



Light

...on a New World

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Editor: Colin Dryland

Assistant Editor: Ken Dennis

Correspondence Secretary: John Carpenter

Publications Secretary: Nigel Griffiths

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Cover picture: Field of wheat (see article on page 1)

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

What did Jesus Mean?

‘The harvest is the end of the world’

THE title of this article is taken from some words of Jesus spoken to his disciples. Jesus had been teaching a great crowd of people about the kingdom of heaven, and had been using parables to explain his message. The day’s work of teaching is recorded by Matthew and it contains a number of parables on this subject of the kingdom of heaven. At the outset of this study we should note two important elements of his teaching:

- ❖ It focused on the kingdom; this was the essential message that he taught. The miracles of healing were a means of proving his authority as a teacher sent from God. His moral teaching of the supreme power of love was intended to show men the ways of God. But above and beyond both these elements was the teaching about the kingdom of God, a kingdom where everyone will know God’s laws and obey them and where sin, disease and death itself will eventually be removed from the earth,
- ❖ Jesus’ method of teaching required his listeners to exercise their minds, to want to seek out and understand this divine teaching. The disciples asked why he spoke in parables. Jesus’ reply was that only those who were prepared to seek out the truth would come to appreciate the full meaning of his words [*Matthew 13.10-17*].

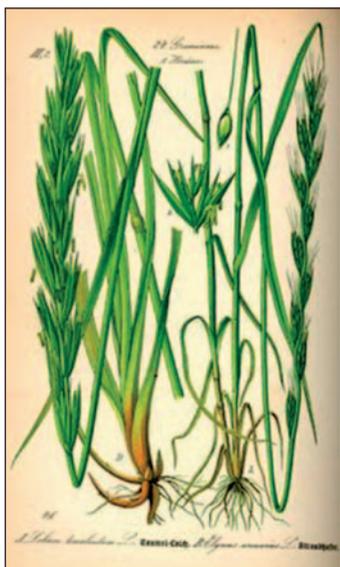
This magazine tries to follow this pattern, to shed light on that new world order which will come when God’s kingdom is established on the

earth. We encourage our readers to explore the teaching of the Bible, in order to know and appreciate the promises that God has made to those who listen and respond to His Word.

PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

In Matthew chapter 13, there are seven separate parables, each one explaining something about the kingdom. Most of them start with the phrase ‘*the kingdom of heaven is like...*’ Some of these parables are probably familiar; the description of the man sowing his seed is perhaps the best known (see Light Volume 21 No 9 page 3). It describes how the soil in which the seed is grown has a very great effect on the quality and quantity of the harvest yield. Seed sown on the path, in stony or weedy ground, will not produce as much grain as seed planted in good, well prepared ground [Matthew 13.18-23]. Having explained the meaning of this parable, Jesus went on to give another harvest parable.

THE WHEAT AND TARES



This parable is the one from which our subject is taken [Matthew 13.24-30]. It describes a man who planted good quality seed in his field. The impression given is that he was a very careful farmer who worked hard to achieve a good crop.

Unfortunately the farmer had an enemy, who came by night and over-sowed the field with tares. Tares are a weed, also known as darnel. In appearance, especially during the early stages of growth, it is almost indistinguishable from wheat. It is only when the plant has grown and the grain is developing that the difference becomes apparent.

Tares or Darnel

The darnel is a slate grey colour, and is very bitter in taste. If its grain is mixed with the wheat, then the end product will be spoiled.

As the crop grew, the farm labourers realised that their original planting had been over-sown with the darnel. They asked the farmer what they should do. His instruction was to leave the two crops to grow together until the harvest. The crops were both now grown to the point where they could be distinguished but their root systems would be intertwined. If an attempt was made to pull up the tares, it would also destroy the wheat. When the field was harvested, it would be easy to identify what was the good crop and what was bad. The two could be separated, and the weeds bundled up and burned before the grain was gathered in.

EXPLANATION OF THE PARABLE

In his teaching by the lakeside, Jesus did not provide an interpretation of the parable. After the crowd had been sent home, Jesus was approached by his disciples, who asked him to explain the parable to them. Jesus then went through each element of the story, providing an identification of its meaning [*Matthew 13.37-43*].

Jesus is the farmer who had spent time and energy preparing the field to receive the good seed. Drawing on the earlier parable of the sower, we can be sure that this ground was well broken up, the stones removed and all the encroaching weeds taken out. The farmer had helpers who assisted in the preparation of the field to receive the seed. The helpers are the apostles who were commissioned to take the gospel to the whole world (the field of the parable) following Jesus' death and resurrection [*Mark 16.15*]. The good seed are the children of the kingdom. A comparison with Jesus' final words on this parable shows that the good seed are those who will eventually enter the kingdom of God. Jesus describes them as the righteous who will '*shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father*' [*Matthew 13.43*].

The meaning of the parable can be shown in tabular form as follows:

PARABLE	MEANING
The sower of the good seed	The son of man (i.e. Jesus)
The field	The world
The good seed	The children of the kingdom (i.e. those who respond in faith to Jesus' teaching)
The tares or darnel	The children of the wicked (i.e. those who are opposed to the good seed)
The enemy who sowed the tares	The devil (i.e. human nature)
The harvest	The end of the world
The reapers	The angels of God

Following the sowing of the good seed, an enemy also sows some seed. The important thing to notice is that the evil planting was not some obvious weed like thistles. It was something which at first, had every appearance of a good crop. In reality it was not only useless, but positively damaging and poisonous. Jesus explains it as the work of 'the devil' [Matthew 13.39]. This article is not the place to explore the Bible teaching about the devil. This is dealt with in detail in other issues of Light on a New World (see for example Light Volume 21.7 page 13). In essence, the Bible reveals the devil to be none other than our own human thinking, which left to its own devices will exalt self importance and try and reduce the authority of divine instruction [Matthew 7.15-20].

Because of the similarity between the good wheat and the evil darnel, we must interpret this as an indicator that there would be false religions which pretended to be true, but were found to be false –

religions based on the thinking and preferences of men rather than the clear teaching from God.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF FALSE RELIGION

This interpretation of the parable is not an isolated example of Scriptural teaching. Other examples abound, both in the teaching of Jesus and of the apostles. In his sermon on the mount, Jesus makes a much more explicit pronouncement – *‘beware of false prophets’* [Matthew 7.15]. He goes on to identify how true teachers and false prophets can be distinguished: *‘A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them’* [Matthew 7.18-20]. In these words there is a close similarity to the parable of the wheat and tares. The tares were identified once their fruit was revealed; then the tares were cut down and burned.

On another occasion, Jesus was having one of his many arguments with the Scribes and Pharisees. They were men who professed to worship God, but had made their own philosophy and tradition more important than the word of God [Mark 17.8-13]. Jesus condemned these false teachers saying *‘You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do’* [John 8.44]. The tares in the parable were the children of the wicked one and this link provides further evidence that the tares represent people who pretend to teach true religion, but instead teach ideas based on their own thinking. In a very similar way the Apostle Paul had to withstand a false prophet and condemned him in these words: *‘you son of the devil...will you not cease from perverting the straight ways of the Lord?’* [Acts 13.10]

Paul constantly warned the early churches about the dangers of apostasy and false religion. To the elders of the church at Ephesus he said: *‘from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves’* [Acts 20.30]. In a letter, he warned the church at Thessalonica about the development of a

religion that claimed to be of God, but in reality was a manifestation of sin '*...the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshipped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God*' [2 Thessalonians 2.3, 4]. Similar warnings can be found in the writings of the Apostles Peter, John and Jude.

These warnings were not unfounded pessimism. Church history shows that the original Gospel taught by Christ and the apostles was slowly changed. At the beginning of this article, we showed how the kingdom of God on earth was the centrepiece of Christ's teaching. The historian Gibbon confirms that in the first century, this hope was '*the reigning sentiment of orthodox believers*', but goes on to comment that '*The doctrine of Christ's reign on earth was at first treated as profound allegory, was considered by degrees as a doubtful and useless opinion, and was at length rejected as the absurd invention of heresy and fanaticism.*' [The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, chapter 15, by Edward Gibbon]. So men changed the clear teaching of the Son of God.

THE LESSON FOR US

The parable of the wheat and the tares has very important lessons for all who wish to be followers of Jesus. He has shown us that true Christianity would be challenged by another form of religion which at first sight looks the same. In reality, this second religion is counterfeit, valueless and worthy only of destruction.

Although this religion is opposed to Christ, it will be allowed to co-exist with true religion until the time comes for God's kingdom to be established. There will then be a time of judgement, when only those who have genuinely tried to follow the true teaching of Christ will be gathered into the kingdom. Those represented by the tares will be destroyed, for as we read in Matthew: '*...they will gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire...*' [Matthew 13.41,42].

It is easy to be complacent and say that the tares represent the pagan religions of the ancient Middle East. But the tares appeared to be very similar to the wheat, not something totally different. Combined with the warnings which abound in the New Testament, we must accept that the tares represent a corrupted form of Christianity. This sobering lesson must be a real challenge for all Christians today.

This publication can provide stimuli to set the reader thinking, but at the end of the day there is only one source of true understanding about God's kingdom and the basis of true religion. The prophet Isaiah spoke out against the corrupt form of religion in his day that eventually led to the downfall of the nation of Israel. His words are just as relevant today:

'To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them' [*Isaiah 8.20*].

As he gave his parables by the lakeside, Jesus pronounced a blessing on those who would seek to find out the real meaning of his teaching:

'blessed are your eyes for they see; and your ears for they hear' [*Matthew 13.16*].

This is the main lesson that comes from this study – to determine to seek out from the Bible, the true gospel message of salvation and having found it to act upon it and prepare for that day when the angels will separate the wheat from the tares! Jesus concluded the parable with an appeal to his hearers:

'He who has ears to hear, let him hear!' [*Matthew 13.43*]

Stephen Irving
Norfolk, UK

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 Gospel
- The Gospel was preached to Abraham
- 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

Religious Groups in Bible Times

The Sadducees

THE Sadducees were one of the religious parties or sects in existence at the time of Jesus and the early church. They upheld the Law of Moses and rejected all other teaching. They opposed the Pharisees and rejected the oral law based on the traditions of the fathers. Jesus condemned both these religious groups on many occasions. Matthew records these words of Jesus to his disciples:

“Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees...” Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees’ [*Matthew 16.6, 12*].

In this passage Jesus reminds his hearers of the importance of sound doctrine or beliefs based only on the Word of God. The main difference between the Pharisees and the Sadducees was that the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, whereas the Pharisees did.

The Sadducees were the smallest of the religious groups and are mentioned only 13 times in the New Testament. They were however a powerful and influential group. Unlike the Pharisees, they did not oppose the foreign rule of the Romans. They also held the majority of the important positions in the Sanhedrin. This was the Jewish council of elders in Jerusalem, the Supreme Court and the ultimate authority on

all matters of Jewish law. As both the Pharisees and the Sadducees opposed Jesus, and the Pharisees were favoured by the people, there was an uneasy alliance between the two groups in the time of Christ, with the aim of getting rid of the man who challenged of their teaching and ultimately their authority as religious leaders.

If we look at their beliefs we will understand why Jesus opposed their teaching. They did not believe in the resurrection of the body and denied the existence of angels. On one occasion they came to Jesus with a challenging question based on the teaching of the Law of Moses about marriage. This was a hypothetical question which they thought would expose the absurdity of Jesus' teaching. The question concerned a man taking on the responsibility of marrying his brother's wife on the death of his brother [*Deuteronomy 25.5-10*]. If this happened seven times she would have had seven husbands, so if there was a resurrection, which of the seven would she be married to?

Firstly they denied a number of Old Testament Scriptures that teach bodily resurrection. Here are two examples:

'Your dead shall live; together with my dead body shall they arise. Awake and sing, you who dwell in the dust; for your dew is like the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead' [*Isaiah 26 v 19*].

'And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt' [*Daniel 12.2*].

Their argument was designed to discredit Jesus in the eyes of the people. But as Matthew records, the answer of Jesus confirmed the teaching of their Old Testament Scriptures about the resurrection and the existence of angels. Jesus said to them:

“You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the

power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels of God in heaven. But concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." And when the multitude heard this, they were astonished at his teaching' [Matthew 22.29, 33].

But why did Jesus refer to a passage in the Law of Moses? He quoted from Exodus: *'I am the God of your father – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'* [Exodus 3.6]. The Sadducees believed this. So Jesus in effect said this was meaningless to them unless there was a resurrection. The truth is that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will be raised from the dead and be in the kingdom of God, as he taught on another occasion: *'There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out'* [Luke 13.28].

The writer to the Hebrews confirms the teaching of Jesus about the resurrection. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob *'died in faith, not having received the promises'* [Hebrews 11.13]. This chapter contains a list of men and women of faith and concludes with similar words: *'all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise'* [Hebrews 11.39]. The writer adds: *'God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us'* [Hebrews 11.40]. The conclusion we can draw from this is that the true servants of God in every age will be raised from the dead and they together with those who are alive at Christ's second coming will be judged and if found worthy, given everlasting life to be enjoyed in the kingdom of God on earth.

After the resurrection and ascension of Jesus to heaven, the Sadducees continued to challenge the Apostles as they preached a risen

Christ to the people in Jerusalem. As a result, the Apostles Peter and John were arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin [Acts 4.1-3]. Later in the book of Acts we read how Paul was brought before the Sanhedrin and, knowing that there were differing opinions over important religious beliefs, he used the occasion to great advantage, the result of which was 'a great dissension' and Paul had to be rescued by the Roman soldiers [Acts 23.6-10].

So what can we learn from the mistaken beliefs of the Sadducees? It is important to make sure we understand Bible teaching. We can only do this by reading and study. We must have a firm basis for our beliefs as Paul wrote to Timothy: *'All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work'* [2 Timothy 3.16, 17].

Resurrection is fundamental to a true believer in Jesus. Paul wrote to the 1st Century Christians at Corinth:

'...if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is vain and your faith is also vain. Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God...And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!. Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.'

[I Corinthians 15.13-18]

If we are to avoid falling into the same error as the Sadducees, we must make sure our beliefs are based on the teaching of the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation, and not just on those parts we select to suit ourselves.

Stephen Bonner
Kent, UK

Bible Characters

James the Lord's Brother

THERE are four men called James in the New Testament record. The one we want to focus on is James, one of the brothers of Jesus. From the Biblical record we see that Jesus had four brothers: *'James, Joses, Simon, and Judas'* [Matthew 13.55]. It is this James that most scholars conclude is the writer of the letter of James in the New Testament. At the very beginning of that letter, he identifies himself as *'James a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.'* [James 1.1]. He is also acknowledged by the Apostle Paul as *'James the Lord's brother'* [Galatians 1.19]. So we are looking at a man who had grown up and lived with Jesus in Nazareth – probably working together and supporting their mother Mary and the younger children.

JAMES THE UNBELIEVER

But James was not always a believer and when Jesus was preaching the Gospel with his disciples, James and his brothers had some doubts about Jesus and his work. For example we read that *'His brothers therefore said to him, "Depart from here and go into Judea, that your disciples also may see the works that you are doing... If you do these things, show yourself to the world." For even his brothers did not believe in him'* [John 7.3-7].

Jesus' brothers did not believe in him and were possibly opposed to his teaching. On one occasion they came to him with their mother Mary, wishing to speak to him. Matthew records the reaction of Jesus

to their request: ‘“*Who is my mother and who are my brothers?*” *And he stretched out his hand toward his disciples and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother”*’ [Matthew 12.47-50].

In this incident, Jesus’ brothers (and it is thought that James would have been one of them) tried to hold him back from his work and his teaching. They were probably quite embarrassed and were concerned not only for their elder brother’s safety, but most probably their own, for they were related to this man who was causing quite a disturbance in the Jewish community of the day. They even persuaded their mother to go with them to try to discourage him in his preaching. But Jesus made it clear that those who were his true family, were not his close companions, not even his blood relatives, unless they too believed and obeyed the Gospel message he preached.

THE CONVERSION OF JAMES

Possibly James did not believe that his elder brother was anything more than an eccentric man who was causing trouble in the Jewish world. But after Jesus had died and risen again James came to understand the purpose of his mission and believed the Gospel, which included the realisation that he truly was the Son of God!

When we think about this knowledge dawning on James for the first time, we can imagine the impact it had on him. For James to realise that Jesus his half-brother was the Son of God, really must have shaken him. He came to realise that Jesus was not just an eccentric man at all, but he was a very special man – he was the Saviour of the world!

What an amazing thought, for if you think about it, you will soon realise just how excited you would be on realising that your elder brother was the Son of God. The reality is that we can become Jesus’ brother or sister, by adoption into the family of God. This can only be possible through full immersion in the waters of baptism and Jesus

himself set us the example by submitting to this simple but essential act of baptism.

Jesus appeared to James, his younger brother after his resurrection, and Paul in his writings tells us about this. He wrote about those who had seen the risen Jesus and James received a special mention:

‘After that he was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that he was seen by **James**, then by all the apostles’ [1 Corinthians 15. 6, 7].

JESUS SPEAKS TO JAMES

The fact that Jesus met James personally shows how important James now was to Jesus. Jesus obviously wanted his family to believe his teaching and become his followers. Jesus talking with James no doubt would have reassured him, who would then have passed on the words of Jesus to his other siblings. His personal meeting with Jesus would also have helped him to later write the letter that bears his name.

After meeting Jesus and coming to a full understanding of his exalted position in the divine plan, there is no doubt that James would now put all his efforts into repairing his past mistakes and making amends for the trouble and upset that he may have brought upon his brother Jesus. He became one of the leaders in the new community of believers, working tirelessly to promote the gospel message with great enthusiasm and was a leading apostle among the believers in Jerusalem. This is what James wanted and now he was very much involved in the activities of the 1st Century church.

THE CHRISTIANS IN JERUSALEM

At first in this newly formed Christian fellowship, the Apostle Peter was at the forefront in preaching the Gospel, but soon James took on a prominent role, for it was he to whom Peter requested the brethren to report his release from prison: ‘*But motioning to them with his hand to*

keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren" [Acts 12.17]. Paul also conferred with him later on when he visited Jerusalem. *'I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother'* [Galatians 1.19].

James position as a leader in the early Church can be seen from a reading of Acts chapter 15, where he is described as presiding over a conference in Jerusalem, and directing the way they were to send out communications to the Gentile (non-Jewish) believers:

'Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles. And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, "Men and brethren, listen to me: Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for his name"' [Acts 15.12-14].

It should be noted that James was very well versed in the Old Testament writings, as is shown in the letter he wrote to the Jewish believers. Having been brought up with Jesus no doubt they would have talked about the Law of Moses and the Old Testament Prophets together. The importance of the Old Testament as a basis for the Gospel message cannot be denied.

THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

When we look at the Epistle written by James, we notice that he introduces himself as *"James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad: Greetings"* [James 1.1]. James does not promote himself, as he could well have done, but rather he says he was *'a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ'*. That word *'servant'* literally means *'slave'* so James was certainly humbling himself by emphasising he was a slave of his brother Jesus!

James wrote to those Jews who had turned from Judaism to Christianity and who were experiencing trials of persecution and hardship for their faith. James wrote to those Jews who suffered trials such as this, but there were still many faults that needed to be pointed out and corrected. The power of the tongue is described in this way by James: *'a fire, a world of iniquity'* and he adds *'no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison'* [James 3.6, 8]. The tongue was being used in a manner that caused quarrelling and contention and which destroyed the very basis of life in Jesus. James gave wise counsel under Divine inspiration and we urge you to take the time to read the five chapters through.

TRUE RELIGION

In his epistle, James showed the Jewish believers the meaning of true religion:

'Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.'

[James 1.27 NIV]

True religion is an active force in the life of the believer. James also speaks of the need for putting our faith in Christ into action in these words:

'What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?' [James 2.14 NIV]

In the last chapter of his short letter, James reminds believers of the need for patience as they look forward to the return of Jesus:

'You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near' [James 5.8].

THE DEATH OF JAMES

The epistle of James gives us much to think about, but it also discloses many characteristics of Jesus' younger brother; He was a mild and tolerant man, firm in his belief in the mission and message of his elder brother Jesus. He was also a practical man who clearly saw the need to demonstrate his faith by his actions. He was a shrewd observer of human nature, and he openly showed up the hypocrisy that characterised the lives of the religious leaders of his day.

According to the Jewish historian Josephus, Ananias the High Priest, together with the Scribes and the Pharisees, taking advantage of an interim period between the death of the Roman governor, Festus and the appointment of a new governor, arranged a meeting of the Sanhedrin and demanded that James should come and denounce Jesus as the Messiah. James obeyed the order to come and appear before the assembly, but instead of carrying out their wishes, he loudly stated his belief that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God and the future judge of the world. James had not complied with their demand and they were enraged, grabbing him and throwing him down to the court below where they stoned him to death.

James was martyred for his faith about the year AD62. He now awaits the return of his elder brother, to raise the dead and reward those who have kept the faith, who *'will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love him'*. [James 1.12].

Andy Coates
Melbourne, Australia

What must I do to be saved?

THIS question was asked by a man who lived in the Roman city of Philippi nearly 2,000 years ago. He was a prison keeper – not a very exciting job but he experienced something which was totally unexpected – an earthquake which caused all the prison doors to suddenly be flung open. Among the prisoners at that time were the Apostles Paul and Silas who he confronted with the question: *‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ [Acts 16.30]* The answer of Paul was *‘believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved’ [Acts 16.31]*. This was followed by his baptism. The record tells us that the Jailer *‘rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household’ [Acts 16.34]*.

A NEW BIRTH

Baptism is described in the New Testament as a re-birth and is a fundamental condition for salvation. The teaching of Jesus summarises this very well. He said to Nicodemus one of the religious leaders: *‘most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God’ [John 3.3]*. Jesus then explained to Nicodemus that eternal life is dependent on a number of things – firstly belief – then baptism – and then what? Do these two things alone guarantee that we shall live for ever in the kingdom of God? This may come as a surprise to many Christians, for if we study the Bible we shall find that there is much more to it than that.

A VERY IMPORTANT QUESTION

Being a child of God is a growing process and lack of growth will hinder progress as we get older. If we don’t grow spiritually we will not become mature sons and daughters of God. Jesus encountered many different sorts of people during his ministry. On one occasion he spoke to a young man who like the Philippian jailer, asked him a very

important question: *'Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life' [Mark 10.17].*

The initial answer of Jesus must have surprised this young man – *'Why do you call me good? No one is good but one, that is God' [Mark 10.18].* Although Jesus lived a sinless life, he too was mortal and in need of salvation from death. In these words Jesus recognises the fact that in the fullest sense, only God is *'good'* by his very nature being immune from sin.

'ALL HAVE SINNED'

There is a fundamental principle here that must be grasped if we are to progress as a child of God - **we are all sinners in God's sight and in need of forgiveness.** This is a human tendency which the Bible tells us we have inherited from our first parents (Adam and Eve). Being sinners alienates us from God and leads only to death. The Apostle Paul wrote: *'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' [Romans 3.23].* However, by becoming God's children through belief and baptism, we can obtain forgiveness of our sins and commence a new life of doing the will of God. Jesus the Son of God is our example, for it is recorded of him that at the commencement of his ministry, when he was baptised there came a voice from heaven which said: *'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased' [Matthew 3.17].*

How then can we be like Jesus and please God in our lives? How can we obtain the eternal life that Jesus now has? In his teaching Jesus made it very plain that it required effort on the part of the believer. What does it really mean to be a Christian? Jesus said: *'Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven' [Matthew 7.21].*

WHAT SHALL I DO?

To many people religion is more about **'being good'** or to re-phrase it **'doing good'** - for as Jesus reminds us in those words from Matthew not one of us is good. If you ask people to give you a definition of being a Christian, probably most of the answers would involve some of

these things: *'I think Christianity is all about helping others'* or *'it involves giving time, effort and money to a good cause'*.

Some people do devote their lives to helping others – but we must ask ourselves if this is really what Christianity is all about. Jesus said to his disciples: *'Follow me'*; but what did he really mean by that statement? If we want to understand what it means to be a Christian, we must consider carefully the teaching and example of Christ and those men and women who were his immediate followers. Jesus made it very plain that *'being good'* or rather *'doing good'* was not enough. If we are to follow him and do God's will, our lives must become more like the one we profess to follow.

True Christianity is demonstrated in many of the parables that Jesus told – those stories from everyday life with a lesson for those who could discern it. Perhaps the most well known is the parable of the Good Samaritan. The parable was prompted by a similar question to that asked by the rich young man. This time a lawyer asked the question to test Jesus: *'Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?'* [Luke 10.25]. It's a fundamental question - salvation is dependant on the correct answer and its practical application in everyday life.

But Jesus didn't answer the question – instead he asked the man another question. He knew the answer to the question and was just testing Jesus to see how he would respond. And so he answered Jesus:

'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself' [Luke 10.27].

In these telling words we see two vital principles which cover every aspect of the true Christian's way of life. Note the order - **God first - our neighbour second**. The idea of being a *good Christian* these days seems to place all the emphasis on the second commandment – and ignores the first. It is a great mistake to neglect our duty to God – the

one who has given us life and the opportunity to serve Him. He has given us His own dear Son as the Saviour, has raised him from the dead and offered us hope of unending life in the future.

THE NEED FOR PRAYER

And so first and foremost the Christian has the privilege of expressing his or her love for God in worship. Individually, this can be expressed in prayer. Jesus gave his disciples an example in this respect: *'And it came to pass, as He (Jesus) was praying...that one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray"'* [Luke 11.1]. The first thing to note is that Jesus didn't just say to his disciples *'do as I say'* - He always set the example as we note from this verse. The model prayer which follows in Luke chapter 11 has been recited by countless millions of people since that time. But how many think about the meaning of the words?

If we think about it carefully, the 'Lord's Prayer' is an act of worship. **Firstly** it emphasises the supremacy of God our Creator: *'hallowed be your name'*. **Secondly** it reminds us of God's plan for the world and the need to pray *'your kingdom come'*. **Thirdly** it enjoins on us the recognition that our lives depend on God: *'Give us day by day our daily bread.'* The Apostle Paul reminded the Athenians of God's hand in our lives. He said *'for in him we live and move and have our being'* [Acts 17.28]. In other words our very existence depends on Him – how many people today recognise that?

Lastly it contains a prayer for forgiveness: *'forgive us our sins.'* Only Jesus himself led a sinless life but his disciples without exception succumbed to the temptations of human nature. The important thing for the true Christian is to honour God and seek help in prayer – it is a communication process which has great benefits. And God will respond to the prayer offered in sincerity as can be testified by many of those who have used this wonderful privilege to the full.

The second aspect of this parable of the Good Samaritan is to love our neighbour. *'Who is my neighbour?'* That was the question from

the Lawyer which prompted Jesus to tell the parable of the Good Samaritan. The background of the parable needs to be appreciated - the Samaritans were hated by the Jews for they were Gentiles - descendants of people who had been settled in the land of Israel by the Assyrian invaders, after the Northern kingdom of Israel had gone into captivity 700 years before the time of Christ. (for more information about the Samaritans see the article in Light volume 21 No 5).

We can imagine the thoughts of the Jewish lawyer as the story unfolded - it took a Samaritan to show compassion on the wounded man - notice how the lawyer reacted to the pointed question of Jesus: *'which of these three (Priest, Levite and Samaritan) do you think was neighbour to him who fell among the thieves? [Luke 10.36]*. The lawyer replied *'He who showed mercy on him*. He couldn't even bring himself to mention the word Samaritan, such were his feelings about this man who was despised by the Jews. We can imagine then how he felt when Jesus told him: *'Go and do likewise' [Luke 10.37]*. The lawyer's question had been answered in a very telling way, followed by that practical advice from the lips of Jesus.

'LOVE YOUR ENEMIES'

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus emphasises this Godly characteristic which is so foreign to the human mind – but one that is enjoined on all those who want to be his disciples:

'You have heard that it was said 'You shall love your neighbour, and hate your enemy'. But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you [Matthew 5.43, 44].

The path of discipleship, as we can see from these verses, goes against our natural inclinations. Jesus teaches us the opposite and he was the perfect example of such teaching. He did have many enemies and the Jewish leaders wanted to kill him. Eventually they succeeded

and they had him put to death by crucifixion. But even in the agony of his dying moments he uttered some words which demonstrate this important aspect of the Christian way of life. He said as he hung on the cross: *'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do'* [Luke 23.34].

TRUE NON-CONFORMISTS

The true follower of Jesus will suffer persecution of one sort or another – it's an ugly human trait that men react against those who stand up for their beliefs, who are often in a small minority. The first century Christians experienced this hatred and so it has been ever since. Some would argue that if everyone practised this, the end result would be anarchy – crime would go unpunished and chaos would follow. The point is this – the life of a true Christian is not for the majority. The follower of Jesus is a non-conformist in the true sense of the word. This is summed up in some more words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount: *'Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect'* [Matthew 5.48].

These words may seem like an impossible hurdle in achieving our goal, but Jesus wouldn't have said them if this was so. The word *'perfect'* in this passage, means 'mature' or 'grown up.' The child of God has to progress towards this maturity which can be achieved through a strong conviction and with God's help. The Apostle Paul wrote some words to the 1st Century Christians at Rome that help us to understand how we can achieve this maturity of character which pleases God:

'...do not be conformed to this world, but be **transformed** by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God' [Romans 12.2].

The word *'transformed'* in this verse, is a translation of a Greek word – *Metamorphosis*. This is a word that has come straight into our language from the Greek in which the New Testament was written.

What does it mean? It is used in the natural world to describe the process of change which affects many species of living things. The butterfly is a thing of exquisite beauty but in the early stages of its short life it is an egg from which emerges a caterpillar. This turns into a pupa and then eventually we see this miracle, a thing of beauty emerging from its ugly shell. The life of the Christian follows the same pattern; its a transformation – not following the natural evil inclinations which lurk inside every one of us, but making a conscious effort to rise above these things as Jesus did. Read this chapter at your leisure; in it the Apostle Paul enlarges on this idea of *‘Metamorphosis’* – this change that must take place in our lives if we are to grow as children of God. Jesus set the example in his own life of obedience to his Father’s will and Paul tells us we’ve got to do the same.

And so what did Jesus really mean when he said *‘follow me’*? Put simply Christianity as practised by Jesus and his immediate followers was not a part-time occupation; not even something reserved for Sundays. It was a lifetime calling; it was a way of life with a very definite purpose. It meant conforming to a pattern – something which is not very popular today when everyone is encouraged *‘to do their own thing’* to use a modern expression. However, the Pattern for a Christian is set before us in the life and example of Jesus himself. This pattern was copied by his immediate followers and passed on to others who received the Gospel message and acted on the instruction of Jesus to *‘follow me’*.

There are many other aspects of practical Christianity which we cannot consider now. The teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5 to 7) is full of practical guidance on many aspects of the Christian way of life; guidance on our relationships with one another, marriage and family life; our attitude to riches and material gain. The teaching of Christ covers the whole spectrum of daily life.

THE PROMISE OF UNENDING LIFE

In essence God requires us to obey Him first in our lives, to respond to His invitation to us and to follow the teaching and example

of His son Jesus. If we do this to the best of our ability we can look forward to the promise of a new life that knows no end. The teaching of the Bible leaves us in no doubt as to what this means. Think about these passages from both the Old and New Testaments:

❖ **David:** ‘The righteous shall inherit the land, and dwell in it for ever’ [*Psalm 37.29*].

❖ **The Prophet Isaiah:** ‘The ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing, with everlasting joy...’ [*Isaiah 35.10*].

❖ **Jesus:** ‘Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth’ [*Matthew 5.5*].

❖ **The Redeemed:** ‘...for you were slain, and have redeemed us to God by your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth’ [*Revelation 5.9,10*].

CONCLUSION

In this article we have looked at Bible teaching in answer to the question posed by the Philippian jailer – ‘*what must I do to be saved*’? We have discovered that being a Christian in the fullest sense involves dedicating our lives to God and obeying Christ’s commands.

The question we must ask ourselves is a very personal one – am I living my life in preparation for the return of Jesus? Will I be among those to whom he will say these words?

‘Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’
[Matthew 25.34]

Editor

Marvellous are your works

BIRD NAVIGATION

MOST long-distance travel these days is done in planes that fly by 'auto-pilot'. The destination point is fed into an on-board computer which guides the plane to the selected airport. Much intricate technology has been involved in the development and use of this system, but ever since birds have been on earth they have had a similar capability in their tiny heads.

One of the mysteries of nature has always been the ability of birds to make long journeys, arriving unerringly at destinations vast distances away. Many mechanisms for this have been suggested, including a good memory for local landmarks or using the stars as guides; but these have always been recognised as only part of the process. But recent discoveries now show that these birds respond to the earth's magnetic field. Just as human travellers use a magnetic compass to point north, so some birds have, in effect, compasses built into their heads, enabling them to navigate accurately.



It is well known that homing pigeons can locate their lofts, or roosts, even when released several thousand miles away. Because of this ability, people have used the birds to carry messages since the days of ancient Egypt. Scientists have recently found that this uncanny ability is controlled by tiny

structures in the pigeon's beak. Within the cells lining the upper beak there are a lot of infinitesimally small particles of an iron-containing compound. Just like an iron compass needle the position of each particle will change in relation to the earth's magnetic field.

But whereas in an ordinary compass this movement can be perceived by eye, the bird has to have some other means of detecting the minute movement of this iron compound. Scientists have discovered that around each of these particles is a fine network of nerve endings. As the iron-rich particles move in response to the earth's magnetic field, these nerve endings are 'tickled', sending signals back to the pigeon's brain. The bird's newly-established geographical position can then be compared with the bearings of its home area that are stored as a "magnetic map" in the bird's brain, and the required flight path determined.

Of course, the pigeon does not know anything about this intricate process: it goes in the right direction to its destination without any conscious thought on its part. Here is an auto-pilot 'par excellence'. It seems impossible to account for this ability by the random process that evolution demands. Is it conceivable that by a series of accidental mutations the cells in the beak, and nowhere else, would be able to produce the tiny iron-rich particles? But these would be valueless without the encircling nerve supply, which must have accidentally appeared at the same time. And then, coincidentally and also by accident, a portion of the bird's brain had to develop in such a way as to interpret these signals coming from the beak and to control the direction in which the creature flies.

How much more logical and satisfying to accept the simple truths of Scripture: *'And God said ... let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky'* [Genesis 1.20 NIV].

Peter Southgate
Surrey, UK

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