

SKY-WAY MESSAGES



Pointing People Heavenward

Internet Bible Materials

VOLUME 31: CONTENTS:-

- Page 2 - **REFLECTION:** ***Paradise Opened***
- Three New Testament References
- Page 5 - **BIBLE BOOK:** ***The Book of Judges***
- Life in Israel without a king
- Page 8 - **UNDERSTANDING:** ***Reconciliation***
- What does this Bible word really mean?
- Page 13 - **CHRISTIAN LIFE:** ***Reliable Resources***
- Some thoughts from Bryn Pullen
- Page 15 - **TODAY'S WORLD:** ***Coronavirus Pandemic***
- A sign of the times
- Page 18 - **GOSPEL TRUTH:** ***Authentic Gospel***
- Comparing the New Testament with Today



Visitors to the New Forest often enjoy calling in at Mottisfont Abbey where they can stroll through the walled rose-gardens. The fragrance of hundreds of roses fills the air, while the melodious song of myriad birds punctuates the stillness – along the restful humming of numberless bees. One can wander along the garden paths, pausing occasionally to savour the fragrance and drink in the beauty of the scene. To many, the tranquility resembles paradise.

Paradise is an oriental word which was first used by the historian Xenophon to describe the parks of Persian kings and nobles. The word passed into Greek as *paradeisos* which, literally, means “a wall around” and thus refers to a protected walled-garden. *Paradeisos* is found a number of times in the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) including Genesis 2:8 where we read that the LORD God planted a *paradeisos* eastward in Eden. This is an interesting reference because it takes us back to before the Fall, to *before* the time that sin invaded our planet.

***Paradise* - three references**

THE ORIGINAL PARADISE

In our English Bibles, the word *paradise* occurs three times in the New Testament. Before considering these verses, we ought to remember the reference in the Septuagint to Eden, the original Paradise. As we know from Genesis 3, Adam and Eve were banished from the garden in which they had lived on account of their disobedience. Genesis 3:24 describes how angelic beings were placed outside the garden with a flaming sword which rotated constantly to prevent anyone from approaching the tree of life. Very early in Scripture, therefore, Paradise was closed to the human race because of sin.

The first New Testament reference to consider is recorded in Luke 23:43 where the Lord Jesus spoke to the dying thief and said, “Today shalt thou be with Me in paradise”. The poor condemned man had previously, along with his companion, railed on the Lord Jesus. A change, however, came over him as he watched and listened to the suffering Saviour beside him. He finally admitted that the two guilty ones were *justly* condemned but Christ had done nothing amiss. Broken and contrite he turned to the Saviour beside him and pleaded, “Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom” (Lk.23:42). It was this request that elicited the response, “Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with Me in paradise” (Lk.23:43).

What a wonderful promise! The man was suffering intensely. Pain racked his body as he hung suspended above the earth under the blazing sun. The heat, the noise, the words of mockery, the hatred, the blasphemy ... all would soon be over! It was as though the Lord Jesus was saying to him, “I will take you out of here to be with Me. I will take you into the bliss and peace of paradise today!”



What a message of hope this is for those who have none! All who belong to the Lord Jesus Christ can share this wondrous prospect. One day He will take us away from all our pain and suffering and from the sin, unrest, and blasphemy that surround us daily. He will take us to a place of safety and tranquillity — behind those secure walls. We shall enter into the fulness of God’s peace which surpasses

our understanding (cf. Phil.4:7). What an incomparable future awaits the child of God!

The second occurrence of *paradise* is found in 2 Corinthians 12. Paul wrote there about “a man in Christ” (clearly himself) who had been “caught up to the third heaven” where he “heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter” (v.2,4). God, in His wisdom, has seen fit to withhold their meaning from us – perhaps because they are beyond the grasp of our finite minds. But one day all believers will be “caught up” like Paul, at the coming of the Lord. When that happens and we enter paradise, *then* we will understand the things that Paul was not allowed to share with us — wonderful though they were!



NO LONGER EXCLUDED

The final reference to *paradise* is found in Revelation 2:7: “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.” This reference to the tree of life takes us back in thought to the opening chapters of the Bible. Genesis 2:9 describes “the tree of life” which was



located “in the midst of the garden”. In Revelation 2 we discover the tree of life again. This time it is to be found in another garden. The tree which had once grown in Eden is now found flourishing “in the midst of the paradise of God” (v.7). The connection is unavoidable. In Eden, the tree of life was “in the midst of the garden”; here in paradise it again occupies a central position. The difference, however, is

that it is no longer a forbidden tree. The “overcomer” is invited to draw near and partake of its fruit — which is not seasonal like so many of our earthly fruits. The tree is nourished by the river of life and yields “twelve manner of fruits” corresponding to the months of the year (Rev.22:2). There is a boundless supply! Endless life is thus nourished in paradise. It is not *good* people who look forward to its tranquility but repentant and forgiven people, those like the dying thief.

We can enjoy foretastes of paradise now, but paradise itself transcends all that we can know down here. Life is found in Christ alone and will continue *with* Him, in paradise, for ever. Truly, the believer’s prospects are out of this world!

The Book of JUDGES

by Martin Girard

In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes. (Judges 21:25)

There could hardly be a more fitting summary of the message of Judges than the words found in the final verse of the book. “In those days there was no king in Israel,” for the book records events which took place *after* the days of Moses and Joshua and *prior to* the reign of Israel’s kings. Within a short space of time Israel would have its first king, a man by the name of Saul. In this preceding period, however, without the guidance of a monarch, “every man did that which was right in his own eyes.” It was a time of individual choice where each person did what was *right* in his own eyes – not that which was wrong. The problem, however, is that our ability to distinguish between right and wrong is inadequate. This truth is reflected in Judges where we read: “And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served Baalim” (2:11). It seemed *right* to them to turn to idolatry, so they did it. But in God’s estimation they were doing something evil.

Judges has a clear and relevant message for the twenty-first century. We are living at a time when established traditions have been abandoned and people are doing what is right in their own eyes. In fact, considerable attention is being given to *human rights* and *individual rights*. According to this philosophy, a person’s rights permit them to follow the desires of their heart. But “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked” (Jer.17:9). We need to discover what is right in the eyes of the Lord.

The book of Judges follows a predictable cycle: rebellion against the Lord, retribution for wrong doing, repentance, and restoration. Sin is never without consequences, so the people's disobedience resulted in divine punishment. When the hand of God fell upon them, they became aware of what they had done and repented of their sin. In mercy to them God removed the punishment and restored them – but sadly the cycle was soon repeated all over again.

EARLY TRIUMPHS

The Israelites had entered Canaan under the leadership of Joshua. The book bearing his name tells of the initial victories which were accomplished by faith, the most notable of which was the conquest of Jericho. Clear instructions had been given by God that the inhabitants of the land must be utterly destroyed because their religion was corrupt. No league must be made with them, otherwise the pure worship of Israel would become polluted. Demons lay behind the filthy religious practices of the Canaanites, with immorality and idolatry being unmistakably connected. Israel's witness to the nations would be ineffective if they compromised and participated in the worship of idols. Sadly, they did just that. They became more taken up with the behaviour of their neighbours than with the requirements of their God.

The first chapter of Judges lists the exploits of the different tribes of Israel as they endeavoured to take possession of Canaan, but repeatedly we are told of the limits to their conquests. They were not able to fully overcome their enemies. Judges 2 describes the death of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and had seen all the great works of the Lord (2:7). But after the passing of that generation,

"knew not the LORD" arose another generation after them, which knew not the LORD, nor yet the works which He had done for Israel" (2:10). This "new" generation was the first of many which forsook the LORD and served false gods (2:13), bringing ruin upon themselves as a consequence. The LORD vowed that He would no longer drive out their enemies (2:21), leaving them in the land instead that He might use them as a means of testing Israel (3:1). The following chapters of the book list the enemies of God's people and names the men (and occasionally women) who were raised up to reform the nation. It might be helpful to summarize the events:-

- ❖ 8 years under the Mesopotamians. Delivered by Othniel who judged Israel for 40 years [Jud.3:7-11].
- ❖ 18 years under the Moabites, Ammonites & Amalekites. Delivered by Ehud & Shamgar resulting in peace for 80 years [Jud.3:12-31].

- ❖ 20 years under the Canaanites. Delivered by Deborah & Barak who judged Israel for 40 years [Jud.4 & 5].
- ❖ 7 years under the Midianites. Delivered by Gideon who judged Israel for 40 years [Jud.6-8].
- ❖ During further oppression under the Midianites, Israel's judges were Abimelech (3 years), Tola (23 years), Jair (22 years) [Jud.9:1-10:5].
- ❖ 18 years under the Ammonites. Delivered by Jephthah who judged Israel for 6 years [Jud.10:6-12:7]. In the years following, further judges were Ibzan (7 years), Elon (10 years), Abdon (8 years) [Jud.12:8-15].
- ❖ 40 years under the Philistines. Delivered by Samson who judged Israel for 20 years [Jud.13-16].

It is instructive to see how God deliberately chose weak vessels to accomplish His purposes. He used a left-handed man, an ox goad, a woman, a tent-peg, a piece of a millstone, pitchers and trumpets, the jawbone of an ass, and a rejected brother. Gideon was a fearful man; Samson was morally weak. Why should God use men like this? The reason He chose such people, as well as such insignificant objects, is "that no flesh should glory in His presence" (1 Cor.1:29). All the glory belongs to God alone.

THE END OF THE BOOK

The last five chapters of the book describe the apostasy which was prevalent in Israel at that time. Micah, a dishonest man, established his own religion and installed priests at his shrine. So vile and outrageous was the conduct of the citizens of Gibeah that the other tribes of Israel were actually repulsed, and the resulting civil war almost completely wiped out the tribe of Benjamin, to which Gibeah belonged. Although some remarkable victories were accomplished, the book of Judges echoes with repeated backsliding and defeat – all because the people insisted on doing that which was right in their own eyes (21:25).

Some situations hardly seem to change. Judges reflects human history, one of constant defeat and failure. The book confirms the fact that left to ourselves we can do nothing worthwhile. The abiding lesson of Judges is that we need to fear the Lord and seek to please Him, for His ways are always best.

**I MUST HAVE THE SAVIOUR WITH ME,
FOR I DARE NOT WALK ALONE.**

L. Edwards

RECONCILIATION

by Martin Girard



“And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to Himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18)

Reconciliation is very much a New Testament word and is used by Paul in 2 Corinthians 5. He writes of God having “reconciled us to Himself by Jesus Christ” and of “the ministry of reconciliation” which has been entrusted to believers (v.18). He proceeds to explain “that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself,” before stating again that “the word of reconciliation” has been “committed unto us” (v.19). What is meant by reconciliation?

Perhaps we should begin by explaining what is *not* meant. The Lord Jesus spoke of being “reconciled” in Matthew 5. “Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift” (Mt.5:23,24). In this situation something has gone wrong. One of God’s people comes to worship Him. As he does so, the thought enters his mind that somebody is not pleased with him. A relationship has soured. The worshipper begins to reason that there is very little point in offering something to the God he *cannot* see when he is estranged from the individual he *can* see. He

therefore delays offering his gift until he has “made it up” with his estranged brother.

The word used in this passage is not the word used by Paul in 2 Corinthians 5. The Lord Jesus used *diallasso* because it concerns *mutual* hostility which is followed by *mutual* concession. This kind of situation is commonplace. One person becomes annoyed by another, and an angry response leads to hostility. It requires one person to go to the other with an apology. If the second person in this example takes this step, the first person may recognize the part they played in the disagreement. *Both* were at fault, and reconciliation was needed between the two of them.



The doctrine of Reconciliation is not like that. God is not a man and is incapable of sin. He is not responsible for enmity developing. Never once in Scripture is God said to be reconciled towards us. It is significant that the apostle Paul does not use the word *diallasso* in explaining Reconciliation. Instead he uses either *katallasso* or *apokatalasso*, bringing out the meaning of *changing from enmity to friendship*, or *reconciling completely*. Reconciliation is what God accomplishes in His grace towards sinful men on the grounds of the death of Christ.

In this study we shall examine Reconciliation in four ways. We shall look at its *worth*, noticing what a necessary subject this actually is. The second approach will be to consider the *work* that brought it about. The third point will deal with the *wonder* of it, for it is truly wonderful for the believer to know he is reconciled and enjoys a right relationship with a holy God. Finally we shall think about *the word of reconciliation*, mentioned by Paul in 2 Corinthians 5, which has been entrusted to us. The purpose of this study is not to create theologians – though a right understanding of doctrine is important. Rather, it is to enable us to rejoice as we discover the greatness of God’s grace, but it ought also to have a *practical* effect upon our lives.

THE WORTH OF RECONCILIATION

Reconciliation is an immensely important subject. “We were enemies” at one time, hostile to God (Rom.5:10a). The earlier chapters of Romans reveal our guilt before a God who is absolutely pure and righteous and who demands the same of us. Although the works of creation prove His existence, mankind did not give God the glory He was worthy to receive but became foolish and idolatrous. Preferring to live without the knowledge of God, man became debased, unrighteous, and disobedient. We were alienated from God “and enemies in [our] mind by wicked works” (Col.1:21) as well as “alienated from the life of God” through our

ignorance (Eph.4:18). Not being subject to the Law of God, we were at enmity with Him (Rom.8:7). What a dreadful position to be in!

Familiar verses of Scripture remind us that we have fallen short of God's standards and deserve death (Rom.3:23; 6:23). By nature we are "the children of wrath," characterized by sin, disobedience, and self-will (Eph.2:2,3). In our



unregenerate state God's wrath hangs over us and has already been revealed (Rom.1:18). "The day of wrath" lies before us when God's righteous judgment will be revealed (Rom.2:5). We can be absolutely sure that God will judge righteously and meet out a fitting punishment, for He shows no partiality (Rom.2:6,11).

In this condition "tribulation and anguish" await us (Rom.2:9). These are the reasons why we need to be reconciled to this holy God. This is indeed a tremendously important subject.

THE WORK OF RECONCILIATION

The Bible explains that "there is one God, and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim.2:5). We also read that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself" (2 Cor.5:19a). Two parties are identified here – God and the world. Between them stands Christ, God's representative (not man's), put forward by Him. If we might ask how God can be "in Christ," Christ was God and came as God's representative. He came as God Himself. As another verse teaches, God saw "there was none to help," so He brought about salvation Himself (Isa.63:5).

How could God reconcile the world to Himself? An incident in the First World War might help us understand what has been done. A painting from that Great



War showed a young signalman lying dead on the field of battle. In his lifeless hands were the newly-joined ends of a broken telephone cable he had been sent to repair. Through his sacrifice communication had been restored. This is actually a very fitting illustration of the Gospel. Communications with God had broken down, and diplomatic relations had been

severed. A state of hostility, or war, existed. But through Christ's death a bridge has been built and man can be reconciled to God. Ephesians 2:16 conveys this teaching. "That He might reconcile" means to *reconcile completely*, removing all enmity. As a result of Christ's work at the cross no barriers remain between Jew and Gentile. Christ has made peace through the blood of His cross, thus reconciling all things to Himself. Once-alienated unbelievers are now reconciled believers – all because of Calvary (see Col.1:20-22a). Again, the Greek word used

here is *apokatallasso* – which means to reconcile completely. Of course, this does not teach universal salvation. Satan, fallen angels, and unrepentant people remain lost and under condemnation. These will not be reconciled but *subdued* in a coming day.

THE WONDER OF RECONCILIATION

The fact is stated plainly in 2 Corinthians 5:18: “God ... hath reconciled us to Himself by Jesus Christ.” Earlier in the verse we read, “And all things are of God.” The plan was entirely His. Redemption is costly, for “the precious blood of Christ” was shed in order to provide it (1 Pet.1:18,19). Reconciliation is also costly as we see in the last verse of 2 Corinthians 5. The Lord Jesus who was absolutely pure and sinless was “made ... sin for us” at Calvary (2 Cor.5:21). Long ago Isaiah wrote: “The LORD hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (Isa.53:6). He was “stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted” (Isa.53:4). Although at one time we were “alienated from the life of God,” (Eph.4:18), believing on God’s Son we now have life (Jn.3:36). The wrath of God which hung over us has been removed.



Reconciliation is an established fact. We do not need to fear that we might lose this blessing or cease to be reconciled. Colossians 1:21,22 clearly states: “And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath He reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in His sight.” If we are true believers we remember how at one time we were unholy, full of blame and guilty through and through. What a change has come about! We are “now ... reconciled” – *apokatallasso* speaking of complete reconciliation. Romans 5:10 informs us that “when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son.” The same verse also points out that “being reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.” Why is this? The answer is that we now share His life – a resurrection life. We shall be saved fully and brought safely home to Glory.



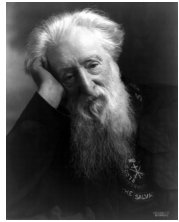
These wonderful statements must be brought together. “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself” (2 Cor.5:19). “God ... hath reconciled us to Himself” (2 Cor.5:18). But the word is used again in these verses: “God ... hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation,” or “the word of reconciliation” (v.18,19). This aspect must now be considered.

THE WORD OF RECONCILIATION

These verses need to be examined in their context. Believers know Christ died for them, and their responsibility as saved individuals is to live for Him (v.14,15). He

has made all things new in our lives (v.17). God is the Source of all our blessings and has entrusted us with the message of reconciliation (v.18). The same God who has reconciled us to Himself entrusts us with the work of ministering to others.

Paul saw himself as an ambassador acting on God's behalf. In this role he implored people to be reconciled to God. We too, on Christ's behalf, are to plead with lost sinners in our day to be reconciled to God.



One night William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, could not sleep. His son Bramwell who lived next door saw a light shining from his father's house and went to investigate, thinking something must be wrong. He discovered his father pacing back and forth with a towel wrapped around his head. "Shouldn't you be asleep?" Bramwell asked, wondering whether his father was suffering from a bad headache. "I'm thinking," William Booth told his son, "Thinking about people's sins. What will they do with their sins?" This concern is largely absent today. Sinful men and women need to be reconciled to God, to change their attitude and accept God's provision whereby they can be forgiven and justified. "The word of reconciliation" has been entrusted to us.

What can we say as we ponder these things? Who can estimate Reconciliation's *worth*? The *work* has been done through Christ at the cross, and the *wonder* of it ought never to be absent from the believer's mind. Truly, we "joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the [reconciliation]" (Rom.5:11). The Authorized Version has "atonement" but "reconciliation" is to be preferred. We do not receive *atonement* but the *result* of atonement which is reconciliation. Having received it, we can rejoice in it! A solemn responsibility remains, for we have been entrusted with the *word* of reconciliation. Our message to others is simply, "Be ye reconciled to God" (2 Cor.5:20).

**A MIND AT PERFECT PEACE WITH GOD:
OH, WHAT A WORD IS THIS!
A SINNER RECONCILED THROUGH BLOOD:
THIS, THIS INDEED IS PEACE.**

C. Paget



Reliable Resources

Two short articles by
Brynmor D F Pullen

MERCY AND GRACE

These are the attributes that are said to be available to us for the asking when we approach the throne of grace. When you pause to reflect upon their significance you may be surprised to learn that they represent all that a believer needs when he is in distress of any kind.

A story is told of an old Puritan divine who prayed to the Lord to either lighten his load or strengthen his back. Lightening the load is tantamount to God giving mercy; strengthening the back is equivalent to God giving grace. Can you think of any distressing experience in life when either the one or the other would not meet the need?

When Epaphroditus was sick nigh unto death, Paul wrote, “but God had mercy on him; and not on him only, but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow.” There we have instance of where the Lord deemed the burden of His servant so great, that relief could only adequately be given by lightening the load. (Phil.2:27)

On another occasion, when Paul felt overwrought by what was probably some physical infirmity (such as you and I might have from time to time – for it is not stated) he asked the Lord, three times, that it might be removed. The reply he

received was, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.” Here we have a case of where the Lord considered it to be in Paul’s best interest to strengthen his back. (2 Cor.12:9)

Like Paul and Epaphroditus, and the Psalmist before them, we too may find the Lord to be a refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble. The mercy seat and the throne of grace is the place where we may obtain all the help suited to our need.

Strength for the Day

Who among us does not need it? From infancy to old age, and every succeeding stage in between, demand strength for the day. Spiritual, physical, moral, mental – strength in all its forms is required for each day’s varying need.

“We are fearfully and wonderfully made”, wrote the inspired Psalmist. None who reflects for a single moment on the tripartite nature of our being would deny it. Innate to our constitution is the capacity to meet the changing claims upon our strength. Sometimes, however, extremes of pressure from within and without impose upon us exacting demands which exceed our surprising resources. What then? There are supplementary supplies available for the asking.

Our ever-gracious God Who made us has not forgotten our frailty. He remembers our limitations. Accordingly He has promised additional strength for times of trouble. Now the Life of Faith is nurtured and sustained only on promise. If it were anything other than promise it would not be faith! There are many exceeding great and precious promises awaiting our appropriation. Therein lies our further sources of supply. All we have to do is to adopt those promises suited to our need and make them our own. Is it not significant that one of the heroisms of faith mentioned in Hebrews 11 is “obtaining promises.”?

In that record we read of those who did so and “out of weakness were made strong”. It was to Paul in his suffering that God said, “My grace is sufficient for you.” To Asaph was the promise given, “As thy day, so shall thy strength be”. Is it a coincidence that aged Anna was of that tribe? The mercy that lifts the burden as well as the grace that strengthens the back are both available at the throne of grace. The Lord grant to us the faith to take Him at His Word.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

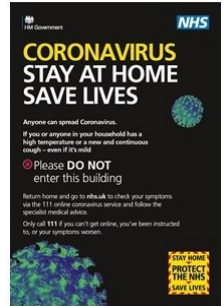
Brynmor Pullen was converted in a Welsh Baptist chapel when he was 10 years old. He continued in the pathway of faith for 76 years until the Lord called him Home in the autumn of 1998. He loved the Word of God and studied it all his life. Both he and his wife Grace (who passed away in 2014) were faithful servants of the Lord.

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

by Martin Girard

“And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads: for your redemption draweth nigh.” (Luke 21:28).

The word *unprecedented* is punctuating the statements of many politicians as the current coronavirus continues to spread its influence across the world. While it is true that there have been deadly plagues which claimed thousands of lives in past centuries, Covid-19 appears to surpass all others in terms of its *effect*. The virus has been officially classified as a *pandemic* because it has spread in multiple countries around the world at the same time. It is not the *only* recorded pandemic, but it would appear that it is going to be the most significant economically that the world has known. *Unprecedented* times have truly dawned upon us.



Each day fresh facts and figures are released, revealing the scale of the infection. We are informed of the number of new cases which have been identified as well as the number of deaths relating to the virus that have occurred in the previous 24 hours. Reports from across the world also confirm how the virus has spread in other countries. Predictions are being made as experts seek to determine how rapidly it will spread and when the peak of the infection will be reached.

Apart from the illness itself, millions of lives have been affected in numerous ways. International travel has become almost impossible, and non-essential local journeys are prohibited. Older citizens have been told to remain at home for the foreseeable future. Airlines globally have grounded most of their fleets, impacting business and leisure travel. The cost to the world's economy will be astronomical. Unemployment and inflation will rise while bank interest and shares fall. Governments are responding to the crisis by promising financial aid, but where will the necessary billions come from? Some have compared this pandemic to the Great Depression of the 1930s – but this is undoubtedly worse. Every country upon earth has been touched in some way or other.



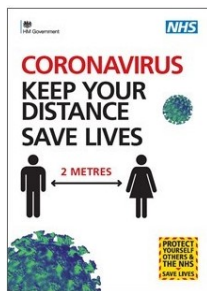
The Christian believer seeking to understand the situation will, of course, turn to the Word of God for help. Does the Bible offer any explanation for the global spread of this deadly pandemic? Clearly, coronavirus is a *curse*, but we ought not

to be surprised by its appearance on every continent. Nations have flouted God's decrees which are revealed in His holy Word. Marriage, a divine institution, is held in very low esteem today, and divorce can easily be obtained. Same-sex relationships are not simply condoned but are now *promoted*. Abortion, the destruction of human life, is increasing – with already some 200,000 being carried out annually in Britain alone, according to *The Christian Institute*. Should we expect God to remain unmoved by these wicked practices? Covid-19 may well be interpreted as a sign of His divine displeasure.

Scripture sheds further light upon current events when we listen to the words of the Lord Jesus in what is often called the Olivet Discourse. Looking into the future, He declared, “For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places. All these are the beginning of sorrows” (Mt.24:7,8). These words are extremely up-to-date when we consider the international unrest, famines, the coronavirus, earthquakes – all of which feature regularly in news bulletins. According to the Lord Jesus they are, collectively, “the beginning of sorrows.” However, He also pointed out “but the end is not yet” (Mt.24:6). A seven-year period of trouble lies ahead for this world, with the second half of that period being a time of great tribulation. It will be a more terrible time than this world has ever known. The events identified by the Lord Jesus are precursors of that tribulation.



The verse quoted at the beginning of this article offers hope to the children of God. “And when these things begin to come to pass ...” (Lk.21:28). What might “these things” be? Much of Luke 21 appears to relate to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD70, but the latter part of the Lord’s address clearly takes us on to a much later time. He spoke of “men’s hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth” (Lk.21:26). It cannot be denied that the hearts of many are filled with fear at the present time as they consider the repercussions of the coronavirus. Nobody knows how long it will continue. But the Lord Jesus told His disciples to “look up, and lift up [their] heads” when they observed certain signs, for those signs were indications that their “redemption” was drawing near. We who rejoice in the redemption found in Christ’s precious blood look for the fulfilment of redemption’s work. Paul wrote of “the redemption of our body” (Rom.8:23) which will take place at the coming of our Lord. The familiar words of 1 Thessalonians 4 assure us of the Rapture when the Lord Jesus will come from



heaven to gather His people home. We await that moment which may be sooner than we think.

Critics and more cautious believers often take exception to such remarks as these. They will point out that throughout history there has been international unrest, as well as wars, earthquakes, and plagues. The coronavirus, they will tell us, is nothing new and we ought not to interpret it as a sign that the Lord's coming is near. The fact remains that the Lord Jesus has promised to come again, and one generation will be alive at the moment of His return. Is it right to dismiss the fact that *we* might be living at such a time? Although events associated with "the beginning of sorrows" may have been witnessed for centuries, so many *more* signs have appeared before us in recent times. We ought to consider them carefully.

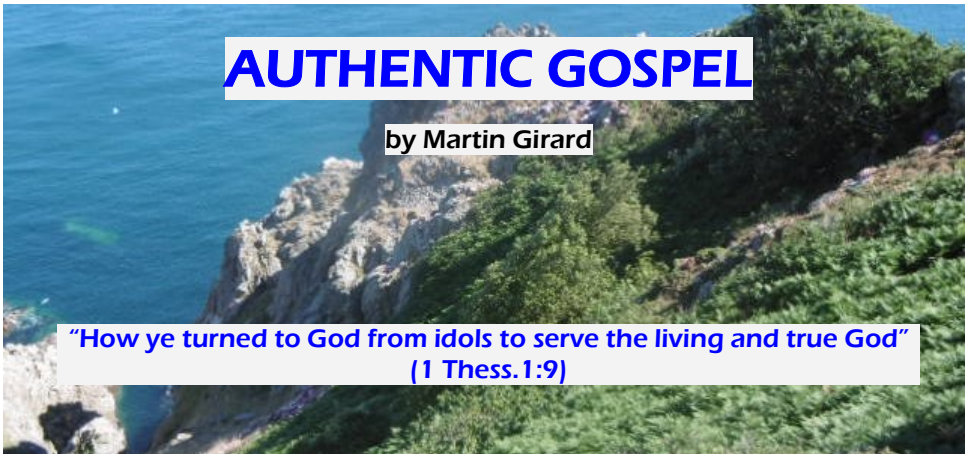
Since 1948 Israel, as a nation, has been established in its land once again. There is clear evidence that we are living in *the days of Noah* as well as in *the days of Lot* – the former characterized by violence and corruption and the latter by same-sex relationships. The Lord Jesus linked these features with conditions upon earth at His return in Luke 17:26-30. Events among the nations of Europe point to what has been prophesied in the books of Daniel and Revelation. In addition to this, we have witnessed an explosion of knowledge and world-wide travel – perhaps in fulfilment of Daniel 12:4. The coronavirus pandemic is yet another sign to consider, creating problems beyond the ability of any man to resolve. Fear has been spread, and the economic repercussions are likely to remain for many years. Finally, man has now usurped the position of God in attempting to control life, decide upon a chosen gender, and determine who may live or who should die.



It would be foolish indeed to ignore all these signs. The Lord Jesus has told us that when these things ***begin to come to pass*** we should lift up our heads for our redemption draweth nigh. Living more than two thousand years since His first advent, we are nearer to our Lord's return than any previous generation has been. However, while we have referred to things happening in the world around that point to the imminence of the Lord's return, no particular sign has been given in Scripture to precede the Rapture of the saints. We could hear the assembling shout at any time! Truly, "the coming of the Lord draweth nigh" (James 5:8).



In his hymn *The night is now far spent*, Thomas Kelly encourages us by saying, "With such a hope let us rejoice, we soon shall hear the Saviour's voice". At such an hour as this, in the words of 2 Peter 3:14 let us be diligent that we may be found of Him in peace, without spot, and blameless, at His coming.



AUTHENTIC GOSPEL

by Martin Girard

**“How ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God”
(1 Thess.1:9)**

In his first epistle to the Thessalonians Paul recalled the time he had spent with the people he was addressing. He remembered the characteristics of their lives before they had come to believe in the message of the Gospel and compared them with what could be seen now as he wrote. The new believers in Thessalonica had turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God. There had been a radical change in their lives.

From time to time it is helpful to examine what we are doing so see if it is right. It is never more important to do this than is assessing our presentation of the Gospel. When we do this, we will soon discover that the message being proclaimed today is often *distorted* or *deficient* rather than being *dynamic*. What has happened?

DISTORTED GOSPEL

It is possible to distort the Gospel by giving undue emphasis to one part of it. Very often it is the love of God that is stressed. While it is true that “God so loved the world,” (Jn.3:16), this is not the *whole* truth. In his epistle John teaches that “God is love,” but he also reminds us that “God is light” (1 Jn.4:8; 1:5). Although God’s love provides salvation, John did not begin his epistle by writing about that love. Before describing this John had already emphasized the sin which needs to be forgiven. In other words, the holy light which shines upon our sins must be preached *before* the boundless love which can forgive it.

Many evangelists today are afraid of speaking the truth. John MacArthur wrote, “Nothing in Scripture indicates the church should lure people to Christ by presenting Christianity as an attractive option.” ¹ He also wrote: “User-friendliness is incompatible with true biblical theology.” ² To avoid causing offence some evangelists distort the truth and concentrate on aspects of the Gospel which may seem more palatable to their listeners.

DEFICIENT GOSPEL

The other shortcoming is to present a message which is deficient. It is easy to miss this point. A preacher can be very persuasive and may captivate an audience. What he says may be thoroughly orthodox, with the message being biblically correct. Sometimes, however, it is worth listening to the message *again* because certain matters may have been omitted. The explanation of Christ's death upon the cross for our sins as He suffered in our place may seem compelling. We may not be able to fault the preacher's theology as he explains substitution. But has everything necessary been said? A careful listener often has to change their assessment of the Gospel presentation. Initially they were impressed – and they still are – but they have to admit that no mention was made of repentance or of the just punishment which awaits the unbeliever. Just saying "I'm sorry" to God is not enough.



DYNAMIC GOSPEL

Two essential elements in the preaching of the Gospel are "repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21). Both of these points featured in Paul's preaching – not simply the second. The popular message today is to ask Jesus to come into your heart, or to receive Jesus. It involves mental assent and an awareness of the fact that we are not good enough, but Jesus took our place. However, we are not saved simply by mental assent. Salvation is a work of the Spirit of God who convicts us of our sin (which is awful and serious) and points us to Christ.

Evidently when Paul visited Thessalonica he preached both repentance *and* faith. In the verse quoted above he described how the listeners had turned *from* idols and had turned *to* God. At one time they had *faced* those idols and had been devoted to them, but now they were facing a completely different direction. Their *backs* were now to those idols and their faces turned to the living and true God. They had repented of sin – meaning they had turned from it. Their lives had been completely changed. They were now living for a new Master.

If the authentic message of the Gospel is not preached, the response in the listeners will not be authentic either. The need of the hour is to fear nobody but God and to return to true biblical preaching in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is *His* work, and He alone can bring about salvation.

¹ John F. MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1993), p.72.

² *Ibid.*, p.65.