world in which we must live and the destruction that we are told must come? Was Lot made righteous only through the example and pleading of Abraham (or for his sake), just as we can be made righteous through Jesus?
We are reminded that we cannot save ourselves from this corrupt world. God intervened through the angels (and through Abraham) to save Lot and He will intervene to save us through Jesus – not because we are righteous or deserving of ourselves, but because God has so promised. In the parable of the lost sheep we read:

‘Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish’ [*Matthew 18. 14*].

If we are given these examples in the Bible, it must be for a purpose, so that we can learn from them. Are you ready to separate yourself from the evils of this world? Will you let yourself be led to safety from the destruction that will soon come upon the world? The Apostle Paul reminds us that it will take many people by surprise:

‘Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, ‘Peace and safety,’ destruction will come on them suddenly, as labour pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled’ [*1 Thessalonians 5.1-6 NIV*].

We can all learn from the example of Lot!

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