

The Bible Standard



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A Diadem of Beauty

Isaiah 28: 1-18

- 1 Woe to the crown of pride, to the drunkards of Ephraim, whose glorious beauty is a fading flower, which are on the head of the fat valleys of them that are overcome with wine!
- 2 Behold, the Lord hath a mighty and strong one, which as a tempest of hail and a destroying storm, as a flood of mighty waters overflowing, shall cast down to the earth with the hand.
- 3 The crown of pride, the drunkards of Ephraim, shall be trodden under feet:
- 4 And the glorious beauty, which is on the head of the fat valley, shall be a fading flower, and as the hasty fruit before the summer; which when he that looketh upon it seeth, while it is yet in his hand he eateth it up.
- 5 In that day shall the Lord of hosts be for a crown of glory, and for a diadem of beauty, unto the residue of his people,
- 6 And for a spirit of judgment to him that sitteth in judgment, and for strength to them that turn the battle to the gate.
- 7 But they also have erred through wine, and through strong drink are out of the way; the priest and the prophet have erred through strong drink, they are swallowed up of wine, they are out of the way through strong drink; they err in vision, they stumble in judgment.
- 8 For all tables are full of vomit and filthiness, so that there is no place clean.
- 9 Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts.
- 10 For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little:
- 11 For with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to this people.
- 12 To whom he said, This is the rest wherewith ye may cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing; yet they would not hear.
- 13 But the word of the Lord was unto them precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little; that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken.
- 14 Wherefore hear the word of the Lord, ye scornful men, that rule this people which is in Jerusalem.
- 15 Because ye have said, We have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we at agreement; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us: for we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood have we hid ourselves:
- 16 Therefore thus saith the Lord God, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste.
- 17 Judgment also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet: and the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding place.
- 18 And your covenant with death shall be disannulled, and your agreement with hell shall not stand; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, then ye shall be trodden down by it.

All Scriptures quoted are from the King James Version, unless indicated otherwise.

"Lift up a standard for the people" — Isa. 62: 10

Contents December 2003

A Diadem of Beauty 134

Chapter 28 of Isaiah condemns the historical faults of Israel's leaders, and in so doing sets forth important principles of Biblical interpretation for Christians today.

O, Little Town of Bethlehem 139

Today's Bethlehem is a scene of seething hostili-

ties. Like the rest of the world, it desperately needs the peace that Christ alone can give.

Bible Question Box 140

- *Why do bad things happen to us?*
- *Abraham and the king of Sodom.*

The Years That the Locust Hath Eaten 142

It's never too late for God to heal the hurt.
Publications 143
Announcements *Back Page*

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WITHIN THE RICH TAPESTRY of Isaiah chapter 28 are woven many wonderful truths, and the chapter repays a careful reading.

As a condemnation of the leaders of Israel of his day, the prophet's discourse expresses the judgments of Jehovah. But it is not all doom and gloom. Here and there throughout the tirade are scattered gems of enlightenment and statements of doctrinal significance for us today.

From one standpoint, the chapter is a prophecy of the saving work of Christ, the Messiah who was to come to His people and deliver the downtrodden and oppressed. Pictured as the "corner stone," a foundation of righteousness (v. 16), He would introduce a rule of righteous government, applying benevolent justice, and would weed out the corruption and dishonesty of those who lorded it over His people. It is perhaps hard to realize that this people Israel, the custodians of God's laws — His chosen — would have reached the unethical point common to many secular governments.

The Rise and Fall

Most people today would not express much surprise to learn that their political leaders or government were tainted with scandal or were unscrupulous in their behavior. Bribery and malfeasance in office are not new phenomena — most governments that hold the reins for some length of time manifest the same tendencies to graft and chicanery. A reform movement to "clean up government" arises, the rascals are thrown out of office, things settle down for a while, the problems recur, and so the cycle is repeated.

Ambition and self-gratification are part of the human condition — at least of the *fallen* human condition. And there is no one free of this taint. As Scripture declares, "there is none that doeth good, no, not one" (Psa. 14: 3; *cited in Rom. 3: 10*).

It is not surprising, then, that Israel herself deteriorated under the influence of the ambitious and the self-serving, those described in verses 14 and 15. The spirit of these leaders manifested itself in the worst examples among the Scribes and Pharisees, with whom Jesus had in a later generation to contend. These were of the "do as I say" brigade, whose personal conduct and philosophies contradicted their outward show of piety (Matt. 23: 1-7).

The Messiah-Judge to come (Isa. 28: 16) would have none of these ungraceful and unrighteous qualities. His heart would be for His people; He would judge righteously. In the

parlance of the builder, He would apply the plumb line to the prevailing standards, and if they were not true or square they would be discarded and replaced.

A Covenant with Death

Feeling themselves secure in their position, immune to attack, the rulers in Israel had, at the time these charges were levelled against them, descended into the depths of idolatry, to the point of human sacrifice (*Clarke's Commentary on Isa. 28: 15*). "We are secure," they said, "for we have an agreement with the grave." They were to have a rude shock.

The ten tribes of the north (Ephraim, v. 1) were soon to be overrun by Shalmaneser and taken into captivity, during which they would disintegrate as a nation. The assault on the southern kingdom, styled Judah or Jerusalem (v. 14) would come somewhat later. This "overflowing scourge" (v. 15), said the rulers in Jerusalem, was a delusion of the prophet and would never touch them. But Jehovah would cancel their covenant with death and they would be crushed by the destruction He had planned for them (v. 18).

The Root of the Problem

It is useful to ask how such a state of affairs came about. How could a nation so blessed by God, personally ministered to by Him through His appointed prophets and leaders — how could they descend into the darkness in which we find them here?

The rule of law is essential for any nation to survive and, over the centuries, often through trial and error, elaborate regulatory and judicial systems have been devised. In the most enlightened of nations society's laws have behind them, *in principle*, a general beneficence and good will, intended to protect the welfare of good citizens. The history of the *manner* of administration reveals a mixed bag, ranging from brutal dictatorships to benign monarchies to republican democracies.

The Evolution of Nations

The War of Independence (1775-1783), which birthed the United States of America, and the French Revolution (1789-1799), which smashed the aristocratic structure in France, both had a profound effect on governmental administration around the world, then and subsequently. The European revolutions of 1848, which rearranged the map of the continent, led to a further adjustment of affairs.¹

¹ The following appeared in *The New York Tribune* of May 5, 1895: "Abdication seems to be in the air. At no time since the eventful years of 1848-49, when the whole of Europe may be said to have been in open insurrection against the mediaevally autocratic tendencies of its rulers, have there been so many reigning sovereigns who are declared to be on the point of abandoning their thrones. In 1848 the monarchs were mostly princes born in the previous century and reared within the influence of its traditions, utterly incapable, therefore, of comprehending such new-fangled notions as popular government and national constitutions. Sooner than to lend their names to any such subversive ideas, which they regarded as synonymous with sanguinary revolution of the character that brought Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette to the scaffold, they preferred to abdicate; and it was during those two eventful years that the thrones of Austria, Sardinia, Bavaria, France, and Holland were vacated by their occupants. If today, half a century later, their successors desire in their turn to abdicate, it is that they, too, have become firmly convinced that popular legislation is incompatible with good government — that is, as viewed from the throne — and that it is impossible to reconcile any longer two such diametrically opposed institutions as Crown and Parliament. In this, perhaps, they are not far wrong; for there is no doubt that the development of popular government in the direction of democracy must naturally tend to diminish the power and prestige of the throne."

The advance of over a century-and-a-half has demonstrated the ancient truth that, despite enlightened laws and systems of government, the Biblical axiom that man is as prone to sin is as true as ever (Eccles. 7: 29). Confirming the oft-quoted statement by the historian Lord Acton² that “power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” control of a nation’s affairs has often been usurped by the greedy and the self-serving, to the detriment of the ordinary citizen.

The Structure of Israel

The Jewish people developed from the 12 tribal families of Jacob and remained in a more or less loose confederation for several centuries. Following their lengthy and trial-some sojourn in Egypt and their subsequent deliverance under Moses, they were organized into a form more closely resembling a nation. The Ten Commandments and the elaborations of the Law of God detailed by Moses, and written down, formed their constitution under a theocratic government (rule by God).

After settling into the promised land the nation was led by a series of “judges,” warriors who were raised up by God as the champions of the people in their persistent skirmishes with the surrounding people (Philistines, Midianites, and others). After the rule of these judges, Israel dissolved into a semi-anarchic condition during which “every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17: 6). Later, under the prophet Samuel and over his protests, the Israelites were unified under a monarchy, a state of affairs which lasted until the death of Solomon, when the kingdom was split into two (north and south).

The monarchic system came to a full end with the capture of Zedekiah, king of Judah, by the forces of the Babylonian ruler, Nebuchadnezzar. Never again would Israel be an independent nation; they were ruled by a succession of imperial powers, fitfully rebelling now and then. By the time of our Lord’s first advent the Jews were firmly under the heel of Rome. Millennia would pass before they were once again gathered as a nation-state in 1948. Today, Israel is a parliamentary democracy, with a President as head of state and a Prime Minister who runs the day-to-day business of the country.

With this background, we can see that Israel’s history as a political entity was in many ways no different than that of the Gentile countries. And during the period of idolatry alluded to in Isaiah 28 we venture to say that she was in a *worse* condition than the surrounding pagan countries —

worse, because those who move from light to darkness fall from an greater moral height and are the more depraved as a result. This principle is enunciated throughout Scripture (Ezek. 3: 20; Luke 12: 47, 48).

The Law of God the True Guide

Many nations have claimed to be “under God” and some have made valiant efforts to guide their societies on the basis of Biblical principles. But there has only ever been one nation of God — only the Jews comprised the chosen people, the only nation upon whom God had set His seal of approval.³

To the degree to which Israel conformed to God’s Law, to that degree they were blessed. But beyond this outward obedience was the more important demonstration of what we might call the *spirit of obedience*. Not all of Israel were true Israelites, as the Apostle Paul shows (Rom. 9: 6). But there were some who loved the Law of God in the best and truest sense, despite their personal failings.

The *Law of God* is equated with the *Word of God*, consisting not merely of legislative and judicial elements, but, in addition, the teachings and prophecies (many of them in writing) given directly as inspired revelations to the nation as a whole. But this instruction was given in such a way as to be difficult to understand for those who lacked the true spirit of inquiry and humility.

This principle is set forth in a somewhat cryptic fashion in vs. 9, 10. It is this: that the doctrinal and ethical principles of the Word of God are often presented in a non-sequential and (seemingly) scattered manner — “here a little, and there a little” (v. 10). Why? “That they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken” (v. 13).

We have ample demonstration of this in the New Testament, too. Jesus, the Master Teacher, who spoke beautifully and simply to the common people, would also on occasion hide the Truth from those who were not worthy of it or ready for it. For this reason He spoke in parables (Matt. 13: 10, 11, 13-16). He cautioned against offering deep and valuable truths to the vicious and ungrateful (Matt. 7: 6).

To grasp this is to understand, first, why Israel’s leaders staggered into degeneracy, and, second, why the claim of Christianity is so weak in the world today. The Word of God is an instrument of *selection and separation*. Certain aspects of it can be understood by the natural mind. These elements of truth have been comprehended and incorporated into civic law in many lands and have proved a blessing over the centuries. But the deep things of God cannot be received by the unregenerate mind for they require spiritual discernment

² John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton, Baron (1834-1902). Acton was born in Naples, and was the grandson of Sir John Acton. He studied at St Mary’s College, Oscott, Ireland, and at Munich University. As a leader of the Liberal Roman Catholics in England, he opposed the doctrine of papal infallibility. In 1895 he was appointed professor of modern history at Cambridge, and was founder editor of the Cambridge Modern History.

³ Supersession, or Replacement Theology, a centuries-old teaching, claims that the literal people of Israel had been replaced by other national entities — that Heaven had selected a new favorite. The Scriptures are plain in their assertion that there *is* a figurative, or spiritual people of God, a spiritual Israel, but are equally clear that this in no way abrogates the promises of God that He continues to regard the Jewish nation, however constituted, as His select people on earth. In the Apostle Paul’s words, they are beloved (still) for “the fathers’ sakes” (Rom. 11: 28). See our May 2003 issue for more on this topic.

(1 Cor. 2: 14). At the root of this discernment is *consecration made and kept*. That is to say, the true believer is one who has given up his or her own will and ways, and taken up the will and ways of God. Previous to this, of course, comes the acknowledgment of self as a sinner, honest repentance, and a whole-hearted acceptance of Christ as Savior.

Viewed in this light, it is easier to see why the majority of mankind have no part in salvation by faith, which is the main feature of the salvation process in this day and age. Mankind *will* have its turn, to be sure. We have shown in many articles how the day is coming when God's offer of salvation will fill a waiting world, but it will be on different terms from those which prevail now. In that day, sight will largely replace faith, for the general resurrection will have taken place, Satan will have been removed as a malicious influence, and persecution of the righteous will have ended.

In the final analysis, the judgment which came upon national Israel prefigures the calamities which are yet to befall the world of nations. Just as Israel as a whole was in rebellion against God and paid Him mere lip-service, so is Christendom today. And just as the "residue" of God's people in national Israel would recognize the justice of His judgments and honor Him, so in the Armageddon to come will His (relatively) faithful few understand the glory hidden behind the tribulation (Isa. 28: 5).

The future for mankind is bright. Behind the heavy clouds of woe is a bright and dawning Sun. At this season of good will, we praise God for His care for His groaning creation.

* * *

CONSIDER GOD'S WAYS

— Isa. 28: 23-29 —

"Give ye ear, and hear my voice; hearken, and hear my speech: Doth the plowman plow all day [always] to sow? doth he open and break the clods of his ground? When he hath made plain [prepared] the face thereof, doth he not cast abroad the fitches and scatter the cummin, and cast in the principal wheat and the appointed barley and the rie in their place? For his God doth instruct him to discretion, and doth teach him."

Because of their short-sightedness, men are apt to think of God's works as aimless and lacking definite object and time; but the Prophet shows us that God's times and seasons and plans are definite and methodical. Here he presents the familiar scenes of farm life, saying that as God instructs the farmer to observe order in his work, so He also observes the same order in His plans and methods. He first prepares the soil of humanity and breaks it up and makes it ready for the seed of truth. Then follows the sowing of seed and the harvest of each in its season.

This Gospel Age has been a sowing time. He that sowed the good seed is the Son of Man (Matt. 13: 37), and His disciples have assisted under His direction. It will be followed by a "harvest," as it was preceded by an age of breaking up and preparing men by the plow and harrow of bitter experiences with sin and Law. So, too, there are as many harvests as there are kinds of seed (1 Cor. 15: 38-44), but order governs all.

But while all recognize that there is a proper time to sow, it is generally forgotten that a reaping time, a harvest, shall come. But for the same reason that God did not forever prepare the soil, He will not forever be sowing the seed, but in due time will give His attention to reaping and threshing.

This is the point of the illustration: the time of trouble coming upon the Church should be recognized as the *harvest*, the *threshing time*, the time for separating the real grain from the chaff and tares. The harvest represents two general classes, with some variety in each. The fitches and cummin (v. 27) were small aromatic seeds used sometimes for food, but more commonly for medicinal purposes. These grew in little pods very easily crushed, and hence required gentle threshing with a rod or staff to separate them. These, we presume, represent a class of saints who, not being closely wedded to the world and its systems, can be quickly and easily separated from it.

The other grains mentioned, of which much larger quantities are grown, all cling closely to the chaff, some more so than others; and hence it was necessary to use rougher means to thresh it free. Cart wheels were passed over them repeatedly until the separation was effected. So some of the Lord's children cling so closely to the world, its forms and institutions, *etc.*, that they must be put through the severe ordeal; and every true grain shall be saved by some process (1 Cor. 3: 15).

This is more clearly shown in another translation: "For the fitches shall not be threshed with a threshing instrument [with saw-like teeth], neither is a cart wheel turned upon the cummin; but the fitches are beaten out with a staff, and the cummin with a rod. But bread-grain [though it ultimately] shall be broken small [or ground]; but [yet] the thresher shall not thresh it forever, neither shall the cart wheel hurt it, nor break it with its [thresher's] teeth. This also cometh forth from the Lord God of hosts to make His council wonderful and magnify justice" (vs. 28, 29).

This shows us that though the Lord will use severer and stronger measures to separate some of His children than is necessary with others, yet it is not His design that the time of trouble shall destroy them, but rather to bless them by thereby making them fit for His future service.

— *Selected* (1884)

“IN DUE TIME”

IN THY due time, our Heavenly Father, shall be known
Thy gracious plan, which now is hid
Except unto Thy saints alone.

O glorious day, when Thine All-wisdom, justice,
power and love,
The whole creation shall approve!

In His due time, O blessed Jesus, Thou shalt see
The travail of Thy soul, and shalt
Be satisfied eternally;
Thine agony on Calvary, — the price that Thou didst give,
Shall cause the dead again to live!

In God's due time, O pilgrim on the “narrow way,”
Thy painful journey ended, darkest
Night shall turn to brightest day;
Thine every trial, then, thine every tear, shall prove a gem
To beautify thy diadem!

In His due time, O weary, groaning, sin-cursed Earth,
The Lord will wipe away thy tears,
And bring the promised “second birth”;
And there shall be no pain, nor any death in that blest day
When sin and sorrow flee away!

In His due time angelic choirs shall sing again
In grander strain that heavenly message,
“Peace on earth, good will toward men!”
And every knee shall bow, and every loving heart confess
The Christ who comes to reign and bless!

— *Poems of Dawn*, p. 256

* * *

of interest . . .

The Church of England and the Methodist Church have taken a step toward mending a 200-year-old rift. The churches split in the late 1790s, during the life of John Wesley, in a dispute over the role of bishops. Over time further differences have arisen, such as the Methodist Church's disagreement with the Church of England's exclusion of female priests, and the Church of England's disapproval of the Methodist practice of occasionally allowing non-ordained individuals to preside at communion services. The fact that the Anglican Church is an established church — a state church — presents difficulties for the Methodists. It remains to be seen whether this will be an insuperable obstacle to the proposed unity.

Queen Elizabeth II, who is the head of the Church of England, was present as the two churches signed the covenant under which they agree to move towards sharing services, clergy, and resources. The covenant has been described as a commitment to unity, rather than unity itself, and “more an engagement than a wedding,” between the two churches. Among the hopes is that this reconciliation will help stave off the threats from factions of the worldwide Anglican community that threaten to secede as a result of the recent ordination of the homosexual Canon Gene Robinson, as Bishop of New Hampshire.

The Anglican communion is about 77 million strong, with most of the adherents in Britain. Attendance figures for the Church of England, however, have suffered deep decline over the past 20 years. Most Britons no longer see the church as relevant to their daily lives. The strongest growth in the Anglican church occurs in Africa and the Middle East. Known in the United States as the Episcopal Church, the communion is about 2.5 million.

* * *

Pope John Paul II and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, met for the first time in October. The 15-minute audience has become a regular event since the heads of the Catholic and Anglican Churches first met face-to-face in 1960. The two exchanged gifts and, in an effort to show that relations between their churches were improving, Dr. Williams wore the Episcopal ring given to one of his predecessors by the late Pope Paul VI and a gold cross, which the present Pope sent him on his enthronement earlier this year. In a prepared statement, Dr. Williams said he would respond to the Pope's invitation for suggestions about the future of Papal primacy.

In an indirect reference to homosexual clergy, the Pope told the Archbishop that Christians had to be protected from what he called erroneous and misguided interpretations of the faith. He went on to say, “These difficulties are not all of a merely disciplinary nature; some extend to essential matters of faith and morals.”

Unlike the Pope's position as head and ruler of the Roman Catholic church, the Archbishop of Canterbury's role in the Anglican church and his relationship to his bishops is that of “first among equals.” He lacks the authority to dictate the doctrines and practices of the worldwide Anglican communion.

— *Compiled from various sources*

O, LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM



HO, HO, HO! For millions of children in the western world this short burst of laughter signals the happiest time of their year. Santa Claus, Father Christmas — by whatever name he is called — is the much-welcomed Bringer of Gifts for the Good.

Although many view the childhood deception of Santa a harmless, childish fantasy, which children quickly leave behind, it is unfortunate that these young, receptive minds miss the solid emphasis on the truth of the Saviorhood of Christ during their formative years.

Christmas in Palestine

Christmas is, without doubt, a pleasant season. In its idealized, glittering Christmas-card Dickensian view, it is certainly attractive and provides happy memories for all, children and adults alike, and there are very few who are not charmed by it. However, it bears little resemblance to the reality of the message of Christ's birth.

Jesus was born in a warring world. Although the Roman Empire had spread its *Pax Romana* to a large portion of the Near East, they had by no means brought tranquility to the region. Subjugated Israel was a seething cauldron of resentment against the heel of Rome. All the more ironic was it that the Prince born that day would bear no arms against the occupying force. Rather, He would preach peace and submission to the pagan overlords — hardly the hero that the militant Jews, chafing long under Roman rule, could welcome.

It is sad to see so much strife and hatred in Bethlehem today. The birthplace of the Prince of Peace has become a stage on which the ancient rivalries and hostilities of Moslem and Jew are enacted over and over again.

Bethlehem, a town of about 30,000 people, is under Palestinian control, Israel having handed it over on December 22, 1995, to the Palestinian Authority, under the terms of the Oslo Agreement. Following that event, Christmas in Bethlehem became an important occasion for all Palestinians — Christians and Muslims (whose devotion to Jesus is based on their belief that He is an Islamic prophet). The city's mayor is Hanna Nasser, a Palestinian Christian, a woman who finds herself in the same odd position as other Muslims who have committed themselves to the Christian faith. These Palestinian Christians find them-

selves in the unenviable position of being in conflict literally and emotionally with Israel — the chosen people of God.

Along with the religious connotations, the secular, western view of Christmas has taken hold. Children dress up as Santa Claus and Christmas trees are erected — though the celebrations are of a less commercial nature than those held in many western countries. For the past several years Christmas in Bethlehem has been a dismal affair. Due to the curfews and security cordons laid down by Israel, movement in and out and across the city has been difficult. Last year, Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat, a Muslim, was prevented from attending Christmas Mass in the Church of the Nativity.

Setting aside the question as to whether December 25 is or is not the correct date for Christ's birth (we believe it is not), as a jolly figure Santa Claus is secular and not generally controversial for most people, who therefore accept him as stand-in for the real figure of Christmas, Jesus Christ. Around the person of the Savior swirl endless controversies in this world of declining Christian faith. "Give me Christmas but leave Christ out of it," seems to be the prevailing opinion.



Silent Night?

From the end of September to the day itself, there is little room for reflection in the midst of this modern cacophony of a commercial Christmas. Christ is not in it. Christ, the greatest Gift of all time, cannot be packaged and put under the tree. Sadly, He is not welcome at His own birthday celebration. For the most part, He is today as much despised and rejected of men as He was when He first walked the earth.

In the powerful quiet of the humble birthplace on that Bethlehem night, the God of Heaven brought forth a Savior, the One who would save His people from their sins. This is the beauty of Christmas — that Christ was born and died for our deliverance. In bringing His gifts to this world, He bestows upon us the peace that cannot be broken — the peace from sin's condemnation, peace with God, peace far beyond that which this world can understand.

We pray for our readers a Christ-filled, peaceful, blessed, and happy Christmas, full of the joys that come from good companionship and the knowledge of God's salvation which has come down to earth and which will, in due time, be made known to all.

* * *

BIBLE QUESTION BOX



Q From time to time in our Christian lives, difficulties come our way that seem to defy explanation. Why is this?

A This question falls under the category of God's providential care over His creatures — human, angelic, even the lower creation. Limiting ourselves to mankind, He exercises a general care over the *good* and the *evil*, over the *just* and the *unjust* (Matt. 5: 44, 45; Acts 14: 17; 17: 24-28).

By the good and just, we mean God's people — those who have come into harmony with Him through repentance for their sins, faith in Christ, and consecration to God. And by the evil and unjust, we mean the world in general — those not in harmony with Him through Christ. (How thankful to know that these will have an opportunity to come into harmony with God in His coming Kingdom, during "the times of restitution of all things" [Matt. 6: 10; Acts 3: 19-21].)

At the present time there is a difference between God's providential care for the world in general and for His people in particular. The former receive His *general* care only, whereas the latter also receive His *special* care, as is indicated in Scriptures such as Psa. 37: 23; 84: 11, 12; 91: 1-4; and Rom. 8: 28. Though in most cases God's special care for His people is exercised in the ordinary routine of life, on some occasions His care for them is exceptional. An example of the latter is the deliverance of St. Paul and all those with him in the shipwreck at Melita (Acts 28: 1-11). (See our July and November 2003 *Bible Standards*, copies free on request.)

The Seven Elements of God's Providential Care

God's providential care for His people consists of seven elements, or forms. He:

- (1) *Arranges for the supply of and actually supplies their needs* (Psa. 145: 14-16).
- (2) *Preserves them*. God does this in two ways:
 - shielding them from evils too strong for them to bear (1 Cor. 10: 13), and
 - strengthening them so they are able to bear and overcome amid evil conditions (2 Cor. 12: 7-9).
- (3) *Directs their course* (Prov. 3: 6).
- (4) *OVERRULES their untoward experiences for good* (Phil. 1: 12 — see NIV, RSV).

(5) *Restrains them from evil and unprofitable deeds by circumstances that He brings into their lives*. For example, when Jesus' disciples found it comfortable to remain in Jerusalem, God permitted persecution to scatter them to different areas. This worked for good because it enabled them to find new and fruitful fields for spreading the Gospel (Acts 8: 1, 4-8).

(6) *Disciplines them* (Psa. 119: 71; Heb. 5: 8; Heb. 12: 1-12).

(7) *Chastises them for wrongdoing* (Col. 3: 25).

In light of the foregoing, we conclude that God has two main purposes in His providential care over His people:

- (1) *To reveal the glories of His character (primarily His wisdom, power, justice, and love) as they are displayed in His providential acts on their behalf*. His design in this is for His people to develop a greater appreciation of Him in their hearts and minds. This will impart an intimate acquaintance with Him, make them like Him in character, and enable them to view matters as He views them.
- (2) *To give the benefits of all the elements of His providences* (as described above). This has the effect of developing, eventually unto perfection, the characters of His people, fitting them for their present and future missions, and ultimately preparing them for eternal life.

Coming back to our question, we first need to ask ourselves: Have I taken all the steps necessary to become one of the Lord's people? If so, am I still seeking His will in all my affairs? If our answer is *no* to either question, we should take the appropriate steps. If the answer is *yes* to both, we can rejoice in full assurance that we rest under God's special care.

The Indispensable Role of Faith

As Christians, our viewpoint should be based not upon sight, but upon faith (2 Cor. 4: 16, 18; 5: 7). Faith allows us to accept any experience that comes to us, even if we are unable to understand the whys and hows. Faith also gives us the confidence that a caring God is directing and overruling in our affairs, and that in due time He will make plain to us the reasons for our experiences. Faith fur-

thermore enables us to wait upon the Lord, be of good courage, and possess strong hearts (Psa. 27: 14).

It is especially during times of trial that walking by faith is paramount. Some Bible examples include the three Hebrew youths facing the fiery furnace and Daniel in the den of lions (Dan. 3 and 6). None of these understood the purpose for their trial at the time. Yet by faith they were obedient to God, and when their trial was passed they acquired an even greater appreciation of the Lord and His wise and loving dealings with them.

Fullness of faith will not come overnight — it takes knowledge and experience, and therefore time to develop and to mature. When we have it however, we will be able to exercise contentment and resignation as to God's providences in our lives. Even more, we will be able to rejoice amid the most difficult and trying experiences, knowing they are all working toward our highest good and eternal welfare.

Q Please explain Gen. 14: 23, which reads: "That I will not take from a thread even to a shoelatchet, and that I will not take any thing that is thine, lest thou shouldest say, I have made Abram rich."

A Genesis 14 begins with the account of four kings going to war with five other kings, one of the five being the king of Sodom.

The four kings prevailed in the war, took the survivors captive, and confiscated their goods. Abraham's nephew, Lot, and his family were dwelling in the land of Sodom at that time, so were among those taken. Abraham (at that time Abram) was informed of what had happened. He armed his servants, pursued and smote the enemy, rescued Lot, his family, the rest of the people, and came back with all the goods.

The king of Sodom recognized the service Abraham had performed and came out to meet him. He asked only that Abraham return the people back to him, but said that he could keep the goods for himself (v. 21). One could argue, however, that the hazards Abraham and his servants faced would have warranted him in requesting the service of the people he had freed, at least temporarily. It also seems that it would have been just for Abraham to have asked for at least a portion of the goods also.

Abraham's Refusal

On the contrary, Abraham responded that he had made an oath to God, stating that he would not take anything that belonged to the king or his people. The account does not indicate when Abraham made the oath. He may have made it before going into battle, determining beforehand that if God gave him success he would deny himself his proper right to any of the spoils. Or, seeing the benefit of refusing the offer by the king, Abraham decided to make the vow and thereby put an end to any further discussion.

As Christians, we will invariably be misunderstood at times, but caution and wise decisions will prevent undue misconceptions of the God we worship, the truths we believe in, and the cause we serve.

Abraham placed emphasis upon his refusal by stating that he would return everything — "from a thread even to a shoelatchet." Sandals being the type of shoe worn at that time makes the literal meaning more understandable: a thread from the strap of a sandal (see NIV, RSV).

The phrase "lest thou shouldest say, I have made Abram rich" is also significant. It suggests that Abraham may have perceived the king of Sodom to be a man that, had Abraham accepted the offer of the goods, would have used that against him. The king might have accused Abraham of enriching himself with the spoils of battle, or worse, impugned him for going into battle with merely covetous and mercenary motives.

Abraham did make two exceptions to accepting goods: (1) his servants were entitled to the food they ate, and (2) the three allies who fought with him were entitled to their share of the spoils. To have refused these two groups would have been unjust on Abraham's part.

Abraham's Decisions: Good Lessons for Today

Several lessons may be learned from the context. One has to do with our proper attitude toward vows. Once a vow has been taken, any consideration of a contrary course of action should be ended. There are two main benefits to this:

- (1) By denying ourselves what we could properly claim as our right can at times work out for the good of others (1 Cor. 8: 13; 9: 12);
- (2) Proper vows can also grant us the proper resolve needed to resist temptations when they approach. The making of our vows should not, however, require others to sacrifice their proper rights, just as Abraham did not expect this of his servants and allies.

Another lesson concerns the exercise of caution and the making of wise decisions. This is important because of others' perception of us. As Christians, we will invariably be misunderstood at times, but caution and wise decisions will prevent undue misconceptions of the God we worship, the truths we believe in, and the cause we serve. In a world that is increasingly lacking in moral fiber, it is important to avoid even the appearance of self-seeking or impropriety of any kind (1 Thes. 5: 22).

* * *

The Years That The Locust Hath Eaten

Joel 2: 25

“If Time is really only a fourth dimension of Space, why is it, and why has it always been, regarded as something different? And why cannot we move in Time as we move about in the other dimensions of Space?”

Herbert George Wells wrote this in his novel, *The Time Machine* (1895) at the height of the Industrial Age. His protagonist roamed through the past and present in his wonderful brass and ivory machine. This story fired the imagination of people of his day and spawned an aspect of science fiction which has been featured in books and films over the decades.

But in the real world, the past has irredeemably gone into oblivion and we cannot return to it and alter its events. *But how often we wish we could!* How many times we yearn to go back in time and alter our actions or make different decisions to change this or that sad outcome.

The Inner Voice

Conscience is a most remarkable faculty. Certainly, it cannot be explained by an evolutionary philosophy. Once wounded, the tender conscience is not easily pacified, and will hound its possessor until it is satisfied. Only when the damage has been repaired, the sin atoned for, the sacrifice made, will it release its victim. For the unfortunate ones whose lives spiral downwards as a result of drugs or drink, or those locked in a cycle of sexual degradation, the shame and remorse which they have brought on themselves is often too much for them to bear and they consider suicide as a way out.

It is safe to say that not one of us is guiltless of some past, haunting, sin. The knowledge of it can rob us of our quiet moments of peaceful reflection, goading us into irritability, and sapping our courage to go on. Our pain may be due to a recognition that we have wronged another and that the possibility of making amends has vanished beyond our reach. Perhaps it was the harsh words or unbecoming conduct toward a now-dead mother or father or spouse; or perhaps it was our actions in destroying our relationship with husband or wife, and thus ruining our marriage.

For those of tender conscience, life can be intolerable. Imagined sins loom large in the eyes of such, threatening to overwhelm them with a fear of severe punishment, even eternal death, visited by an avenging God. To these, release from guilt does not come easily. Mindful of their sinfulness they swing to the extreme and imagine their wrongs to be unforgivable.

It has been well said that each one of us has a maggot in our past that would happily devour our future. We must not allow this to happen.

He Who Inhabits Eternity

The Almighty Jehovah is Sovereign of the past and present. He is the God of Second Chances. So tender is He that Jesus describes Heaven's joy when a sinner turns to righteousness.

Happy thought: *God's bias is toward redemption and recovery.* The Scripture tells us that Jesus is able to save absolutely all who come to God through Him (Heb. 7: 25). The very act of grieving over one's sin is in itself an indication that one's condition of heart is pleasing to God. And though we must not underestimate His justice and His wrath against evildoers, He is tender toward those who come to Him in humility. Those with penitent hearts will always find a listening ear in the God of Creation. “For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones” (Isa. 57: 15).



Repairing the Damage

The text at the head of our article comes from the chapter which details the punishments that, from one standpoint, came upon Israel because of her unfaithfulness to God's covenant and the penalty she paid for them in her frequent captivities. (It also depicts the future assault on the now-regathered nation — but that is another topic.)

Despite His judgments against Israel, God's care for His chosen people shows His long-suffering and mercy. This text is a promise to make good the damage that was caused by Israel's default — to undo the effects of the past. In another place, on a wider scale, this is called Restitution, or “times of refreshing.” God has promised to mankind as a whole that He will undo the vicious effects of sin and suffering which have afflicted the race since the fall in Eden (Acts 3: 19-23).

The Forgiven, Forgive

As we have been forgiven, so must we forgive. This beautiful principle is highlighted in our Lord's prayer: Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors (Matt. 6: 12).

For the guilty, there is peace in the blood of Christ. *Only* by accepting this Sacrifice, made once for all time and for all people can the remorseful heart find rest. And oh! what a blessed rest! “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus,” writes the Apostle Paul (Rom. 8: 1). We may suppose that the Apostle was racked in his own heart over his sins against the Church — hailing men and women to prison and to death. Taking the personal viewpoint he declares himself to be the foremost of sinners (1 Tim. 1: 15).

Are you discouraged? depressed? afraid to face the future because of your past? What would you give to re-live those sad days? Let this comfort you, dear child of woe: It is never too late to repent and be recovered. The One who sits above the circle of this earth, who surveys eternity, has spoken it.

* * *

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announcements

MEMORIAL DATE FOR 2004

Friday, April 2, after 6:00 p.m.

Our Lord's Memorial is Friday, April 2, after 6:00 p.m. This is calculated as follows (all times Greenwich Mean Time): The vernal equinox is March 20, 6:50 a.m.; the new moon nearest this equinox is March 20, 10:42 p.m.; add 2 hours 21 minutes to get Jerusalem time = March 21, 1:03 a.m.; so Nisan 1 is from 6:00 p.m. March 20, to 6:00 p.m. March 21; Nisan 14 begins 13 full days later, on Friday, April 2, 6:00 p.m., ending Saturday, April 3, 6:00 p.m. The Memorial should therefore be kept after 6:00 p.m. Friday, April 2. May God bless all His consecrated people in this service. We will be glad to receive reports of each commemoration. (*Note: The vernal equinox and new moon nearest this equinox fall on the same date in 2004, a rare but occasional occurrence.*)

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GENERAL CONVENTIONS FOR 2004

At-a-glance

France: (*All at Barlin*) *Spring* — April 11, 12; *Summer* — July 30-August 1; *Autumn* — October 30, 31

Germany: *Velbert*, May 29-31; *Altleiningen*, October 1-3

United Kingdom: *Hyde*, August 6-8; *Sheffield*, October 30, 31

United States: *California*, February 14-16; *Florida*, March 12-14; *Massachusetts*, April 16-18; *Michigan*, May 29-31; *Philadelphia Area*, July 3-5; *Ohio*, August 13-15; *Illinois*, October 1-3; *Oklahoma*, to be announced.

Details

United States

California, February 14-16 (Saturday-Monday)

Site: Country Side Suites, 204 N. Vineyard Ave., Ontario, CA 91764; telephone (800) 248-4661 or (909) 937-9700; Sales Fax (909) 937-3414. *Rates and Reservations:* 1-2 occupants, \$74.00, 3-4 occupants, \$84.00; all rooms plus 11.85% tax; check-in after 3 p.m.; check-out noon. Any cancellations of guaranteed reservations must be done 24 hours prior to arrival. Free and frequent shuttle bus transport is available (only 5 minutes from airport to hotel). Please make room reservations through the Class Secretary, Mrs. Mary Detzler, 6941 Abel Stearns Ave., Riverside, CA 92509; telephone (909) 779-0331.

Florida, March 12-14 (Friday-Sunday)

Site: Oceanfront Comfort Inn, 1515 N. First St., Jacksonville Beach, Fla., 32250; Telephone: (800) 654-8776. *Rates and Reservations:* \$69.00 for 1-4 guests, plus 13% tax. Reservations must be made directly with the hotel, **by February 15: be sure to inform them that you are attending the Laymen's Home Missionary Movement Convention to secure the special rate.** Please make all other inquiries to Mrs. Beverly Blaine (Class Secretary), 3569 John Anderson Drive, Ormond Beach, Fla. 32176; telephone (386) 441-9836.

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