

The final chapters of *The Acts of the Apostles* all describe the experiences of the apostle Paul during his time as a prisoner of the Romans. Paul was a most important person in the outworking of God's purpose, having the principal role in the proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles. We might be inclined, therefore, to think that Jesus, being in control of events, would not permit Paul to remain in prison but would secure his release, as in the case of Peter (Acts 12:11). However, God has a variety of ways to fulfil his will and sometimes his ways are contrary to the expectations of men. In this case his purposes were achieved as Paul was taken to Rome, the Empire's capital, where the gospel was proclaimed, not only to Jews and Gentiles but also to the highest authorities.

Furthermore, the apostle is set forth as an example of suffering tribulation, to encourage all disciples of Christ in times of distress: "Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God; who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling" <sup>2Tim.1:8</sup>.

We left the apostle Paul about to make his defence to the agitated crowd of Jews who had attempted to kill him. They were surprised by his speaking to them in Hebrew <sup>v.2</sup> and listened while he recounted his conversion from a persecutor of Christians to a disciple of Christ himself. He told them how Jesus had appeared to him and instructed him what he ought to do; how this instruction was supplemented by Ananias in Damascus; how he believed; and how he was baptized. <sup>vs.10-16</sup> He told them that God had chosen him to "know his will, and see that Just One, and hear the voice of his mouth" that he should "be his witness unto all men of what he had seen and heard" <sup>vs.14-15</sup>.

Paul, receiving this commission from the Lord to make known the truth to all people, was sent not only to the Jews but also to the Gentiles. <sup>v.21</sup> The crowd of Jews remained silent and attentive to his speech until he said this particular word, "Gentile". <sup>v.22</sup> This illustrates the attitude of the Jews to people of other nations and their unwillingness to allow foreigners to hear and accept God's salvation. They were, therefore, incensed against this fellow Jew who informed them of his commission from God to make known the way of salvation to the Gentiles, and they bayed for his blood.

The centurion took Paul into the citadel and would have examined him by scourging, as was the way of the Romans, but discovering Paul was a Roman citizen he refrained, and was greatly impressed that the apostle was freeborn. <sup>v.28</sup> In Ephesus, Paul had concealed his Roman citizenship and endured the scourging because disciples, both existing and potential, would be encouraged and edified by his example of suffering unjust affliction, but on this occasion the interests of the Truth were served best by the apostle revealing his status.

The next day Paul was brought before the Jewish authorities, the High Priests and the council (22:30). Jesus himself had appeared before this bar of judgment and faced both false accusation and false witness. Paul received the same injustice. When he protested his innocence, saying: “I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day”, the High Priest ordered him to be smitten. <sup>vs.1-2</sup>

Paul’s hope, as a result of believing the gospel, was of resurrection from the dead, just as Jesus himself had been raised to immortality, and so he declared this to the council: “of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question”. <sup>v.6</sup> This declaration was received differently by the parties of the council. The Sadducees denied the resurrection, having no hope of life after death, whereas the Pharisees did profess a belief in the resurrection of the dead. Therefore, some sided with Paul while others opposed him, and in the resulting dissension the centurion rescued Paul from the uproar. <sup>v.10</sup>

The following night the Lord appeared to Paul, encouraging him and assuring him he would witness to him in Rome. <sup>v.11</sup> The subsequent events illustrate the way in which the divine purpose works out. We might have assumed from the words of Jesus that Paul would have been quickly released in order to have the freedom to travel to Rome. In fact, Paul was to endure years in prison before being taken to Rome as a prisoner.

The Jewish authorities next conspired to kill Paul. Under the pretext of interviewing him once more, they attempted to secure an opportunity for those who had vowed to kill him. <sup>vs.12-15</sup> When this conspiracy was made known to the garrison commander, Claudius Lysias, he dispatched Paul under armed guard to Caesar’s representative, Felix, at Caesarea, <sup>vs.23-26</sup> with a letter of explanation which shows himself in the best light and entreats Felix to deal with the matter. Felix then placed Paul in custody until his accusers came from Jerusalem. <sup>v.35</sup>

When the High Priest and Jewish elders came to Caesarea to charge Paul before Felix, they brought an orator who flattered the governor and falsely accused Paul. <sup>vs.1-9</sup> Paul spoke for himself and described his manner of life: “Herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men”. <sup>v.16</sup> He explained his visit to Jerusalem was for good causes only: to bring alms, to make offerings, and to worship in purity in the Temple; <sup>vs.17-18</sup> and he declared that the accusations against him were false and could not be proven. <sup>vs.12-13</sup>

The real charge against Paul was his beliefs, for the Jews considered him an heretic, even though he worshipped God in truth and believed his word: “But this I confess unto thee, that after the way which they call heresy, so

worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets [the Old Testament]" <sup>v.14</sup> He possessed the hope of all God's people - of resurrection from the dead - and so he proclaimed this: "And I have hope toward God, which they themselves also allow, that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust" <sup>v.15</sup>

Felix deferred to come to a decision <sup>v.22</sup> but, while putting Paul under house arrest, allowed him a degree of liberty and association with other Christians. Felix was a Gentile but his wife a Jewess and, with her, he met with Paul to hear his teaching. Paul told him of the faith which is in Jesus and "reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come" <sup>v.25</sup> This caused Felix to tremble in contemplation of the coming judgment, and rightly so, for "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God".

*Heb.10:30-31*

Felix was fearful of future judgment but the love of money and political expediency were stronger for he kept Paul in custody in the hope of receiving a bribe and to please the Jews. <sup>vs.26-27</sup> As a result Paul remained incarcerated for two years, until the governorship of Felix terminated. <sup>v.27</sup>

## **Week 17**

## **Acts of the Apostles 25**

## **Day 116**

The new governor in Caesarea was Festus to whom the Jewish authorities reiterated their charges against Paul. Festus was in Jerusalem and they hoped he would bring Paul there, presenting again the opportunity for his murder on the way. <sup>vs.1-3</sup> Festus refused this request and arranged for the parties to confront one another once more in Caesarea. Again Paul was falsely accused by the Jews who "laid many and grievous complaints against Paul, which they could not prove", <sup>v.7</sup> and Paul stoutly defended himself: "Neither against the law of the Jews, neither against the temple, nor yet against Caesar, have I offended any thing at all" <sup>v.8</sup>

Festus, however, was not moved to execute justice but, currying favour with the Jews, suggested Paul go for trial at Jerusalem. This, clearly, would endanger Paul's life, while his determination was to preach the gospel and bear witness to Christ in Rome. He therefore reaffirmed his innocence of the false charges laid against him and appealed to Caesar for judgment. <sup>v.11</sup> This, as a Roman citizen, he had a right to do, but it presented a problem to Felix because he had no charge against Paul to justify sending him to stand trial before Caesar. <sup>v.27</sup>

Consequently, Festus sought the advice of King Agrippa, one of the descendants of Herod the Great. Agrippa was part Jewish and therefore likely to appreciate the arguments of the Jewish accusers which Festus said were beyond him. <sup>vs.18-19</sup> Agrippa agreed to examine Paul, and the next day Paul was arraigned before them. <sup>v.23</sup>

Paul made his own defence before Agrippa, acknowledging the king's qualifications to judge the matter.<sup>vs.2-3</sup> He again protested his innocence, showing that he had been well known in Jerusalem from his youth, and the Jews could testify that he had lived his life according to the strictest rules of the Pharisees. The Pharisees were professed believers in the resurrection but nevertheless this particular belief was the basis of the accusations laid against Paul, as he said: "And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made of God unto our fathers: unto which promise our twelve tribes, instantly serving God day and night, hope to come. For which hope's sake, king Agrippa, I am accused of the Jews".<sup>vs.6-7</sup>

This is a most important statement by the apostle. It is the hope of all disciples of Christ based on the promises God made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, which can only be fulfilled by the resurrection of these faithful men. Resurrection from the dead is, therefore, an essential element of the Christian faith, as the apostle himself wrote to the Corinthian disciples: "But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen: and if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain".<sup>1Cor.15:13-14</sup>

If someone dies suddenly, the only possible hope is that he might be resuscitated, and the medical profession has technology to restart hearts and lungs to restore life. We should have no difficulty therefore in believing in resurrection, as Paul said to Agrippa: "Why should it be thought a thing incredible with you, that God should raise the dead?"<sup>v.8</sup> Modern man can do extraordinary things, but God has the knowledge and power to do much more, including restoring a person to life irrespective of how long he has been dead.

Paul then recounted how the resurrected Jesus gave him a commission to the Gentiles, "to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me".<sup>v.18</sup> He also described how he obeyed this command, saying: "Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come: that Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles".<sup>vs.22-23</sup>

Like all the apostles and early disciples of Christ, Paul preached the gospel and the truth concerning Jesus from the Old Testament scriptures, and this should be the same today, although we also have the benefit of the New Testament. It is common for the study of the Old Testament to be disparaged, as it was by Festus, but the apostle could only direct Agrippa's attention to these same scriptures: "King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest".<sup>v.27</sup> Agrippa confessed he was nearly converted by the

apostle,<sup>v.28</sup> prompting Paul to express his great desire that all who heard him might believe the gospel and attain to the same relationship with God as he had.<sup>v.29</sup> It is a great blessing that today, even so long afterwards, we can still read the scriptures, including the inspired writings of Paul, and have the opportunity of attaining to a privileged relationship with God, in the hope of resurrection from the dead at the coming of his Son.

The outcome of Paul's appearance before King Agrippa was that he might have been set free had he not appealed to Caesar.<sup>v.32</sup> This would now *appear* to have been a mistake, yet the upshot was as Jesus intended - Paul would bear witness to him in Rome.

## **Week 17**

## **Acts of the Apostles 27**

## **Day 118**

Arrangements were made for Paul to be taken to Rome, accompanied by a centurion, and have his case heard before Caesar.<sup>v.1</sup> The chapter provides details of the journey which was hazardous because in those days sailing in the Mediterranean during winter was dangerous. Despite Paul's warnings, the captain and centurion decided to risk sailing. The centurion preferred to rely on the advice of the "expert" sailor rather than that of the apostle who could speak the word of God. This is a common error, with individuals preferring, even in the vital matter of eternal life and death, to trust theological "experts" rather than to investigate the word of God in the scriptures for themselves.

Paul is set forth by Jesus as a model of discipleship and, in particular, as an example of suffering tribulation for Christ. On this occasion he endured the terrors of the sea, surviving a shipwreck, and in writing to the Corinthians he catalogued other tribulations he experienced: "Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches" <sup>1Cor.11:23-28</sup>.

In the event, despite the severity of the storm and the shipwreck, all lives were saved. We have in this account an example of the work of the angels, one of whom intimated to Paul that the outcome would be deliverance, provided all those on board obeyed his instructions. We are assured in the scriptures that "the angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them" <sup>Psa.34:7</sup> On most occasions, and always in our times, the angels work unseen as they serve the people of God: "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?" <sup>Heb.1:14</sup> We can be in this class, heirs of salvation, but only if we too obey the instructions of Jesus and his apostles.

The ship foundered on the shores of Malta *v.1* with all lives saved, and the ship's company received the succour of the islanders. One of the differences between our times and the apostles' is that we do not have the gifts of the Holy Spirit as they did. Jesus had said to them: "And these signs shall follow them that believe; in my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover". *Mar.16:17-18* When, therefore, Paul was bitten by a venomous snake, he remained unharmed, to the amazement of the Maltese. The purpose of Spirit gifts in the first century was to ensure the development of the church, and the apostles and others used the power of God to demonstrate that their message was from the Lord. And Paul used this power to heal all the sick on the island who were brought to him.

After three months, Paul and the centurion took another ship to Italy and made their way to Rome, with the apostle being encouraged by disciples who met him and accompanied him on his journey. *v.15* In Rome he was placed under guard but was permitted to receive visitors, so he called the leading Jews together to declare the Truth to them. They confessed they knew of no charges against him but that the community he belonged to was "a sect everywhere spoken against". *v.22* This has been the case throughout history. Holders of the Truth by Jesus' definition are few in number (Luk.13:23-24) and have always been disparaged throughout history.

Given the opportunity of putting these Jews into the right way, Paul "expounded and testified the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses, and out of the prophets, from morning till evening". *v.23* As always, the truth was rejected by most of these Jews, prompting Paul to cite the prophecy of the LORD through Isaiah concerning them: "Hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and not perceive: for the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them". *vs.26-27* The LORD requires our hearts to be receptive to his word, but if we harden them against him then we will be deprived of salvation. Nevertheless there were, and still are, some who rejoice in the truth, and most of those are found among the Gentiles: "Be it known therefore unto you, that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that they will hear it" *v.28* The message from God is still available in the scriptures for us to believe, enabling us to be saved, and the message remains the same as that proclaimed by Paul while he was held prisoner in Rome "preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ" *v.31*

oooOooo

The book of Leviticus contains part of the law which God gave to the people of Israel through Moses. The statutes in this book regulated their worship of God while they lived in his land. These regulations covered the religious life of the nation, including the duties of the Priests and Levites; the requirements for sacrifices, offerings and vows; and the instructions concerning the annual feasts in which they rejoiced before the LORD.

The apostles, in the New Testament, instruct us that these provisions under the Law of Moses were “a shadow of good things to come” Heb.10:1 and, in particular, they foreshadow the salvation which was to come through Christ. It is especially interesting to see how the regulations concerning the High Priest prefigured the work of Jesus as our Mediator, and also how the animal sacrifices made by the High Priest foreshadowed the sacrifice of Christ.

**Week 18****Leviticus 8****Day 120**

Aaron, Moses’ brother, belonged to the priestly tribe of Levi and was chosen by God to be his High Priest, and in this chapter we read of his consecration in the presence of the people who assembled at the door of the tabernacle to witness it. *vs.1-3*

Aaron did not appoint himself to this position of High Priest but was appointed by God, and the apostle shows that no man can arrogate this position to himself. Even Jesus did not do so but was appointed by God: “And no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron. So also Christ glorified not himself to be made an high priest; but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son, today have I begotten thee... saith also in another place, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec” *Heb.5:4-6*

Aaron was anointed with oil during his consecration *vs.2,12* which made him the LORD’s anointed. It is important to notice this because the word “anointed” in the Greek language of the New Testament is “Christ”, the title given to Jesus because he is the LORD’s anointed. However Jesus, being superior to Aaron, was anointed to be, not only a High Priest, but also a Prophet and a King; and he was anointed, not with oil, but with God’s Holy Spirit (Acts 10:38).

The details given here of Aaron’s consecration are significant in that they point forward to various aspects of the work of Christ as High Priest. For example, a bullock and rams were sacrificed to represent the sacrifice of Christ. Here is a vital distinction between Aaron and Jesus. While Aaron as a High Priest sacrificed animals, Jesus as a High Priest sacrificed himself. The apostle furthermore emphasised the superiority of the sacrifice of Jesus over that of bullocks and other animals: “But Christ

being come an high priest of good things to come by a greater and more perfect tabernacle... Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" *Heb.9:12-14*

Moses took the blood of the bullock <sup>v.15</sup> and of the rams v.19 and sprinkled it upon the altar to intimate that under God's provisions for salvation men and women can only have their sins remitted and escape from death if blood is shed: "Moreover he sprinkled with blood both the tabernacle, and all the vessels of the ministry. And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission" *Heb.9:21-22*.

Ram's blood was also placed on Aaron's right ear, right thumb, and right great toe <sup>v.23</sup> to show that Jesus would dedicate his whole life to God in saving mankind by the sacrifice of himself. He would listen (ear) to the word of God, do (hand) the work of God, and walk (foot) in the ways of God.

The death of the Lord Jesus Christ is also represented by the burning of the body of the bullock outside the camp v.17 for Jesus was crucified outside Jerusalem: "For the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned without the camp. Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate. Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach" *Heb.13:11-13*.

## **Week 18**

## **Leviticus 10**

## **Day 121**

This chapter teaches us a very important lesson concerning our worship of the LORD: "I will be sanctified in them that come nigh me, and before all the people I will be glorified" <sup>v.3</sup>. People are inclined to think that we may worship God in any way which is acceptable to us, but God declares emphatically that no worship is acceptable to him that is not performed according to his precise instructions. Failing to listen to what God says and attempting to worship him according to our own imagination will be fatal, as it was immediately for Aaron's two eldest sons, Nadab and Abihu.

God had given precise instructions regarding the burning of incense by which sweet odours would pass into the Most Holy place where he met with Israel. Elsewhere we are taught that this represents the prayers of God's people, and the LORD tells us the mode and content of prayers which are acceptable to him. The incense had to be made in a particular way of specified spices, and had to be burnt by taking fire from the altar before

the LORD. Dire consequences would result from departure from these instructions.

Nadab and Abihu thought they could approach God in a different way. They did not take the fire from the altar but from another source, and they were struck dead. This may appear harsh to us, but it is a lesson we must learn if we hope to be acceptable to God. We cannot ignore his commandments, nor approach him according to the imagination of our own hearts. The scriptures tell us of God's goodness and severity (Rom.11:22), for he is loving and merciful to them that obey him, but he is against them that ignore his word or disobey his commandments: "The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty" *Exo.34:6-7*.

## **Week 18**

## **Leviticus 16**

## **Day 122**

In this chapter we read what happened on the Day of Atonement in Israel when the High Priest went into the Most Holy place to appear before the LORD. This represents the entry of Jesus into Heaven itself to be with God. The Most Holy Place was separated from the Holy Place, which the other priests entered to do service, by a veil. This veil was rent from top to bottom at the moment when Jesus died on the cross, to show that through his death the way to immortality was opened up. None of us could be saved from death apart from the sacrifice of Christ, and this was prefigured on the Day of Atonement by the sacrifice of animals: a bullock, a ram, and a goat. The blood of these animals was sprinkled on the furniture of the tabernacle and before the LORD in the Most Holy to foreshadow the shedding of Jesus' blood.

The bullock was sacrificed as a sin offering, and it is important to notice that the High Priest had to do this for himself as well as for others. This is stated four times in this chapter and is most important because it points forward to Jesus as a High Priest who died as a sacrifice for himself as well as for other people. This was because he was of the same sinful nature as ourselves and, although he lived a perfect life, he had to die because of his sinful flesh. Some people do not like the idea that Jesus was the same nature as ourselves and so they deny this truth. The apostle warned the disciples against this error: "Many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist" *2Jo.1:7*.

The apostle in his letter to the Hebrews draws the correct parallel between Aaron and Jesus: they both had to sacrifice for themselves as well as for others: "For every high priest taken from among men is ordained for men

in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins: who can have compassion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way; for that he himself also is compassed with infirmity. And by reason hereof he ought, as for the people, so also for himself, to offer for sins” *Heb.5:1-3*.

Jesus was also represented by the two goats, one of which was sacrificed and the other was released into the wilderness as a scapegoat vs.9-10. This was to teach that the blood of Jesus would be shed for our sins v.9 and also that all our sins would be placed on him to be carried away never to return. Therefore “Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness: and the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness” *vs.21-22*. Jesus not only died to take away our sins but also our iniquities are laid on him: “Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed... and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” *Isa.53:4-6*.

## **Week 18**

## **Leviticus 17**

## **Day 123**

The people of Israel were required to sacrifice animals in their worship of God. The regulations for these sacrifices were very precise because the main purpose was to point forward to the sacrifice of Jesus. The principal aspect of the sacrifices was the shedding of blood, for Jesus’ blood was shed for us. Jesus poured out his life for us, and this is well represented by the pouring out of animal blood because the life of men and of animals is in their blood *v.14*. To respect this, the Jews were commanded not to eat, or drink, blood *v.12*,

When the first man was created God breathed into his body the breath of life, and the first thing a baby does at birth is begin to breathe. This is essential for life because the lungs extract oxygen from the air and pass it into the blood which is then transmitted throughout the body to keep us alive. If any part of our body is cut off from the blood it dies because the life is in the blood. If the blood supply does not reach the brain we die immediately. If our hearts or lungs cease to function then we die, and this happens to everyone in the end. If we are to live for ever we must have bodies which contain life in something other than blood. Therefore the promise is of receiving a spiritual body. This is the divine nature

(2Pet.1:4) which Jesus now has. He has flesh and bones like us (Luk.24:39) but not blood, for God's Spirit keeps him alive for ever.

There are two words used in this chapter which are often misunderstood, but their use here helps us understand them correctly. The first is "soul"<sup>v.12</sup>. Many people think we are, or have, immortal souls but the Bible does not teach this. The first man was made "a living soul" and "soul" is used to mean a person himself. For example, when God said, "No soul shall eat blood"<sup>v.12</sup> he meant "no person" should do so. Just as those in distress say "Save our souls", meaning "save us, ourselves".

Israel were also commanded to stop sacrificing to "devils". They had been worshipping the idols of other nations and this is what is meant here by "devils". In fact this is a poor translation because the original Hebrew is "hairy he-goat" which was one of the heathen idols. It is worth knowing that the word "devil" in the singular does not appear at all in the Old Testament, because there is no such person as "the devil" of popular imagination. "Devils", in the plural, occurs only four times and on each occasion refers to the gods of the heathen.

## **Week 18**

## **Leviticus 23**

## **Day 124**

The people of Israel were required to keep the seventh day of each week holy to the LORD, and to celebrate three feasts of the LORD during the year. These were "holidays" or "holy days" which were a great benefit to the people as they provided refreshment and rest from toil. However the feasts, like the rest of the Law of Moses, were intended also to illustrate God's work of salvation in Christ.

All the people in the land benefited from the Sabbath day for they were able to rest from their labours one day a week when they had freedom to worship the LORD. Even slaves were blessed in this way and received this regular refreshment unknown in other nations who required their people to work ceaselessly throughout the year. The Sabbath was Saturday, not Sunday as is often mistakenly believed, and being the seventh day of the week represents the seventh period of one thousand years to follow the six thousand years of toil and trouble which mankind has endured. All the indications are that we are very near to the end of the six thousand years, and so the faithful are alert and watchful for the coming of Christ to inaugurate the rest which God has promised.

The first feast was the Passover at which a lamb without blemish was sacrificed to represent the sacrifice of Jesus. He was the Lamb of God and was crucified on the fourteenth day of the first month<sup>v.5</sup> for "Christ our passover is sacrificed for us"<sup>1Cor.5:7</sup>. On the Sunday after the Passover the priest waved a single sheaf of their harvest before the LORD, and this represented the resurrection of Christ who was raised from the dead on

the first Sunday after the Passover. Israel were then to count fifty days to the feast of Pentecost when they were to wave two loaves before the LORD <sup>v.15</sup>. While Jesus was represented by the single sheaf of barley, his disciples were represented by the loaves, and it was on the day of Pentecost fifty days after Jesus rose from the dead that the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples to demonstrate that they were accepted by God. This was foreshadowed by Israel each year when they waved the loaves, and there were two loaves to represent the two classes of people from which the disciples of Christ would come: the Jews and Gentiles.

Israel then had a long wait during the year before the next feast which represents the coming of Jesus and the establishment of the kingdom of God. On the first day of the seventh month the priests were to blow the trumpet to gather the people to the LORD. This represents the blowing of the trumpet when Jesus comes. He will gather the saints together, most of whom will be sleeping in the grave, and they will all come together to be with Jesus: “For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them” *1Thes.4:16-17*.

The tenth day of this same month <sup>v.27</sup> was the Day of Atonement on which the High Priest went into the Most Holy and came out again to pronounce God’s judgment on the people to remove their sins by placing them on the scapegoat. This represents the coming of Christ out of Heaven to pronounce God’s judgment on his people and to give eternal life to the faithful: “So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation” *Heb.9:28*.

Then the reign of Christ will begin and last for a thousand years which will be a time of rest and refreshing for the world after six thousand years of toil. This is represented by the final feast, the feast of tabernacles, which Israel commenced on the seventeenth day of this same seventh month <sup>v.34</sup>. This feast will also be kept throughout the Millennium because people of all the nations of the world will be required to come up to Jerusalem each year to keep it: “And it shall come to pass, that every one that is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall even go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the feast of tabernacles” *Zech.14:16*.

## **Week 18**

## **Leviticus 25**

## **Day 125**

Israel were also to observe a Sabbath of years and allow the land to remain fallow each seventh year <sup>v.4</sup>. This kept the land fertile, and God promised that if they faithfully obeyed his commandment then he would ensure that

the harvest was abundant in the sixth year to provide food through to the ninth year when they would again harvest the land <sup>v.22</sup>. Israel failed to keep this commandment and God removed them out of the land so that it could then enjoy her sabbaths <sup>26:34</sup>. This is remarkable evidence of God's hand at work in the earth. The land of Israel, a land of "milk and honey" when the people entered it, became and remained a desolation for centuries while Israel were scattered out of it; but once they returned to the land, it began to flourish again.

The people of Israel were also commanded to observe the Jubilee. Every fiftieth year was a Jubilee, a year of release which brought great benefit to the people. Each family in Israel had its own inheritance of land, and this could not be sold. All that could be sold was the fruit of the land until the year of Jubilee when possession of the inheritance had to return to its rightful owner. This prevented the possession of great tracts of land by the rich, an evil that has afflicted all other nations. Furthermore, in the year of Jubilee all the oppressed were set free. If any Israelite had, through misfortune, become a slave in the land he was released in the Jubilee. The Jubilee points forward to the release which will come with the return of Christ. Then the land will return to its rightful heirs and the people of God will be released from the slavery of sin.

## **Week 18**

## **Leviticus 26**

## **Day 126**

God gave the people of Israel many commandments to obey, with the promise that obedience would bring great blessings to them in every aspect of their lives. He promised to provide rain for their crops so their land would flourish and be fruitful, and they would dwell safely in the land, easily overcoming any enemies that attacked them. However, if they disobeyed then the reverse would take place. Their land would become unfruitful and they would suffer at the hand of invading enemies.

Sadly, Israel were mostly unfaithful to God. They disobeyed his commandments and turned aside to the worship of idols. Therefore, instead of all the blessings they could have continuously enjoyed, they received all the curses God had pronounced upon them for disobedience. God is merciful and he repeatedly sent prophets to exhort them to return into the right way; but they refused to hear. Therefore, after many centuries, the ultimate punishment came upon the nation and they were removed out of the land and scattered throughout the nations of the world, just as God had declared <sup>v.33</sup>. Their cities were destroyed <sup>v.31</sup> and the land became such a desolation that people could not imagine that it ever had been a flourishing "land of milk and honey" <sup>v.32</sup>. The land enjoyed her sabbaths during their absence while it lay desolate <sup>v.34</sup> and they suffered terribly in their enemies' lands <sup>v.38</sup>.

The Jews were absent from the Promised Land for nearly two thousand years after the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in A.D.70. During this long period they suffered at the hands of the Gentiles, the holocaust under Hitler and the Nazis in which six millions Jews were put to death being just one example. However, God will save Israel and bring them back to his land because of the promise he made to their fathers: “Then will I remember my covenant with Jacob, and also my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham will I remember; and I will remember the land” <sup>v.42</sup>. Already many Jews have returned to the land according to the outworking of God’s purpose. The desolating Turks were removed from the land in 1917 by the British who declared the Jews could have a national home there, and in 1948 the State of Israel came into existence. In three wars the Arab nations attacked Israel to destroy her, but she survived because it is God’s will that the Jews be in the land ready for the return of their King. Jesus, the king of Israel, will soon come to Jerusalem and he invites to believe and do as he requires and then to live and reign with him in his kingdom re-established in the land.

oooOooo

## Week 19

## Introduction

Paul was appointed by Jesus to be his apostle to the Gentiles. The word “apostle” means “one sent”, so Paul was sent to the nations with Jesus’ message. *The Acts of the Apostles* recounts how he performed this commission, and the New Testament contains letters he wrote to seven congregations of Gentile disciples. *Romans* is the one he wrote to believers in Rome, the capital city of the world in those days.

He addresses the disciples as “saints”.<sup>1:7</sup> This title means “separated” or “sanctified”, and all the people of God are called saints. In later times men began to award the title “saint” to those, usually dead, whom they considered worthy of it, such as Paul himself. However, Paul is never referred to in the scriptures as “St. Paul”, although he is a certainly a saint, as are all the true disciples of Christ because they are all “separated unto the gospel of God”.<sup>1:1</sup>

In writing to the disciples in Rome, in the first eleven chapters, Paul expounds the doctrines of the Truth which must be believed by all who hope to be accepted by Christ. He shows the true state of mankind and how we can escape from the consequences of sin and death. He details God’s marvellous scheme of salvation, and he is so moved by the wonder of it he exclaims: “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen”. 11:33-36

## Week 19

## Romans 1

## Day 127

The essential facts which must be believed concerning Jesus are, firstly, he is the Son of God and, secondly, he is the Christ, i.e. the Messiah, king of Israel, who will ultimately sit on David’s throne in Jerusalem and reign over the kingdom of God. Therefore, Paul opens his letter by declaring he is a messenger of the gospel which God “had promised afore by his prophets in the holy scriptures, concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh; and declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead”.<sup>vs.2-4</sup> Jesus lived a life of holiness, therefore God raised him from the dead and declared him to be his Son with power, and in the future he will establish him as king of Israel upon David’s throne.

This was the gospel, or “good news”, that Paul brought to the people of the Roman world, with the promise that if they fulfilled God’s conditions they would live with Jesus in that kingdom for ever. Belief of this gospel is

essential for salvation, as Paul wrote: “So, as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also. For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek”.<sup>vs.15-16</sup> “Belief” is often translated by the word “faith”, and the faith required by God is “belief of the gospel”. Only those who believe the gospel (i.e. have faith) will be counted righteous by God and receive eternal life: “For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just [the righteous] shall live by faith”.<sup>v.17</sup>

God requires us to believe the gospel and live our lives according to the commandments of his Son. We shall thus be counted righteous and ultimately receive the gift of eternal life. However, this truth has been greatly corrupted as men have departed from belief in the true God and “changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator”.<sup>v.25</sup> Paul, in this chapter, outlines the fall of mankind from the worship of the Creator to the worship of idols and even of men themselves. People also fell from the holy way of life demanded by God into the abominable practices which are so prevalent today, so Paul concludes with the warning: “they which commit such things are worthy of death”.<sup>v.32</sup>

It is vital to know that God sees how we behave and he will “render to every man according to his deeds”:<sup>2:6</sup> “indignation and wrath to them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness” but, happily, “unto them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, [he will render] eternal life”.<sup>2:7</sup>

## **Week 19**

## **Romans 5**

## **Day 128**

In chapters 2 to 4 the apostle proves from the scriptures that “there is none righteous, no, not one”.<sup>3:10</sup> Even the Jews who boasted in their observance of God’s law were sinners because none of them could keep the law perfectly. However, God will forgive our sins, and the happiest people are those whose sins are forgiven: “Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin”.<sup>4:7-8</sup>

God will forgive our sins and count us righteous men and women if we comply with his conditions. What then is the essential condition? Paul told the Romans the answer by directing their attention to God’s word and to the example of Abraham, the father of the Jews: “For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness”.<sup>4:3</sup> Abraham was “fully persuaded that, what God had promised, he was able also to perform. And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness”.<sup>4:21-22</sup> The promise of God is that we also may be

counted righteous by the same means: “Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead” <sup>4:23-24</sup>.

This forms the introduction to our chapter: “Therefore being justified [made righteous] by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” <sup>v.1</sup>. The apostle therefore emphasises the happy position of those who believe the gospel, a position which is only possible because of God’s love demonstrated in sacrificing his Son, for we are saved by his death and resurrection: “God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” <sup>v.8</sup> and “if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life” <sup>v.10</sup>.

We need saving from sin and death which was introduced into the world by the disobedience of the first man, Adam. Jesus did the opposite: introducing righteousness and salvation by his obedience. Just as Adam’s sin resulted in a great many dying for ever, so Jesus’ obedience will result in a great many living for ever: “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned. Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous” <sup>vs,12,18-19</sup>.

Figures of speech are common in the Bible and the apostle here uses personification to represent sin as one king and the grace of God as another. One of these kings gives death to its subjects, but the other gives life: “As sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord” <sup>v.21</sup>.

## **Week 19**

## **Romans 6**

## **Day 129**

It would be a serious mistake to think that because God will graciously give people eternal life, it does not matter if we continue to sin after we have believed: “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?” <sup>v.1</sup> Paul counters this argument by showing that we must also obey God’s commandments. The first commandment the believer must obey is to be baptised which is immersion in water. It must be complete immersion because it represents burial, just as Jesus was buried after his crucifixion. Of course, only dead people are buried and therefore the individual must first die to sin: “How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? Know ye not, that so many of us as were

baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death”.<sup>vs.2-4</sup>

God requires all men to die to sin, but if we leave this to the end of our natural lives we will then remain in the grave for ever. We can however die to sin now, be buried with Christ in baptism and, coming out of the water, be “born again” to start a new life: just “as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life”?<sup>v.4</sup> We will then have the hope that, just as we have risen from the waters of baptism, so we can in the future rise like Jesus from the grave: “For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection”.<sup>v.5</sup>

In the rest of this chapter, Paul exhorts the disciples to serve God instead of Sin: “Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God”.<sup>vs.11-13</sup>

We can choose whom we serve: whether sin, the natural impulses in our flesh, or God whose commandments are found in his word. The right choice is vital because the consequence of serving sin “is death”?<sup>v.21</sup> while the consequence of serving God is “everlasting life”<sup>v.22</sup>: “For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord”.<sup>v.23</sup>

## **Week 19**

## **Romans 8**

## **Day 130**

The conclusion of the apostle’s argument so far is that: “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit”.<sup>v.1</sup> God will not condemn us but will give us eternal life if these two conditions apply to us: firstly, we are “in” Christ Jesus, i.e. we have believed and been baptized; and, secondly, we live our lives, not according to the impulses of the flesh, but according to the guidance of God’s Spirit in his word.

We will only comply with these conditions if we have the right thoughts in our mind because thought generates action. If we are carnally minded, having minds influenced by the flesh, then we will not fulfil these conditions but will die; but if we are spiritually minded we shall live: “For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace”<sup>vs.5-6</sup>

We might think we can reason matters out and decide for ourselves what is right and wrong. But this would be a fatal error, for our natural

thinking opposes God and displeases him: “Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God” <sup>vs.7-8</sup>.

The choice is entirely ours, but the consequences are definite: “For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live” <sup>v.13</sup>. The benefits of being guided by God’s Spirit, as we are when we are led by his word in the Holy Scriptures, are numerous, and the apostle identifies some of them here. Firstly we become God’s children: “As many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons [children] of God” <sup>v.14</sup> and secondly as children of God we also become his heirs, “heirs of God” <sup>v.17</sup>, and “joint-heirs with Christ”! How marvellous this is: “He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?” <sup>v.32</sup>

God has made “exceeding great and precious promises by which we can become partakers of the divine nature”, <sup>2Pet.1:4</sup> live for ever, inherit the promised land, and reign with Christ in glory in the kingdom of God when all the nations of the earth will be blessed. Those that hope <sup>v.24</sup> for these things are “waiting for the manifestation of the sons of God” <sup>v.19</sup> when they “shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God” <sup>v.21</sup>.

The disciples of Paul’s day had to endure severe persecution from their contemporaries, and many since have suffered extreme tribulation. All these were able to endure because they could look forward to a glorious future, as Paul declared: “For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” <sup>v.18</sup>. We can be sure that God is in control of our lives and we can be greatly encouraged by the knowledge that “all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” <sup>v.28</sup>.

God is working out his predetermined purpose which involves calling men and women to salvation, making them righteous like his Son, and finally glorifying them: “For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified” <sup>vs.29-30</sup>.

If we act to comply with God’s requirements and become related to him through belief and baptism, we will have Christ at God’s right hand to intercede for us, <sup>v.34</sup> and no-one “shall separate us from the love of Christ” <sup>v.35</sup> and nothing “shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” <sup>v.39</sup>.

Although Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles, he was himself a Jew and greatly distressed that his own people of Israel rejected the gospel. They were the natural children of Abraham and in a very privileged position. They “are Israelites; to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever” <sup>vs.4-5</sup>.

Sadly, being the natural children of Abraham they also behaved like Abraham’s natural son, Ishmael, and rejected the word of God. Therefore God declared that the promised seed, which is Christ, would come through Isaac, Abraham’s son born according to God’s promise: “In Isaac shall thy seed be called” <sup>v.7</sup> (Gen.21:12) Therefore, the apostle asserted: “the children of promise are counted for the seed” <sup>v.8</sup> Consequently, Gentiles can, by belief and baptism “into Christ”, become Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise (Gal.3:29).

This is not an arrangement which pleased the Jews, but Paul shows that all things are God’s and he may do whatever he likes with his own and, in particular, “he hath mercy on whom he will have mercy” <sup>v.18</sup> We are simply dust and ashes, made from the clay, but he is the great Creator. Like the potter, he can mould the clay in any way he likes and the clay vessel formed can have no complaints: “Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?” <sup>vs.20-21</sup> God, as a potter, can make any vessels he likes but we have the opportunity to be malleable to his will so that we will be part of his new creation and become vessels unto honour and mercy, for his purpose is to “make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory, even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles” <sup>vs.23-24</sup>.

Paul cites examples from the past when God poured his judgments on vessels of wrath, but in the future he will pour out his blessings upon those “who have attained to the righteousness of faith” <sup>v.30</sup> Unfortunately, many of the Jews stumbled at Jesus. He is a precious stone, but they saw him as a rock in their path and they stumbled over him: “For they stumbled at that stumblingstone; as it is written, Behold, I lay in Sion a stumblingstone and rock of offence” <sup>vs.32-33</sup> (Isa.8:14). Nevertheless, many other Jews, and Gentiles too, accepted Jesus and believed: “and whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed” <sup>v.33</sup>.

The apostle continued to express his anxiety for his own people, the Jews, especially as they made the common mistake of thinking they could please God in their own way and refused to learn the right way from God himself: “For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God” <sup>10:2-3</sup>.

God has plainly stated the means by which people can be counted righteous, and it is by believing him to gain “the righteousness which is by faith”.<sup>v.6</sup> We cannot believe what God has said unless we hear it, and therefore God has brought it to us in the scriptures, “even the word of faith which the apostles preached”.<sup>v.8</sup> God sent forth his prophets and the apostles to preach the gospel so that men and women might believe and be saved: “How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!” <sup>v.15</sup> (Isa.52:7).

God offers his salvation to everyone, as the apostle proved from the prophecy of Joel: “whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” <sup>v.13</sup> (Joel:2:32). This statement is often taken out of context and made to mean that anyone who simply calls upon God is automatically saved but God requires more from us than that. The Jews, for example, were rejected by him because they were “a disobedient and gainsaying people”,<sup>v.21</sup> and he will reject everyone who does not both believe and obey. Paul instructs us plainly in this letter that God requires us to know his promises, to believe them, to be baptized into Christ, and thereafter to serve righteousness.

There is no profit in having a zeal of God which is not according to knowledge. We must first learn the true faith which now comes from the scriptures alone: “faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” <sup>v.17</sup>. We can only please God by having this faith and looking for the future reward he has promised: “without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him” <sup>Heb.11:6</sup>.

We must obey the commandments of Christ if we are to be beneficiaries of God's salvation, therefore Paul also instructs us concerning these commandments. He first insists that, in view of the marvellous promises God has made and the wonderful future in prospect, it is perfectly reasonable that we should devote ourselves entirely to his service: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service".<sup>v.1</sup>

Our natural inclination is to conform to this age in which we live, but we should transform our lives so that we conform to God's will as expressed in his word: "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God".<sup>v.2</sup> The Greek word translated "transformed" is "metamorphosis" which we use to describe the change of a caterpillar into a butterfly, and this gives some idea of the tremendous change that should be effected in us by the word of God.

The apostle teaches in the next chapter that all the commandments are encompassed in love: "If there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law".<sup>13:9-10</sup> And so he commands the disciples: "Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another"

v.10. However, our love for one another must be genuine, not a pretence: "Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good".<sup>v.9</sup>

To love other people irrespective of what they are like is not easy, and many other commandments are difficult because they go against our natural inclination. Examples of these are the commands to "love our enemies", and to "forgive those who trespass against us", but if we obey them we will be like our Heavenly Father who promises to love and forgive us. Therefore the apostle exhorts: "Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good".<sup>vs.14,19-21</sup>

oooOooo

The book of Numbers recounts the experiences of the children of Israel during their wilderness journey from Egypt to the promised land. Although they reached the land in months, they spent forty years in the wilderness because they refused to enter when they first arrived at the border. This book is called “Numbers”, no doubt because Israel were numbered both at the beginning and end of the forty years, with the number of men over the age of twenty being approximately the same, just over six hundred thousand. However, within the tribes the populations changed greatly, reflecting the faithfulness or faithlessness of individual tribes during various trials in the wilderness. It seems, for example, that the tribe of Simeon played a significant part in Israel’s rebellions, for their number dropped from 59,300 to 22,200. The book contains many examples of both faithfulness and disobedience, and their consequences, from which we can learn.

**Week 20****Numbers 14****Day 134**

When Israel reached the border of the promised land they requested permission to send in spies first. These spies confirmed it was “a land flowing with milk and honey” <sup>13:27</sup> but ten of them brought an evil report <sup>13:31</sup> stressing the fortified cities and the giants who dwelt in the land. The people were alarmed at this and railed against Moses and Aaron, determined to appoint another leader and return to Egypt.<sup>v.4</sup> The two faithful spies, Joshua and Caleb, tried to persuade the people to be courageous and to trust in God, with the assurance that if God “delighted” in them he would bring them safely into the land.<sup>v.8</sup> This is the key aspect to note, for it can apply to us. If the LORD delights in us he will ultimately give us the promised land. Jesus himself is the example: “The LORD delivered me, because he delighted in me”. <sup>Psa.18:19</sup>

The LORD would have destroyed virtually the whole rebellious nation had not Moses interceded on their behalf. No doubt this is recorded to prefigure the work of Jesus who as a mediator in heaven intercedes for his disciples. The LORD is longsuffering and merciful but he also punishes the guilty.<sup>v.18</sup> Although that generation was faithless, and later generations of Israel were also, yet God’s purpose will be fulfilled, as he said: “But as truly as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD”.<sup>v.21</sup>

God declared that the consequence of the rebellion was that most of that generation would perish in the wilderness, but their children would enter the land forty years later.<sup>v.31</sup> Of the Exodus generation only Joshua and Caleb, who “wholly followed” the LORD, would live to enter the promised land, and these are set forward as examples for us “to have another spirit and follow the LORD fully”.<sup>v.24</sup>

The last incident in this chapter shows the perversity of human nature. When Israel had the opportunity to enter the land they refused, but as soon as the opportunity was withdrawn they then attempted to enter it, but were thwarted. We can learn from this. Now is our time of opportunity to accept God's invitation of places in his kingdom in the same promised land. Most reject this opportunity, but many will clamour to enter in when it is too late (Luke 13:24-25).

## **Week 20**

## **Numbers 17**

## **Day 135**

The previous chapter (ch.16) records how many priests and princes of Israel rebelled against Moses and Aaron who had been appointed by God. Many died in the rebellion and many more would have done so had not Moses acted to save them. He took fire from off the altar (which represents the suffering and sacrifice of Christ) and ran into the midst of the people "and he stood between the dead and the living; and the plague was stayed."<sup>16:48</sup> Moses represented Jesus as a mediator who likewise acted to save us from death. Aaron also represented Jesus, but as God's high priest, and God dramatically demonstrated he had appointed his high priest in a way that pointed forward to the resurrection of Christ.

A rod for each tribe, with the name of the owner on it, was placed in the tabernacle overnight. The man whose rod blossomed into life would be revealed as the LORD's chosen one. In the morning only Aaron's rod had come to life, with buds, blossom and almonds. This prefigured the Lord Jesus who is manifestly the LORD's chosen one for he sprang to life again early in the morning after being laid up in the darkness of the tomb. Afterwards the rod that budded was placed in the ark, together with the incorruptible manna and the tables of the law, as a memorial throughout all generations to point forward to the coming of the Lord Jesus who would be God's high priest, incorruptible, and an embodiment of God's holy law.

At the end of forty years wandering in the wilderness the children of Israel returned to Kadesh Barnea <sup>v.1</sup> on the southern border of the land. Again there was no water for the people to drink and, as usual, they remonstrated against Moses and Aaron, lamenting they had ever left Egypt. When they first came into the wilderness God had provided water out of a rock when Moses struck it (Exo.17:6) and we are told that this Rock represented Christ (1Cor.10:4). Jesus was smitten and out of him, at it were, came living water (Joh.7:38) and the smiting of the rock represented his being smitten as he was crucified. He was not to be smitten a second time however and therefore, on this second occasion, Moses was commanded not to smite the rock, but to speak to it v.8. But Moses did smite the rock, breaking the type which represented Jesus, and thus he misrepresented the purpose of God in Christ. He also “spake unadvisably with his lips” (Psa.106:33) and as a result he and Aaron were prevented from entering the promised land. <sup>v.12</sup>

At long last Israel were commanded to make their way to the promised land, but they did not go northwards, the shortest route, but they went south eastward to the Red Sea and then turned northwards to enter the land from the east by crossing the river Jordan. This meant they went round Edom, the land possessed by their cousins the descendants of Esau (also called Edom), Jacob’s brother, <sup>v.14</sup> and Aaron died on the way near the land of Edom. <sup>v.28</sup>

Despite being so close to their destination, Israel still continued to murmur, complain, and express their desire for Egypt. <sup>v.5</sup> Therefore the LORD sent fiery serpents which bit them, and many died. The purpose of this was not only to punish the rebels but also to prefigure our salvation from sin. We are all suffering the consequences of sin and are dying. The serpent was used from the beginning to represent sin and we therefore may be described as having been bitten by the serpent, and “the sting of death is sin”. <sup>1Cor.15:56</sup> No-one can save us from dying except God who has provided salvation through Jesus, a partaker of our sinful nature and crucified for us. To represent this, Moses was commanded to make a brass serpent (to represent sinful flesh) and fix it on a pole (to represent the crucifixion of Jesus): “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life”. <sup>Jn.3:14-15</sup> The people who looked to the brass serpent on the pole survived the serpent’s sting, so those who look to Jesus in the way prescribed in the scriptures will survive the sting of death, which is sin. <sup>1Cor.15:56</sup>

Israel continued on their journey to the promised land which required them to pass through Gilead, then occupied by the Amorites. Moses sought permission from their kings, Sihon and Og, to pass peaceably through to the river Jordan that they might cross into the promised land. The Amorites refused this reasonable request and fought against Israel and were defeated, and Israel possessed their lands. Later this territory on the eastern side of the river Jordan was possessed by two and a half tribes of Israel (Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh) when the other nine and a half tribes received their inheritance in the promised land.

## **Week 20**

## **Numbers 22**

## **Day 138**

When Israel defeated the Amorites they took possession of land called “the plain of Moab” which had once belonged to the Moabites.<sup>v.1</sup> This lay to the north of the country of Moab and later became the territory of Reuben. Israel did not intend to attack Moab, and were forbidden from doing so by God because these were also their relatives, being the descendants of Lot, Abraham’s nephew.

However the king of Moab, Balak, was afraid of Israel when he saw them defeat Sihon and Og, the powerful kings of the Amorites. Therefore he sent for a renowned prophet by the name of Balaam to curse Israel. But God intervened and prevented Balaam from accepting Balak’s commission.<sup>v.12</sup> Israel are God’s chosen people and were blessed by him, but Balaam desired the reward promised by Balak and schemed to circumvent God’s command. He is set forth as a bad example. We should accept the straight forward instructions of God, not change our understanding of his commands to suit ourselves, and especially not for money. This is what Balaam did and so, later, did many Christians (2Pet.2:15-16).

Balaam was rebuked by a “dumb ass speaking” and this is a difficulty for some people, but there is no difficulty if we accept that God may do anything in the outworking of his purpose, including enabling animals to express their thoughts. It is not apparent in the translation but the word “adversary” in verse 22 is “Satan” in the original Hebrew. This shows that “Satan” is not an evil supernatural being, as is generally believed, but is anyone who secretly opposes another. Thus even an angel doing God’s will may be a “satan”, as the original of verse 32 expresses the words of the angel: “I went out to be a satan to thee”.

Balaam went to King Balak hoping to gain rich rewards by cursing Israel, but God used him to bless them instead. These events show how God made men, even reluctant ones like Balaam, express his mind. The prophets of the LORD did not express their own thoughts, but God's. Thus their prophecies in the Bible, although expressed by men, are the thoughts of the LORD, as Balaam said: "Behold, I have received commandment to bless: and he hath blessed; and I cannot reverse it. All that the LORD speaketh, that I must do" (see vs.8,12,20,26).

Balaam spoke seven times in prophetic parables concerning Israel's uniqueness among the nations and her glorious future, including prophecies concerning Christ, and two of these are in this chapter. The LORD God chose Abraham and separated his descendants through Isaac and Jacob from all the other nations to be his people; as Balaam was moved to declare: "the people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations".<sup>v.9</sup> God promised Abraham that his seed would be multitudinous like the dust, therefore, said Balaam: "Who can count the dust of Jacob?".<sup>v.10</sup> The true seed of Abraham are all righteous and although most of them are now dead they will not sleep in the grave for ever but will awake to great reward: "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!".<sup>v.10</sup>

King Balak complained of Balaam blessing Israel but Balaam told him that they would certainly receive these blessings because God had spoken it, and he would do it.<sup>v.19</sup> Although Israel, both in the land and later when scattered among the nations have suffered greatly through the centuries and been persecuted horrendously by their enemies, will ultimately be saved and will overcome all who have afflicted them.<sup>vs.23-24</sup>

These prophecies of Balaam concerning Israel related, not so much to those days, but to the far off future when Jesus will be the king of Israel, i.e. “the latter days”.<sup>v.14</sup> In this third prophecy Balaam speaks of Israel’s future blessings and of their great king. He heard the words of God and saw a vision of the future.<sup>v.4</sup> In particular, he saw the greatness of King Jesus who will be “higher than Agag and his kingdom will be exalted”.<sup>v.7</sup> “Agag” was the title of the King of the Amalekites, the first nation that warred against Israel <sup>v.20 margin</sup> and is typical of the enemies of Israel whose “latter end shall be that he perish for ever”.<sup>v.20</sup> The title of the leader of the nations whom Jesus will destroy when he attacks Israel is “Gog” (Ezek.38:16,23) which in Chaldean (in which Ezekiel wrote) is the same as “Agag” in Hebrew. Gog will be the ruler of Russia, and a leader of a mighty confederacy of nations, and his defeat will demonstrate to all people that Jesus has returned and is to be King of kings and Lord of lords.

Israel are God’s people and others make a great mistake in afflicting them. Unfortunately history recounts how most nations have persecuted the Jews, but God has seen this and declared of Israel: “Blessed is he that blesseth thee, and cursed is he that curseth thee”.<sup>v.9</sup> This should motivate us to have the right attitude towards God’s people of Israel - not to curse, but to bless them.

oooOooo