

SKY-WAY MESSAGES



Pointing People Heavenward

Internet Bible Materials

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Corn in the Land

by Martin Girard

“Jacob saw that there was corn in Egypt” (Genesis 42:1)

While reading through Genesis, I was struck by the above verse. After seven years of plenty, a severe famine was being experienced “in all lands” (Gen.41:54). God had already revealed His purposes and had His man - Joseph - in a position of authority in Egypt. Jacob and his sons, feeling the effects of famine in Canaan (Gen.42:5), heard that there were ample stores of grain in Egypt. Simple logic dictated that the sons of Jacob should *go* to Egypt where there was food - otherwise death by starvation stared them in the face.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones once said, “All the troubles in the Church today, and most of the troubles in the world, are due to a departure from the authority of the Bible.” How right he was! Many of the Lord’s people in Britain today feel very much the same as Jacob did. There is a famine in the land - “a famine of hearing the words of the Lord,” (Amos 8:11). The world has nothing good to offer. As in the days of Elisha, poisonous wild gourds abound (2 Kings 4:39-40) leading only to spiritual death. Many books and magazines on sale in secular stores today promote the New Age and encourage a sinful lifestyle. It has to be said that books written by Christian authors sometimes provide little real help. Sadly, an ever-increasing number of churches are now failing to provide true

spiritual nourishment and in the name of Christ can only offer a diet of worthless chaff - with copious helpings of amusement and entertainment. Those who recognize the authority of Scripture seem few and far between. This is a shallow age with plenty of levity and very little depth.

FINDING REAL CORN

Thankfully some of the Lord's people today are concerned by these trends. Their hearts long for true spiritual food - the *real* corn. In their immediate locality they may find plenty of chaff but no real wheat. Like Jacob's sons they find themselves compelled to travel further than they used to in order to hear sound Bible teaching and to meet with like-minded believers who reject today's carnal, fleshly, light-hearted alternative "Christianity". The Lord Himself asks, "What is the chaff to the wheat?" (Jer.23:28). There is no comparison between the two! When we have tasted good Bible teaching, we are not interested in the "rubbish" (entertaining though it may be) that is spouted from many pulpits today. The Lord still wants His people to enjoy "the finest of the wheat" (Ps.81:16) - but, like Jacob's sons we may need to search it out.



The trends that we are witnessing both in the world and in the church surely point to the fact that the return of our Lord is near. Many nowadays, sadly, have lost the appetite they once had for that which is God-glorifying, sound, and spiritually edifying. Our faith will only be built up by Bible-based teaching that remains true to His Word and has not been adulterated by the trends of fashionable society. The challenge we face in these difficult days is, like Jacob's sons, to be prepared to *go* to where the real "corn" for our spiritual nourishment can be obtained.



"AND DANIEL CONTINUED"

by Martin Girard



"And Daniel continued even unto the first year of King Cyrus."
(Daniel 1:21)

The Bible is unlike any other book. Its writers often have a way of compressing a lot into a very few words. One such statement is found at the end of the first chapter of Daniel where we read that "Daniel continued".

What a testimony this is! Here was no comet that blazed across the sky and then disappeared into the darkness. The light that shone forth in Daniel's early life *continued* to burn brightly. Many start out well and begin to serve with great zeal and enthusiasm. They promise much, and their potential is recognized. Soon, however, the brilliance begins to fade - perhaps through disappointment or through an unrealized goal. Excellence is replaced by mediocrity, and great things are no longer achieved. The lustre has gone, and others are left to reflect upon "what might have been".

Daniel was not like that. He began promisingly when he refused to defile himself with food that had been offered to idols and "purposed in his heart" that he would please God (Dan.1:8). What a challenging statement! This is, in fact, the first statement that is made about Daniel himself in the book bearing his name, and it provides the key for understanding his exemplary character. We need to consider

the background in a little more detail, in order to discover what made Daniel such a remarkable man of God.

TRANSPORTED TO BABYLON

Faced with an unknown future in a foreign land and in a heathen culture, Daniel determined that he would remain true to his God. With other young Israelites who possessed intelligence, Daniel (perhaps just 16 or 17 years of age at the time) had been transported to Babylon. A first-class education had been planned, and the finest food had been made available. Daniel had all the potential to be a successful student in the Babylonian university. His name had been changed in order to wean him from his past and give him acceptance in the leading nation of his day. Yet we find this young man resolutely determining to remain true to his God.



Like Timothy many years later, Daniel must have known the Holy Scriptures from childhood, (2 Tim.3:15). He knew what his God expected of him and made up his mind from the very beginning that he would stick to his principles and honour his God - even if it meant the end of his prospects in Babylon. Knowing that certain aspects of that alien culture would “defile” him, Daniel “purposed in his heart” that he would remain true to the Lord and to His Word.

As we think of the bold stand taken by this young man, it is clear that his parents must have done a good job in training him to recognize the difference between right and wrong. Without their presence and support in Babylon, he was still able to stand on his own feet and remain true to his convictions which were born out of love for his Lord. This is the youth, who, in later life, was addressed as “a man greatly beloved” of God, (Dan.10:11).

The early part of Daniel’s life is extremely challenging. Today we are encouraged by the media (and by Christians who are moving with the tide) to be “politically correct” and tolerant of other viewpoints. Tolerance did not feature in Daniel’s vocabulary! His heart was set on pleasing the Lord - and ours should be too. Without being bigoted or rude, Daniel politely and yet firmly made his convictions known and stood by them - regardless of the consequences. It is all too easy nowadays to be swept along in the popular, easy-going form of Christianity where lifestyle, ambitions, and even music and worship mirror the unconverted world around. Surely it is time for believers, like Daniel, to purpose in their hearts that they will be separate from those things that are contrary to the plain teaching of the Word of God.



The Lord honoured Daniel's stand and endowed him and his three friends with wisdom and understanding surpassing that of their contemporaries, (Dan.1:20). With his university training over, Daniel "continued" in his commitment to live for the Lord.

NO COMPLACENCY

To start out well is one thing, but to finish well is another. Away from home for the first time, a Christian student at a college or university can honour the Lord in those early days - which is truly commendable. Later, however, after graduation and when life becomes more comfortable materially, it is possible to slip back into second gear. Not Daniel! He "continued" until Cyrus the Persian came to the throne - and he continued even *beyond* that point.

For more than seventy years this man of God "continued" until he was approximately ninety: such was the quality of his life! God used him to explain the meaning of Nebuchadnezzar's dreams, to interpret to Belshazzar the writing on the wall, and God gave him personal revelations of significant future events. Daniel, who all the time was faithful to his God, ultimately proved God's own faithfulness when he was delivered from the lions' den. At the end of a long life he entered into rest, assured that "at the end of the days" he would stand in his appointed place, (Dan.12:13).



DANIEL'S LEGACY

How can we be like Daniel? Paul, in his writings to Timothy, supplies us with the answer. "But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of," (2 Tim.3:14). That is the secret. Many today are turning (either willingly or in ignorance) to new ideas and practices which plainly contradict the teachings of God's unchanging Word. God has revealed His mind in the sacred Scriptures, and we must "continue" in them if we ourselves would be faithful to God. Barnabas encouraged the believers at Antioch "that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord," (Acts 11:23). Daniel had that purpose. The Lord is calling us to be people with a purpose - people who will, by grace, "continue" until He comes or calls.

Dare to be a Daniel!
Dare to stand alone!
Dare to have a purpose firm!
Dare to make it known!

P. P. Bliss



THE TRUE BIBLICAL SHEPHERD

by Martin Girard

In an illustrated children's Bible you may well find a picture of a shepherd out in the fields watching his sheep as they quietly graze. There is something tranquil about such a scene. Study it, and you will feel as if you have been transported to another world - to a world of long ago where life was simple, safe, and happy. How far removed this is from our complicated and confusing world of the twenty-first century with its noise and its city lights! Yet, even today, it is possible in some parts of the world to find a shepherd caring for his sheep in almost the same way as it was done hundreds of years ago.

It was to people who were familiar with this rural scene that Peter wrote: "Feed the flock of God." (1) The idea is to *care* for the sheep as a shepherd would. Today, have we lost sight of the *real* meaning of these words? Writing in a previous generation, Dr. H.A. Ironside was aware of a failure in some circles to recognize the true pastoral office (2).

According to Scripture it is tragic when sheep have no shepherd. Moses pleaded with God "that the congregation of the LORD be not as sheep which have no shepherd" (3). Later, Micaiah the prophet "saw all Israel scattered upon the hills, as sheep that have not a shepherd" (4) because their king was about to be taken from them. At the end of the Old Testament Zechariah yearned for the people of his day who were in trouble because they, too, had "no shepherd" (5). How many Christians today remain in trouble of one kind or another because there are no true shepherds to care for them?

MANY EXAMPLES

Shepherds are referred to many times in the Bible. Abel, “a keeper of sheep” and a “righteous” man, was the first shepherd (6). He typifies a greater Shepherd who also was righteous and who died (7). Rachel was a shepherdess (8), and Moses tended his father-in-law’s sheep (9). David was perhaps the best-known shepherd of all. Interestingly, both Moses and David rose from being shepherds of *sheep* to shepherding *people*. Moses led the children of Israel for forty years, while David reigned over them as their shepherd-king for forty years too. These examples surely indicate that shepherding is important to God.



A few general observations can be made as we consider the work of shepherds. First, it hardly needs to be said that a vital connection exists between the shepherd and his sheep. The people of Israel, *nationally*, were “the sheep of His pasture,” (10). God led His flock using under-shepherds - Moses, for instance, being described as “the shepherd of His flock,” (11). But in Old Testament times an *individual* connection between a shepherd and a single sheep can also be discerned. One confessed personally, “I have gone astray like a lost sheep,” and David boldly affirmed, “The Lord is my Shepherd.” (12)

Any shepherd is expected to be conscientious. How faithful and reliable the Lord was in leading His people of old! “He made His own people to go forth like sheep, and guided them in the wilderness like a flock. And He led them on safely, so that they feared not,” (13). Although far from perfect, Moses and David both displayed faithfulness in their care of God’s people. Sadly, however, not all shepherds could be trusted. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel expose the failings of some of the despicable shepherds of their day (14). But the picture of the shepherd and the sheep is not limited to the past. The same theme features in descriptions of the future kingdom of Christ, where re-gathered Israel, under the Lord Jesus, will have “one shepherd” (15). Interestingly, in that day He will *still* employ under-shepherds to “feed them” and to ensure that all His people are cared for properly (16).



SHEPHERD SUPREME

The greatest of all shepherds is, of course, our Lord Jesus. Although sent initially to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” He had a great concern for “other sheep” not belonging to Israel’s fold (17). “He was moved with compassion” as He viewed the crowds that came to Him because they “were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd.” (18) Eventually His great love caused Him to bear that awful cross to Calvary, where, as the Good Shepherd, He laid down His life for the sheep (19).

Believers at the present time can benefit from His shepherd-care. His sheep shall never perish (20). He knows the name of each one belonging to Him and speaks personally, directing their lives according to His perfect will (21). This “Great Shepherd” knows no limitations (22) and will bring His sheep safely to their eternal home. The believer can confidently exclaim: “I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.” (23)

However, the Chief Shepherd still looks for under-shepherds who will lovingly and compassionately care for the sheep. Beside the Sea of Galilee, the Risen Lord asked Peter three times about his love for Him. In response to Peter’s honest answers, the Lord Jesus commissioned Peter to care for the “lambs” and the “sheep” (24). Many years later Peter recorded some vital words of instruction found at the beginning of 1 Peter 5. He addressed “the elders” found “among” the other believers, (v.1). The New Testament does not envisage one elder or bishop presiding over a number of churches. Rather, an elder is an older, spiritually-equipped man whose work (with others of similar character) is in one local church (25). Only the Holy Spirit can **appoint** elders (26), but those He has equipped for the work need to be **recognized**, (27). According to 1 Peter 5:2, their task is to “shepherd” the local flock of God which they are “among” (28).



THE SHEPHERD’S TASK

We can perhaps understand the shepherd’s task more clearly by considering Ezekiel’s challenging words (Ezek.34:2-4) to those who had failed in their shepherding. “Should not the shepherds feed the flocks?” Ezekiel asks, (Ezek.34:2). This was of prime importance then, and it is still vital today. Only sound, edifying Bible teaching will promote godliness. Charles Spurgeon, the famous Baptist preacher, wryly remarked that some preachers must have misread Peter’s instruction. One would have thought, he suggested, that Peter had written “feed my giraffes” rather than “feed my sheep” because they place the food so high that neither sheep nor lambs can reach it! If Bible teaching is to profit, it must be understood - and an elder must have the ability to teach (29).



Apart from feeding the flock, six further features of shepherding can be discovered in Ezekiel 34:4. Sadly, in Ezekiel’s day these were not being fulfilled.

1. The weak must be strengthened (NKJV). Rigid systems of legality have often stumbled weak Christians. The true shepherd will be gentle with the lambs, seeking to encourage their spiritual growth.

2. The sick need to be healed. There are many spiritually-sick Christians today. The caring shepherd will correctly diagnose the ailment and seek to administer a healing remedy.

3. The broken need to be bound up. Painful experiences have broken the lives of many of God's dear children. The true shepherd will endeavour to understand the trauma and apply the healing balm of love.

4. The sheep that was driven away must be brought back. This sheep has not wandered but has been driven away by someone's unkindness. Instead of blaming the one who has left, the understanding shepherd will seek to bring him back.

5. The lost must be found. A Christian can become "lost" to spiritual realities, and the caring shepherd will seek to bring about a recovery.

6. The Christ-like shepherd does not rule with "force and cruelty" but displays compassion. It has been said that an elder does not *dictate* but *indicate*. Rather than being "lords" over those entrusted to their care, Peter exhorted elders to be "examples" to the flock (30).

Diotrephes, who loved the pre-eminence, is the classic example of one who was no genuine shepherd (31). The true shepherd will be like the Lord Jesus and will



serve willingly without being motivated by any kind of personal gain. He will seek to be an example to others - like the Saviour Himself (32). Those who are faithful in this work are promised "the crown of glory" when "the Chief Shepherd" appears - an eternal reward (33).

A GREAT NEED

Christians can be thankful to have a wonderful Shepherd who feeds His flock, gathers and carries the lambs, and gently leads those who are with young (34). Today He seeks under-shepherds who will respond to Peter's exhortation and accept the responsibility of humbly feeding and leading the flock of God in a local place. We must pray that God will raise up His men for the task. As the sheep of His pasture we must not make their task more difficult but seek to encourage them in this vital work.

END NOTES:- (1)1 Pet.5:2. (2)H.A. Ironside, *A Historical Sketch of the Brethren Movement*, Loizeaux Brothers, 1985; page 29. (3)Num.27:17. (4)1 Kings 22:17. (5)Zech.10:2. (6)Gen.4:2; Heb.11:4. (7)Heb.12:24. (8)Gen.29:9. (9)Ex.3:1. (10)Ps.100:3. (11)Is.63:11. (12)Ps.119:176; Ps.23:1. (13)Ps.78:52-53. (14)Jer.23:1-4; Ezek.34:2-10. (15)Ezek.37:24. (16)Jer.23:4. (17)Mt.15:24; Jn.10:16. (18)Mt.9:36. (19)Jn.10:11. (20)Jn.10:28. (21)Jn.10:3-4. (22)Heb.13:20-21. (23)Ps.23:6. (24)Jn.21:15-17. (25)Phil.1:1. (26)Acts 20:28. (27)1 Thess.5:12; 1 Tim.3:1-7. (28)In 1 Peter 5:2 the word "flock" (also found in Acts 20:28-29) means a *small* flock. The threat of dangerous wolves scattering the sheep, which concerned Paul greatly in Acts 20, makes the task of shepherding so vital. (29)1 Tim.3:2. (30)1 Pet.5:3 NKJV. (31)3 Jn.9-10. (32)1 Pet.5:3; 1 Pet.2:21. (33)1 Pet.5:4. (34)Is.40:11.

BRINGING THE WANDERER HOME

by Martin Girard

Some of the loveliest stories ever to be told must be those that came from the lips of our Saviour and are preserved for us in the fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel. Tax collectors and sinners had drawn near to listen to the One of whom it was said, "This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them" ⁽¹⁾. They were the first to hear that simple yet now well-known parable of the lost sheep.

4. What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?

5. And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing.

6. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, "Rejoice with me: for I have found my sheep which was lost."

7. I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.

(Luke 15:3-7)

How thankful we are that "this Man" still receives sinners! Gospel preachers have often used this beautiful parable to good effect in illustrating the extent to which the Good Shepherd went in order "to seek and to save that which was lost." ⁽²⁾ But perhaps the parable can be understood in another way.

At the close of his highly practical epistle, James draws our attention to a very necessary work which we need to think about. "Brethren, if any of you do err

from the truth, and one convert him; let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins,” (Jas.5:19-20). Not only do sinners need to be saved, but those who wander away need to be restored. Notice carefully that this message is addressed to Christians. One “of you” - one of the “brethren” - can turn from the truth. It is something that can happen to *anyone*. Peter thought himself perfectly safe, above the danger line. Yes, others might deny the Lord - but not he! (3) Within the space of a few hours Peter’s self-confidence had evaporated as he suddenly realized that *he* had wandered from the One who is, in Person, the Truth. (4)

SO EASY TO WANDER...

In the familiar “Shepherd Psalm” David wrote, “He restoreth my soul” (5). Here we learn that God Himself is in the business of restoring those who go astray. If David wrote this Psalm as a young shepherd, he may have had little idea of just how much he himself would need this very restoration one

***David's
Restoration***

day. After his shameful fall when he committed adultery and murder, the Lord sent Nathan the prophet to restore him. David had written of the comforts received from God’s instruments of restoration, the rod and the staff (6). Sometimes we do not appreciate this comfort until later. One this occasion the word of the Lord hit home hard. “Thus saith the Lord...” Nathan thundered, “thou art the man!” (7) The rod hurt, but it also healed. With a broken and contrite heart David confessed, “I have sinned against the Lord.” (8)

The context here in 2 Samuel is significant. David had been enjoying close fellowship with God, and things generally had been going well for him. Under his leadership, the ark had been returned to Jerusalem (9). David had then been given the wonderful promise that the throne of his kingdom would be established for ever because of his godly desire to build a temple for the Lord (10). Victories had

been experienced over the Philistines, Moabites, Ammonites, and Syrians, and David had shown unmerited kindness to Mephibosheth - a descendant of his one-time enemy, Saul (11). The background could hardly have been better; in so many ways David had pleased the Lord. Yet this very same man fell into gross sin and needed to be restored! It reminds us again of James’ sober warning that *any* of God’s children can wander from the truth.

Thinking again of the lovely parable of the lost sheep, James tells us that *we* can be like the shepherd in seeking to turn the wanderer back to the truth (12). A believer may have wandered from the truth *morally* and be guilty of sexual sin. It could be that unbiblical teaching has stumbled him, causing him to wander from

the truth *doctrinally*. Alternatively, it may simply be that his heart has grown cold towards God. There are many ways in which this can happen. However, when a brother or a sister *does* go astray, how do we go about restoring them?

THE WAY TO RESTORE ANOTHER

Some very good advice is given to us by the apostle Paul in Galatians 6:1:-

“Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.”

The possibility is always there: a believer *can* be overtaken by sin. When this happens, we find it easy to point the finger accusingly or to think, “I would never have done that!” Rarely will such an attitude result in the brother or sister being restored. Instead, whenever we see that someone has wandered, we should immediately think, “That could have been me - but for the grace of God.” Only when we realize this can we seek to “restore such ... in the spirit of meekness.”

meekness

W.E. Vine points out that this “meekness” is an inwrought grace of the soul. It is closely connected with the word *humility* and is, first of all, a spirit of meekness before God. (13) It therefore means going after the erring one with all the loving compassion and tenderness that the Lord Jesus displayed. Coupled with this there will be a transparent honesty, causing us to admit, with Robert Robinson,

honesty

***“Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love...”*** (14)

Part of the work of restoration, too, may be helping to bear the burdens of the one who has wandered away (15).

WHEN DISCIPLINE IS NECESSARY

Of course, sometimes the rod of discipline is necessary. A case of flagrant immorality in the church at Corinth could not be ignored. So serious was the sin that the offending brother had to be excommunicated from the Christian fellowship (16). Discipline of this kind is never pleasant to administer.

However, the object should always be the restoration of the offender. Later, Paul could write to the Corinthians telling them that the punishment inflicted had been sufficient. Obviously the man had repented of his sin, and so the Corinthians were told to receive him in love once again (17).

seek their restoration

If the “rod” of discipline has to be used today, it must be with the right motives. Holiness in the Lord’s house must be maintained for the honour of His Name. Some wilful sin may still merit excommunication. If such a step is necessary,

however, it must be taken in godly humility, and the prayers of God's people for the wanderer to be restored to the Lord in due course must follow the action. Other matters at Corinth needed attention, but Paul quite clearly preferred to come "in love" rather than wielding a rod of discipline (18). That spirit of love must characterize all our disciplinary actions today.

A WORK FOR THE "SPIRITUAL"

One further little word in Galatians 6:1 must not be overlooked. Only those who are "spiritual" can restore the wanderers. For the Lord to use us, we must be living near to Him and must have His mind in our service. But for those who **do** cause the sinner to turn again to the Lord, a double blessing is promised. All those who engage in this vital ministry are assured that they will both "save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins," (Jas.5:20).

**Living near
the Lord**

Sometimes, in His providence, God allows a disobedient Christian to experience premature death. Salvation is never lost - it cannot be - but life upon earth can be shortened. The promise is that the restored "sinner" will be saved from this punishment and his "multitude of sins" will be completely hidden from God's sight.

Elijah, that man with a nature just like ours, was used by God to restore a backsliding nation (19). This gives us encouragement. God can use us too, if our hearts and attitudes are right, to bring wanderers back home to Himself again.

END NOTES:- (1)Lk.15:2. (2)Jn.10:11; Lk.19:10. (3)Mk.14:29-31. (4)Jn.14:6. (5)Ps.23:3. (6)Ps.23:4. (7)2 Sam.12:11a,7a. (8)Ps.51:17; 2 Sam.12:13a. (9)2 Sam.6. (10)2 Sam.7. (11)2 Sam.8-10. (12)Jas.5:19. (13)**EXPOSITORY DICTIONARY OF NEW TESTAMENT WORDS**, by W.E. Vine, Oliphants Ltd, 1940. (14)Hymn 470 in **GOLDEN BELLS: Come, Thou Fount of every blessing**. (15)Gal.6:2. (16)1 Cor.5:1,13. (17)2 Cor.2:6-8. (18)1 Cor.4:21. (19)Jas.5:17-18.



RUNNING TO WIN

by Martin Girard



Excitement is certainly mounting as the London Summer Olympics approach. The prestigious event, held every four years, attracts worldwide attention with some 15,000 athletes taking part. All involved want the event to be a great success.

Other cities in the past have had their moments of glory. Barcelona hosted the 1992 Olympics and had 3,000 officials, 2,000 judges, 11,000 sponsors and VIPs, and 9,000 from the press, radio, and TV in attendance for the occasion. Such were the expectations that should the city's 15,500 hotel rooms be insufficient, a number of luxury liners were made available to provide an extra 6,600 bedrooms!

History always reveals some interesting connections. In the second century AD, at the CCXVII Olympiad, Lucius Minicus Natalis Quadronius Verus, a Barcelona general, was crowned with a laurel wreath as victor of the chariot race. Afterwards he carved his name on the historic stones at Olympia.



Although a modern Olympic stadium is very different from the site of the earliest games, the atmosphere today is no less exciting than it was at Olympia in 776BC when the first Games were held. For over a thousand years Olympia remained the home of the ancient Greek festival - certainly until 261AD. Since being revived at Athens in 1896, this international sports contest has taken place in a different city every four years. Like all other recent Games, years of very careful planning and preparation have preceded the event in London.

For the Christian it is interesting to realize that the early Games were being held at the time when the New Testament was being written. Paul not only reveals his own personal knowledge of such games but also very effectively likens the Christian life to an athletic contest. We can learn much from the comparisons made in Scripture.



PURPOSE

The first thing to understand is that the Christian life is not easy. The very idea of a **race** confirms that! Like any athlete, the Christian must have a **purpose** in life. Paul's words recorded in Acts 20:24 make an excellent motto for the child of God today:- "That I might finish my course with joy." Determination is needed. No difficulties (such as "bonds" or "afflictions") or conflicting desires must be allowed to detract the runner from his prime purpose.

Sometimes we forget that the Christian life is meant to be one of conflict, and we find ourselves settling back into a life of ease. All the contestants in the next Olympics will have pursued a rigorous training programme beforehand, at the same time as maintaining a carefully-controlled diet. In order to achieve his purpose, the Christian, like the athlete, must deal ruthlessly with anything that might impede his progress. Not only must sin be avoided assiduously, but "every weight" must also be laid aside (1). Friendships, "harmless" hobbies, and television viewing, for instance, must all be checked very carefully - and where necessary, action must be taken.

TRAINING

In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 Paul reflected upon the **training** undertaken by the contestants in the Isthmian games - held near Corinth every two years. For "a corruptible crown" (a wreath of pine) they would spare no effort in their gruelling training. When we consider the superior reward (an "incorruptible" one) promised by our Lord at the end of the race, we ought to have an even more determined spirit.



In order to achieve his purpose, Paul knew the importance of applying rigorous self-discipline. Just as the herald summoned competitors to the race, so Paul had called many to the Christian life through preaching the Gospel. An athlete would not wish to be disqualified by the umpire at the end, and Paul did all he could to ensure that nothing ruined his service. Spiritual "fitness" requires training - the joint exercises of prayer and witnessing forming the backbone of the programme. The right "food" is vital too - not trashy magazines and novels but the nourishing Word of God (2).

INVOLVEMENT

Another passage of Scripture deals with our actual **involvement** in the Christian race. In Hebrews 12:1 we are shown the need for **endurance** as we "run.... the race that is set before us." The marathon runner, in particular, needs this quality if he is to complete his course of more than 26 miles. It is only when we have laid aside "every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us" that we can "run

with patience” or endurance. What keeps the long-distance runner going? Surely it is the thought of a triumphant finish. If he is on the point of giving up, a word of encouragement from his coach can make all the difference. The cheering crowds also give him added impetus.

In the Christian race our greatest incentive is the Lord Jesus Himself. When we feel the heat, and our limbs begin to ache, we can remember how He not only faced the “contradiction of sinners against Himself” but also “endured the cross, despising the shame.” The little word to spur us on is, “Consider Him.” (3)

Although today’s main Olympic Stadium can accommodate 60,000 people, millions more around the world will be watching the Games by means of television. It seems as if the writer in Hebrews 12:1 turns, for a moment, to look at the crowds in the grandstand. **They** are not mere spectators; they are the worthies of chapter 11 who all completed the race and triumphed by faith. From their elevated position they seem to be watching our progress with concern. **Their** success rings out like a cheer to encourage us.



CONCENTRATION

No serious runner will ever allow his eyes to wander - or he may miss the prize! Like every athlete, Paul forgot his past achievements and strained his every nerve as he pressed “toward the mark, for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” (See Philippians 3:12-14.) The goal for the Christian is promotion to glory. The Lord may come for us, or He may call us through death. We may already have reached the last stretch of the race. How necessary to be like Paul and to fix our eyes upon the finishing line!

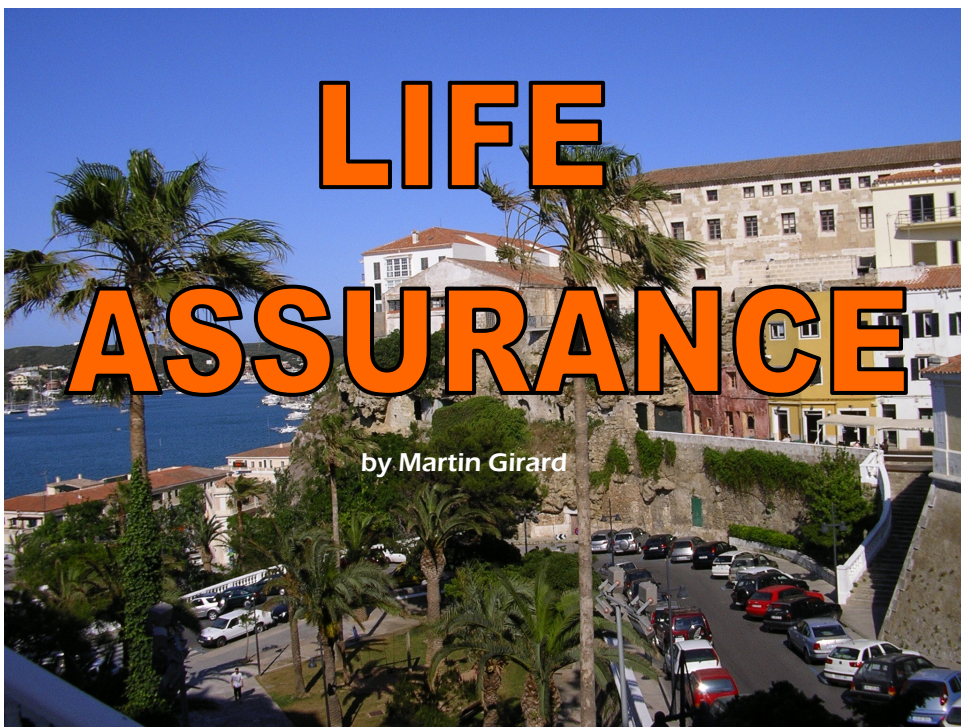
VICTORY

For Paul, the end of the race was reached shortly after his last letter was penned. “I have finished my course, I have kept the faith,” he declared (2 Tim.4:7). Like a runner in a relay race, Paul had received the baton of Gospel truth and had faithfully passed it on to others. He had achieved his desired purpose and had finished his course with joy.



How different were the Galatians! “Ye did run well,” Paul told them, but sadly they had not maintained their progress (4). Perhaps as Christians we can look back to better days too. Ron Mahers’ last words to me from his hospital bed just three days before the Lord called him home in September 1991 were, “Keep running the race.” As we watch the Olympic Games, may the determination of the athletes spur us on in the Christian race with renewed enthusiasm and steadfast purpose both to “run well” and to finish our course with joy.

END NOTES:- (1)Heb.12:1. (2)Heb.5:12-14. (3)Heb.12:2-3. (4)Gal.5:7.



by Martin Girard

Difficult decisions can sometimes face us in life - especially when it comes to planning for the future. The “credit crunch” and “economic downturn” that we have heard so much about are causing uncertainty in the financial market and gloom for many clients. Bank interest has remained at an all-time low, providing no comfort for savers. Investments have disappointed, and an increasing number of countries now face a debt crisis. An attractive pension taken out today may prove to be inadequate at retirement. What does the future hold for the individual? How can the right decisions be made?

Facing these questions can be quite daunting, and it isn't easy to know what to do. There are countless different policies to consider and so many schemes on the market. It *is* sensible to provide for your loved ones and to prepare for your own retirement, but so many factors need to be taken into account. The Stock Market can change without warning; banks and financial institutions have been known to collapse; schemes for investors that are popular and attractive now can become almost worthless; companies can be taken over. Even the best Financial Advisor cannot foresee what will happen. There is a lot to ponder - including the fairly obvious fact that the personal benefits of any policy are restricted to your own lifetime anyway.

SOMETHING BETTER

All pensions and investment schemes are only good for this life. What about **beyond** death? The Bible outlines a very remarkable life assurance scheme that provides for this life **and** for the next. For all who trust Him God offers satisfaction and support throughout **this** life as well as **future** security. Please take a moment to consider His proposal.

SATISFACTION

A lump sum payment on retirement **may** enable you to buy that villa or go on your dream holiday, but material pleasures do not provide **lasting** satisfaction. In contrast, the Lord Jesus Christ will satisfy your life. He declared: “Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst” (1).

SUPPORT

Better than any promise of **future** support, God Himself is able and willing to help you daily - **throughout life**. He says: “Fear thou not: for I am with thee; be not dismayed: for I am thy God; I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness.” (2)

SECURITY

Death is the great enemy of mankind. The Lord Jesus offers us more than financial security upon retirement; He offers **life beyond death**! He guarantees eternal life to all who follow Him, for He says, “They shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. (3) What security!

All of these benefits are available - and they are absolutely free! We have **nothing** to pay! The Lord Jesus paid the price for them when He died for our sins on the cross. God's terms are remarkably simple too. All of us have sinned and deserve His judgment, but Jesus died in our place so that we could be forgiven (4). We must forsake our sins and to ask God for forgiveness through His Son. If we are truly sorry, He promises that He will “abundantly pardon” us (5). When we come God's way, He gives us eternal life and assures us that we will never face condemnation (6).



This forgiveness is only promised today. God reminds us that “now is the accepted time... now is the day of salvation” (7). If you delay you could miss this wonderful offer. You may have a life assurance policy, but have you prepared for eternity? Real life assurance can be yours - right now! Turn to God in prayer and ask the Lord Jesus to be your Saviour.

END NOTES:- (1)Jn.4:14. (2)Isa.41:10. (3)Jn.10:28. (4)Rom.5:8. (5)Isa.55:7. (6)Jn.5:24. (7)2 Cor.6:2.