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Paul's Letters to the Corinthians

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The Prophet Elijah

Paper presented by Darryl Roe

A Revelation

Paper presented by Colin Giles
at Alexandra Headland

News and Notes

PAUL'S LETTERS TO THE CORINTHIANS

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Introduction

When Paul went to Corinth, that city was one of the best-known cities of the known world. It was a city of commerce, culture, religion and vice, a city which in many ways resembled the civilisation of our own time. Some commentators have said that the letters to the Corinthians are the most relevant writings in the New Testament for people of our own day, and I think many Christians would agree with that.

Paul arrived in Corinth approximately one hundred years after Julius Caesar had restored the city from the rubble and ashes of a previous devastation. The newly restored city had undergone great growth and prosperity, and was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia.

Corinth was situated on a narrow neck of land between two harbours, Cenchreae on the east and Lechaeum on the west, and the city of Corinth welcomed travellers and commerce from every part of the known world. Corinth lay on the highway from mainland Greece to the Peloponnesus, so all military and commercial traffic north and south passed through this important city. The result was that Corinth was a city into which wealth flowed. When Paul spoke of *“gold, silver, and precious stones”* in chapter three of the first letter, he used an illustration with which his Corinthian readers would have been familiar.

Some fifteen kilometres outside Corinth the Isthmian Games were held every four years. They were the most splendid and best attended of the Grecian festivals. Preparations for the games took months, and delegates and athletes came from all parts of the known world. The main events were racing, boxing and wrestling, to all of which Paul made reference in chapter nine of the first letter.

Overlooking Corinth, high on the Acropolis, was the magnificent temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love and fertility. One thousand priestesses practised prostitution as part of the religious rites. Corinth was a city addicted to vice. Long-haired male prostitutes were a common sight on the streets, and were the background for Paul's comments in 1 Corinthians 11:14, *“Isn't it unnatural and disgraceful for men to have long hair?”*.

PAUL'S VISIT TO CORINTH

It was from Athens that Paul went to Corinth, a city of prosperity, sport, politics and immorality. He had had a discouraging experience in Athens (Acts 17:16 to 34), and at Corinth new problems awaited him. The Lord assured Paul of His presence and protection in a vision, as recorded in Acts 18:9 and 10; *“One night Paul had a vision, and in it the Lord said, Don't be afraid to keep on preaching. Don't stop! I am with you, and you won't be harmed. Many people in this city belong to me”* (CEV).

The first contacts the Apostle made were a married couple, Aquila and Priscilla, victims of the expulsion of all Jews from Rome by order of the Emperor, Claudius Caesar. Aquila and Priscilla were tentmakers by trade, and Paul also had skills in that trade, so he lived with them in Corinth while he continued his ministry.

Soon after that, Silas and Timothy, who had been in Macedonia, joined this small company of believers, and with Paul presented the Gospel of Jesus Christ every Sabbath in the local synagogue. Two influential men were converted, Justus whose home was next door to the synagogue, and Crispus the chief ruler in the synagogue.

So a New Testament church was established, including male and female, Jew and Gentile, slave and master; a cross-section, in fact, of the citizens of Corinth. Paul made comments about this in 1 Corinthians 1:26 to 31, and in 1 Corinthians 6:9 to 11.

The Apostle stayed almost two years in Corinth, teaching, preaching and organising the church. He then moved on to Ephesus, where he stayed for three years. At Ephesus he received letters from the Corinthians asking for his advice concerning marriage, and the problem of eating meat which had been offered to the idols of the temple. In addition to these matters, Paul received disturbing reports of decaying conditions in the church. To answer the Corinthians' questions, and to counteract the decaying conditions and wrong conduct of the church members, Paul wrote the first letter to the Corinthian congregation.

AN OVERVIEW OF PAUL'S FIRST LETTER

The first letter was a letter of anger, satire, reproof, correction and instruction. It was written to a congregation which had been established upon the most authoritative foundations and had had the best of teaching and example. But the congregation failed. Instead of victory through faith in Jesus Christ there was tragedy; instead of Christian witness there was shame.

The Apostle wrote, *“I have heard terrible things about some of you. In fact, you are behaving worse than the Gentiles. A man is sleeping with his own stepmother”* (1 Corinthians 5:1; CEV).

Instead of evangelism there was behaviour deserving of ridicule. *“Supposing everyone in your worship service started speaking unknown languages, and some outsiders or some unbelievers come in. Won’t they think you are crazy?”* (1 Corinthians 14:23; CEV).

In those early days of Christian evangelism, the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit were in evidence, and the Corinthian church was, in fact, a charismatic church. The Apostle wrote, *“You are not missing out on any blessings (charisma)”* (1 Corinthians 1:7; CEV). But the Corinthian church members were misusing the blessings given to them, and Paul devoted three chapters to trying to set them straight on this issue (1 Corinthians 12, 13 and 14).

The Corinthian church was an immature church. Paul wrote, *“My friends, you are acting like the people of the world. That’s why I couldn’t speak to you as spiritual people. You are like babies as far as your faith in Christ is concerned”* (1 Corinthians 3:1; CEV). The Apostle referred to this matter again in chapter 13:11, chapter 14:20, and in his closing words in chapter 16:13.

The Corinthian congregation tolerated immorality among its members, as mentioned earlier. The Apostle must have been shocked to learn of a church member living immorally with his step-mother, an action of which even immoral pagans disapproved (1 Corinthians 5:1).

Some church members were even involved with prostitutes, and had to be reminded that their bodies were members of Christ and temples of the Holy Spirit. *“Don’t you know that your bodies are part of the body of Christ?” Is it right for me to join part of the body of Christ to a prostitute? No, it isn’t! Don’t you know that a man who does that becomes part of her body? The Scriptures say, ‘The two of them will be like one person.’ But anyone who is joined to the Lord is one in spirit with him. Don’t be immoral in matters of sex. That is a sin against your own body in a way that no other sin is. You surely know that your body is a temple where the Holy Spirit lives. The Spirit is in you and is a gift from God. You are no longer your own. God paid a great price for you. So use your body to honour God”* (1 Corinthians 6:15 to 20; CEV).

We readily see from Paul's letters to the Corinthians that heresy was infiltrating the church. The doctrine of the resurrection was being questioned by some members, which led Paul to address this fundamental Christian teaching in chapter 15 of the first letter. *"If we preach that Christ was raised from death, how can some of you say that the dead won't be raised to life?"* (1 Corinthians 15:12; CEV).

THE PROBLEM OF IMMATURITY

It was said earlier that the church at Corinth was an immature church, and its immaturity was evident in its failure to grasp fundamental Christian teaching and its failure to recognise and reject immoral behaviour amongst its members.

Paul used three analogies to describe Christian development and growth: a building, a battle and a body. The analogy of the building is in chapter three, in which the Apostle said, in effect, that an unfinished building is an eyesore, and told his readers to finish what he began and to take care how they should build. The image of the battle is in chapter nine, and alludes to the brutal boxing matches of the Isthmian games. Paul said that an unfinished contest was a waste of time and a loss, and exhorted his readers to go on to the crown, that is, to be victorious. The analogy of the body is the theme of chapter twelve, and there Paul said that a non-functioning body was a tragedy, and a non-co-operative body was suicide. He was beginning to deal with the church's misuse of the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit, and told the members not to cause disunity in the church by desiring selfishly to possess the showy gifts of the spirit such as speaking in foreign languages and healing the sick. The three analogies Paul used will be considered in more detail, when we come to them.

As we consider the problem of immaturity in the church at Corinth, it is important to understand what spiritual immaturity is not. In the first place it is not the lack of spiritual gifts. The Corinthians had all the gifts, as the Apostle said in 1 Corinthians 1:7 *"You are not missing out on any blessings (charismata) as you wait for him to return"* (CEV).

Immediately after acknowledging the presence of the charismata among them, Paul dealt with divisions in their midst. *"My dear friends, as a follower of our Lord Jesus Christ, I beg you to get along with each other. Don't take sides. Always try to agree in what you think"*. (1 Corinthians 1:10; CEV). What the Apostle said is that spiritual gifts and spirituality are not one and the same.

In the second place, immaturity is not, nor is it caused by, lack of learning. The Corinthians were great admirers of education and knowledge, and Paul cautioned them along these lines in chapters one and two. In 1 Corinthians 3:18 and 19 he counselled the Corinthians to gain wisdom from the right source, that is, from the Lord and His chosen Apostles and disciples, because the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. Again, in 2 Corinthians 10:5 Paul said that the believer had to capture people's thoughts and lead them to obey Christ. So, gaining a better spiritual education, while being admirable and desirable, is not the answer to spiritual immaturity.

Thirdly, immaturity does not come about because of a lack of good teaching. The Corinthians had the best of teachers, Paul, Aquila and Priscilla, Silas and Timothy, and Paul said he gave them the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 2:7), that is, words given to him by the Holy Spirit.

“But God has given us his Spirit. That’s why we don’t think the same way that the people of this world think. That’s also why we can recognise the blessings that God has given us. Every word we speak was taught to us by God’s Spirit, not by human wisdom. And this same Spirit helps us teach spiritual things to spiritual people” (1 Corinthians 2:12 and 13; CEV).

So it was that the Corinthians had all the gifts, were well taught in the Word, and had the best of teachers, but in spite of these great privileges, they remained carnal minded and babes.

So how do we know that the Corinthians were immature? We know that this was the case through Paul's letters.

Evidences of Immaturity

1. The first evidence of immaturity is selfishness. The Corinthians were suing one another in the secular courts because they considered that they were being defrauded (1 Corinthians 6: 1 to 8). They were misusing their Christian liberties with no thought of the effect that misuse would have on others.

Further evidence of selfishness was the eating or not eating food offered to idols. Paul gave clear advice to the Corinthians on this subject in 1 Corinthians 8, and his advice occupied the whole chapter. The believer is free to eat or not eat food offered to idols, but if such eating causes a fellow-believer, whose conscience is weak, to stumble and perhaps fall, the matter has serious consequences, as the Apostle said.

“Don’t cause problems for someone with a weak conscience, just because you have the right to eat anything. You know all this, and so it doesn’t bother you to eat in the temple of an idol. But suppose a person with a weak conscience sees you and decides to eat food that’s been offered to idols. Then what you know has destroyed someone Christ died for. When you sin by hurting a follower with a weak conscience, you sin against Christ. So if I hurt one of the Lord’s followers by what I eat, I will never eat meat as long as I live” (1 Corinthians 3:9 to 13; CEV).

The Corinthians were behaving selfishly at their meetings by eating and drinking and having a meal together, and somehow confusing this practice with the observance of the Lord’s supper. Paul had to set them straight on this matter and did so in 1 Corinthians 11: 20 to 32.

The selfishness of the Corinthians was further seen in their misunderstanding and misuse of the miraculous gifts of the Spirit. They were using the gifts for self-aggrandisement, and Paul devoted three whole chapters, 1 Corinthians 12, 13 and 14, in order to deal adequately with this matter.

2. The second symptom of spiritual immaturity is division. The Corinthians were divided amongst themselves over personalities, and spoke of different divisions, the 'Paul' party, the 'Apollos' party, the 'Peter' party, and the 'Christ' party in 1 Corinthians 1:12. Paul took up this matter more fully in 1 Corinthians 3: 1 to 9.

There is, of course, a time and place for division. In 1 Corinthians 10: 20 and 21, the church was commanded not to have fellowship with those who worship devils. Further, in 2 Corinthians 6: 14 to 17, believers were commanded to avoid unrighteousness, darkness, impurity, idols and the unclean. But there is not a word about believers separating themselves from fellow-believers over personalities, such division being evidence of spiritual immaturity.

3. A third symptom of immaturity at Corinth was criticism. It seems that the majority deprecated Paul because they thought that they had outgrown him and outdistanced him spiritually. Paul wrote, *“It doesn’t matter to me if I am judged by you”* (1 Corinthians 4:3). But in 1 Corinthians 4:8 he introduced cutting satire; *“Are you already satisfied? Are you now rich? Have you become kings while we are still nobodies? I wish you were kings. Then we could have a share in your kingdom”*. The attitude of those people is seen in a quotation from them which Paul used in defending his apostleship. *“Some of you are saying “Paul’s*

letters are harsh and powerful. But in person, he is a weakling and has nothing worth saying". This was caustic and contemptible criticism, a mark of spiritual immaturity.

4. The fourth symptom of immaturity and lack of spiritual development was the Corinthians' toleration of evil in the church. They saw nothing wrong with resorting to secular courts for settlement of disputes. Blatant immorality among church members did not disturb them. Indulgence in sins of the flesh, from which they had been set free at the beginning, was widespread and accepted. Gluttony and drunkenness were practised with meetings to observe the Lord's Supper.

In spite of these deplorable failings, the Corinthians believed they had achieved a spiritual stature, evidenced by the presence of spiritual gifts (mainly speaking in foreign languages) which placed them, in their own estimation, above the other churches and above Paul.

It was to correct the failings outlined above, and to halt the downward slide of the church, that Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthian church.

Paul must have felt deep disappointment in having to write as he did to a congregation on which he had devoted so much time and effort, a church arrested in development, charismatic in practice, immoral in living and heretical in doctrine.

Unfortunately Paul did not succeed. The limited knowledge that has come down to us of the church at Corinth is of an assembly which continued the course described in the letters and eventually died with the city.

CONCLUSION

But Paul's letters, inspired by the Holy Spirit, live on, warning, teaching and correcting us who live now in a similar environment to ancient Corinth. It is our Christian duty to learn from Paul's inspired words, and to obey the Spirit's counsel given to him by the Lord for all true Christians to benefit throughout the Gospel Age, and everyone in the age to come.

We should always bear in mind the words of the Lord Jesus to the crowds who had gathered to hear His sermon on the mount. He said these words specifically to His disciples when He spoke. *"You are like salt for everyone on earth. But if salt no longer tastes like salt, how can it make food salty? All it's good for is to be thrown out and walked on. You are like light for the whole world. A city built on top of a hill can't be hidden,*

and no-one would light a lamp and put it under a clay pot. A lamp is placed on a lampstand, where it can give light to everyone in the house. Make your light shine, so that others will see the good that you do and will praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5: 13 to 16; CEV).

Jesus meant that His church should be “*salt*” and “*light*” in the world, salt being a source of preservation to hold decay in check, and light to dispel darkness and cause the truth of the Gospel message to shine for all to see. Our Lord went on to say that when salt loses its taste it is worthless, and light hidden under a clay pot is no hindrance to darkness.

And so it was that the church at Corinth, instead of holding evil in check, was overcome by it, and instead of giving light for all to see, persisted in darkness. It was God’s desire for the Corinthian church to make its mark on the city, but instead the city of Corinth made its mark on the church, and the church eventually perished in darkness and oblivion.



THE PROPHET ELIJAH

Paper presented by Darryl Roe

There are a lot of lessons that we can learn from the Old Testament prophets. But what constitutes a prophet? William Wordsworth once said that a prophet was ‘one on whom truths do rest, which we are toiling all our lives to find’. The Macquarie dictionary has a number of meanings for the word ‘prophet’: ‘one who speaks for God;’ ‘a Divinely inspired revealer;’ ‘a member of a band of religious ecstasies, believed in ancient Israel to be wonder-workers, soothsayers or possessors of clairvoyance’. The Hebrew word for ‘prophet’ is derived from a verb signifying ‘to bubble forth’ like a fountain. Just as a fountain has pure, fresh, life-giving water gushing from it, so the pure words of truth bubble forth out of the mouths of all of God’s prophets.

The purpose of this presentation is to remind you of what happened many years ago in the days of the prophets, and also to stimulate your hearts towards a greater appreciation of the wisdom and power of our Heavenly Father who watches over us every day.

The Apostle Peter wrote that prophecy did not have its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were moved, or carried along, by the Holy Spirit; *“For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.”*

(2 Peter 1:21). In the next verse Peter stated that there were false prophets among the people, and he went on to warn his readers that these are the ones who secretly introduce destructive heresies, and who exploit people with made-up stories, who bring the way of truth into disrepute, because many begin to follow their shameful ways (2 Peter 2:1-2).

If we go back to the time of Israel as a nation, we can see that God was watching over His special people, just as He is doing today. When the Levitical priesthood sank into a state of degeneracy, because many had become quite corrupt, God introduced another order in Israel, the prophetic order, beginning with Samuel.

Just as the Levitical priesthood was intended to purify the hearts of the people, so the prophetic order was brought in to try to maintain a healthy spiritual and moral character amongst the Kings of Israel. Beginning in the days of Samuel, training centres were set up where promising young students were trained for the office which they were later destined to fill. These training centres were in places such as Ramah, Bethel, Jericho and Gilgal in the days of the Kings. The chief subject of study was the law and its interpretation. Other subjects were music and sacred poetry. As time went on, other prophets arose who did not strictly belong to this prophetic order. Among these were the prophets Amos and Elijah, both of whom were men who lived in the desert country.

Although there were a large number of prophets in Israel, only sixteen have books attributed to them in the Old Testament record, and of those sixteen only four have been considered to have performed major work: Isaiah; Jeremiah; Ezekiel and Daniel. The prophets of God were considered to be national poets, annalists, historians, preachers of patriotism, morality and the law. They were also looked upon as pastoral and political leaders and instruments through whom God's will and purposes were made known.

Looking back we can see what God was trying to achieve through His prophets. Many of the lessons are still applicable to us today. The prophets endeavoured to save Israel from the worshipping of idols. They tried to prevent wickedness and corruption. They warned the Kings of both the northern and the southern kingdoms that God would take action against them if they did not change their ways. Both kingdoms were told that they were about to be overrun by more powerful nations.

God's prophets predicted that a remnant, or very small number of them would survive. They predicted that from this remnant would come a

Messiah, a Deliverer – their Redeemer. The prophets foresaw a time in the future when a Kingdom of righteousness and peace would be set up - an everlasting Kingdom under the rulership of a King sitting on the throne of David, who belonged to the tribe of Judah. Although often couched in symbolic language, very vivid and specific descriptions of these future events were announced.

For example, we have the following statements:

"The sceptre shall not depart from Judah" (Genesis 49:10). The sceptre was the golden rod borne in the King's hand as an emblem of power and authority.

"There shall come a star out of Jacob" (Numbers 24:17). A star was a symbol of great significance and of Divine origin.

"Thou art my Son. This day have I begotten Thee" (Psalm 2:7). [The word begotten means to bring into existence.]

"Thou Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small..out of you will come a ruler over Israel" (Micah 5:2)

"He was despised and rejected of men. He was despised and we esteemed Him not" (Isaiah 53:3).

"They shall look upon Me whom they have pierced" (Zechariah 12:10).

"Neither wilt Thou suffer Thy Holy One to see corruption" (Psalm 16:10).

"He shall see the travail of His soul and be satisfied" (Isaiah 53:11).

"Sit Thou at My right hand till I make Thine enemies thy footstool" (Psalm 110:1).

"I create a new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not come into mind" (Isaiah 65:17).

This prophetic period lasted about 500 years. For 500 years the people of Israel were reminded of God's watching care over them. Time and again they provoked Him to anger with their wickedness and idolatry. Sometimes the prophets themselves were able to reason with God and get Him to reduce an intended punishment. Some prophets actually saw the Lord in vision sitting upon His throne. Others experienced the brightness and power of His angels talking to them. To some of them God gave miraculous powers, to others He gave visions of the future. To others again God gave great wisdom and the understanding of dreams and events which would soon take place. There were times when the prophet knew very little about what he was told to pronounce, but in most cases the relationship with God was very close, so close, in fact, that a prophet would rather die than disobey the Lord's command.

The Kings over Israel were mostly disobedient and weak. After Saul came David, who was an excellent King in every respect. Solomon followed after David, but then the people rebelled due to very high taxes and corruption amongst the leadership. The nation was divided in two kingdoms. Ten tribes formed the northern kingdom, called Israel, ruled by Jeroboam, and two tribes formed the southern kingdom, called Judah, ruled by Rehoboam. Samaria became the capital in the north and Jerusalem became the capital in the south. As a political measure, to keep the kingdoms separate, Jeroboam brought in calf-worship, which was practised in Egypt. Later, when Omri came to the throne in 886 BC, not only did he build many lavish buildings and palaces, but he also introduced the Phoenician gods Baal and Asherath, the mother goddess.

When Omri died, his son Ahab came to the throne of Israel. Ahab was a weak King. He fell in love with a Phoenician princess, the daughter of Ethbaal, king of Tyre, and married her. It was the biggest mistake of his life. From that moment on, his wife, Jezebel, controlled Ahab's life. She made him build a huge, expensive temple to Baal, one which housed 400 priests. He also built a second ivory palace, a number of cities, and a special grove dedicated to the 450 priests of Asherah, or Astarte, the pagan Goddess. So influential was Jezebel, and so submissive was Ahab, that any prophet of God who spoke against her was immediately put to the sword. It was at this point that Elijah came on the scene. Elijah came from Tishbe, a small rather deserted area in Gilead, 55 km east of Samaria, on the other side of the Jordan River.

Elijah's name means 'My God is Jehovah [Yahweh]'. Elijah, it is said, was a very romantic character. Gilead, where Elijah lived, was a dry, rocky region. He was a child of the desert who rarely visited a city. His head was covered with thick, black hair which ran right down his back, and he was clothed with a skin girdle. In the winter he had an additional sheepskin mantle for extra warmth.

The Lord chose this man from the desert to carry out His plans to restore the little nation back to the true worship of Himself. It is not known why God did not choose a prophet from Bethel, Ramah, Jericho, or Gilgal. Perhaps Elijah's knowledge of the desert region was the telling factor in his selection.

Elijah, dressed only in a loin-cloth and sandals, journeyed over the Jordan to Samaria, to the ivory palace of King Ahab, to deliver the Lord's message to the King. *"As the God of Israel lives, whom I serve, there shall neither be dew nor rain these years except by my word,"* he said

(1 Kings 17:1). After saying these words, Elijah immediately left the palace, journeyed back to Gilead, and at the word of the Lord hid himself in a quiet desert area by the brook Cherith, South of Tishbe. The Lord said to Elijah, *"You will drink from the brook and I have ordered the ravens to feed you there"* (1 Kings 17:2). And the ravens fed Elijah bread and meat both morning and night each day, and he drank from the brook until it was dry.

The waters which we drink are the waters of truth from the lips of the Lord. The bread which we eat and share is the bread which came down from above, whose body was broken for us for the remission of our sins. God, who has power over the ravens and all creatures around us, has also promised us joint heirship with His Son, guaranteeing our redemption by means of the seal of His Spirit within, like a living fountain of water within us.

Some time later there was a widow of Zarephath, near Sidon in Phoenicia, whom the Lord contacted to let her know that Elijah the prophet would be coming and would ask for food and for drink after his long, dry journey. The woman was prepared for Elijah when he arrived, but because of the drought, she had only a mere handful of flour and a little oil in the house. Elijah was not perturbed. *"Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'The jar of flour will not fail and the jug of oil will not be spent until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth'"* (1 Kings 17:14)

There is another lesson here for us. The lesson is that the Lord always provides food for His people, and the most important food is the Word of God. As strangers in a foreign land, like Abraham, we look for a city whose builder and maker is God. He has promised never to leave us or forsake us and the good work He has begun in us. He is also able to complete in us and bring us into His glorious Kingdom which is to bless all the families of the earth.

After a while the young son of the widow became ill and died. Here was a test of Elijah's faith as a prophet of God. *"'What have you against me, O Man of God, to cause the death of my son,' she said"* (1 Kings 17:18). Elijah took the boy in his arms and went up into the upper room where he had been sleeping. He laid the boy on his bed. He stretched himself over the boy three times and cried up to the Lord. The Lord heard his cry and immediately brought the boy back to life. *"'Now I know that you are a man of God and that the Word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth,' she said"* (1 Kings 17:24).

But one who is greater than Elijah has come, and all that are in their graves shall hear His voice and shall come to life – a wonderful prospect for the whole human race who are currently groaning and travelling in sickness and in pain.

When the time had come for the drought to end, Elijah returned to see King Ahab. This time Elijah issued a challenge to Ahab and his 850 priests and prophets of Baal and Asherah a challenge which Ahab felt obliged to accept. They were all to go 70 km north to the top of Mount Carmel and sacrifice a young bull on an altar. Each was to call upon his god to supply the fire for the sacrifice. The true god who provided the fire would be the only true God to worship. Ahab and all the people agreed, and the sacrifices and the altars were prepared. When the bull was ready the priests of Baal began to sing and chant. Then they began to dance; but still no fire appeared. They began to cut themselves with their knives and tried prophesying; all to no avail. No fire came upon the sacrifice.

Then it was Elijah's turn. He collected 12 large stones, representing the 12 tribes of Israel. He built an altar and laid the bull on some sticks. Three times he poured water over the animal and the altar. He called upon the Lord to answer. Immediately fire from the Lord came down upon the sacrifice, burning everything in its path and evaporating all the water within minutes. The people stood astonished as Elijah ordered that all Baal's priests and prophets be put to the sword (1 Kings 18: 15 to 40).

Only God, who first created fire and earth and wind and water, can re-create at any moment whatever element that He may choose. Other gods are mere products of men's imaginations, and they are of no use to their worshippers.

After this, an amazing thing happened. Elijah prayed seven times to ask the Lord for rain. Finally, Elijah could see black clouds appearing in the distance. It wasn't long before torrential rain began to fall as King Ahab and his men rode back to Jezreel, some 40 km, only to be overtaken by Elijah himself, who was running on foot in the power and strength of the Lord all the way. However, when Jezebel found out what had happened to her priests and prophets, she vowed revenge, forcing Elijah to flee for his life into the desert.

After a few days Elijah reached the Mount Horeb region in the south. He was exhausted. He dropped to the ground and asked the Lord to take his life. Somehow he had become disillusioned with his mission and purpose. Somehow he thought that his efforts had not been successful after all.

There is a lesson for us too. We also can tend to lose direction. We need the strength of the Lord to help us back on the right track. We must learn to wait on the Lord and He will help us.

Elijah suddenly heard a mighty whirlwind coming around the mountain. The whole mountain rocked and some of its rocks began breaking up. Following this came a great earthquake. The ground trembled violently and the trees shook. Then Elijah started to feel the fierce heat of a roaring fire which began to burn the vegetation around him. He knew that he was in the presence of the Lord and he fell to his knees, placed his cloak over his head and listened. He heard a still, small voice. The voice whispered, *"Elijah, what are you doing here?"*

" 'The Israelites have rejected your Covenant, broken down your altars, put your prophets to death, and I am the only one left,' he said. 'Go back and anoint Hazael King of Aram and Jehu King over Israel and Elisha who will succeed you as prophet, and I have reserved 7000 whose knees have not bowed down to Baal,' the Lord said" (1 Kings 19: 13 to 18). So Elijah obeyed the Lord and went back.

Later, King Ahab ignored the prophet of the Lord's command with regard to Ben-Hadad, King of Aram, by sparing his life. Then Ahab and Jezebel conspired in the cruel murder of Naboth, the vineyard owner. God told Elijah to condemn the King for his disobedience. Within three years Ahab was killed in battle, his son, Ahaziah, died after falling through a palace lattice, and Jezebel was thrown out of the palace where her body was trampled on by horses, ending her wicked reign.

When King Ahaziah fell through the lattice, he ordered his men to consult Baal-zebub to see if he was about to die. But Elijah was told to rebuke the King, so he sent 50 men out to get Elijah, saying, *"Man of God, the King says, 'Come down.' Elijah replied, 'If I am a Man of God, may fire consume you and your 50 men.'"* (2 Kings 1: 9 and 10). Then fire came down and consumed them all. The King sent another 50 men. Elijah again caused fire to come down and consume them all. When the King sent another 50 an angel of the Lord told Elijah to tell the King that he would not leave the bed he was lying in. And so Elijah was obedient to God. God protected Elijah from harm, and God knew the heart condition of King Ahaziah.

In Revelation chapter 2 Jezebel's influence is mentioned again, this time amongst the Church at Thyatira. They were warned to have nothing to do with her unholy practices. Today's world has many similar practices,

including immorality, idol-worship, materialism, humanism and the worship of worldly things which draw people away from God.

Elijah anointed Elisha as his successor. He placed his cloak over him while he was in the field ploughing with his oxen. Elisha immediately slaughtered the animals, burnt their yokes, gave all the meat away to the villagers, and quickly followed Elijah everywhere he went. Elijah came to the Jordan river. He struck the water with his cloak and they both crossed on dry ground. As they were walking, Elisha heard a great rushing sound. He looked up, and there in the sky were the Lord's horses and a chariot of fire which had come to take Elijah away. Just as the chariot rushed past, Elijah was snatched up into the air. His cloak dropped to the ground as Elisha just stood there astonished and bedazzled. In a moment they were all gone. Elijah was never seen again. His body was not found. A remarkable end to the life of a remarkable man.

The Apostle Paul told the Thessalonians that at the Lord's return many will be caught up to be with the Lord in that day. It was to be straight after the sleeping saints were raised from their graves, so that both groups would actually meet the Lord in the air, and they would then remain with Him forever. What a wonderful day that will be.

The northern kingdom of Israel lasted only 130 years after Elijah. Every one of its 19 Kings walked in the same path as Jeroboam, worshipping idols. Finally, in 721 BC, the Assyrians under Sargon II surrounded and destroyed Samaria and took 29,000 Israelites captive, spreading them throughout the Assyrian empire and placing other people throughout the cities of Samaria. The southern kingdom of Judah survived another 135 years before it, too, collapsed, this time at the hands of the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar. In both cases, idol-worship was the Israelites' problem. It was Ezekiel who pronounced the following words to Zedekiah, the last King: *"O profane and wicked Prince of Israel, whose day has come ... this is what the Sovereign Lord says. Take off the turban, remove the crown. It will not be as it was. A ruin. A ruin. I will make it a ruin. It will not be restored until He comes to whom it rightfully belongs. To Him I will give it"* (Ezekiel 21: 25 to 27).

In the next chapter of Ezekiel, the Lord said to Israel, *"I will disperse you among the nations and scatter you through the countries, and I will put an end to your uncleanness. When you have been defiled in the eyes of the nations, you will know that I am the Lord"*. Ezekiel 22: 15 and 16). It is interesting to note that since that day, the Jews have not worshipped

idols. In that message the Lord was looking far ahead to the Kingdom Age, for it will not be until then that the Jews will believe and accept the Lord and His anointed One who will rule in Zion, the New Jerusalem.

The writer to the Hebrews wrote of a wonderful reward that will be given to all the faithful prophets of old. They are to be made perfect, and will be God's representatives on the earth as part of His new administration. They are to be Princes in all the earth. They will have an important part in the New Heavens and the New Earth which will be established when Christ comes as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Since we have this wonderful knowledge about God's prophets and faithful ones, let us, as the writer said, throw off everything that hinders our progress, and the sin that so easily entangles our minds, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes upon Jesus, who is the author and perfecter of our faith, who, for the joy set before Him, endured the cross, scorning its shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. What an inspiration for each one of us to follow.

In Hebrews chapter 12 the writer reminds us of the comparisons between the Old Law Covenant which Israel made with God, and the New Covenant which is far superior because it has a greater High Priest who lives with God and has offered a superior sacrifice, shedding His blood to provide salvation for the whole world of mankind bringing eternal life to those who believe in Him. He wrote, *"You have not come to a mountain ... that is burning with fire ... to darkness, gloom, and storm ... you have come to Mount Zion, the Heavenly Jerusalem, the City of the Living God, to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, and to the Church of the Firstborn, whose names are written in heaven; to God, the judge of all men: to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, and to Jesus, the Mediator of the New Covenant"*. (Hebrews 12: 18 to 24).

The writer to the Hebrews said, *" ... you have come to Mount Zion"*, meaning that each of us, with our spiritual vision, can see all these things about to take place as part of God's Divine Plan for man's redemption from sin and death. It is our hope to be with our Lord, as we strive to be found acceptable to Him and, hopefully, to be joint-heirs with Him on the Spiritual plane together with His Bride. The whole world waits, and while it waits, it groans and travails in pain prior to the manifestation of the Sons of God, when victory will swallow up death and our faith will overcome the world, just as Jesus' faith overcame the world. There will be no greater joy than for us to see our Lord Jesus as He is.

A REVELATION

Colin Giles

This is not intended as a review of the whole of the book of Revelation, but as a consideration of one particular series of visions where information is scattered throughout the book. I have attempted to bring together all the pieces which refer to the same subject.

Understanding the book of Revelation is quite difficult, with symbols and figures and strange beings given to portray a hidden meaning. Only in the book of Daniel do we find something that is of the same pattern, although we are not unfamiliar with the portrayal of characters like that which appears in the book of Revelation because they are found in political cartoons in particular, with figures depicting a hidden meaning. Well-known ones are Uncle Sam depicting America and John Bull representing Britain. Children's books and fables use a similar style of writing. There are blessings to be found in trying to understand this book which reveals the things that will soon take place. There is also a blessing to those who read aloud the words of the prophecy as stated in the opening words of this book, and there are blessings to those who hear and keep what is written therein.

In proceeding to try to understand the figures in the revelation, I have set out for myself a number of conditions or principles that I think should be applied to make some sense of the whole book. These are:

1. Try to find the best reading of the words and to try to understand their intent. We have help in this by referring to different versions.
2. Identify the similarities of events and prophecies that occur in the Old Testament, such as references to Babylon and its predicted future. Refer also to the Old Testament where the quotations are taken from events that have a similar background.
3. Note when a meaning is given by such phrases 'who is' or a plainness of speech is used. A phrase such as 'who is' defines exactly what is being talked about.
4. There is a similarity to understanding parables by the principle that if the simple sense makes sense then a more complicated interpretation should not be sought.
5. To understand Revelation we also need to have a knowledge of history to consider how the visions could be understood, always searching and trying to understand whether there is something better, so continue to listen to what others have to say.

Considering the book of Revelation as a whole and dividing it by the style of the messages given, there are :- (1) the messages to the seven churches, and (2) the things that shall be, which is the major part.

This second part opens with the vision of heaven and the heavenly worship, followed by the seven seals and further detailed information about that vision. The seventh seal is opened in a following chapter. Then follows the visions of the seven mystic figures, which are strange beings.

This vision does not progress in a straightforward way as there are interludes of angelic messengers bringing information, combined with the seven bowls of wrath and judgments of great Babylon. In conclusion there is an epilogue of our Lord saying that he would come soon.

Because of the many and varied visions of beings that are presented to us, the opening words of Hebrews come to mind; "*In many and varied ways God spake of old to our fathers by the prophets*". So the many and varied visions cover a variety of subjects.

If we understand correctly, the basic message of Revelation is for the church to be faithful as well as revealing the conditions of things which are going to happen on the earth. In the opening verses, there is a blessing coming from reading the message and hearing it. Those messages were given in particular to meet the challenges that were to face the church.

Another conclusion that I draw from this book as a whole is that it doesn't progress in a single line. It doesn't stay on one subject, but there are some interruptions to the story line to explain some part of the vision in more detail. It very much reminds me of the novels by Charles Dickens in which he had two or three sub-plots running through, and it wasn't until you got to the end of the novel that all the threads were drawn together to come to one grand outcome.

Throughout Revelation I notice that there are also interludes or breaks in the vision to explain some detail or to reinforce some explanation that has already been given, or to introduce new figures whose connection with the vision is not immediately evident.

It is the vision of the seven mystic figures of chapters 12, 13 and part of 14 that I want to concentrate on particularly in this presentation. So, to give an outline of this vision before discussing the detail, I will quickly summarise the important figures of that vision.

It begins with revealing a woman clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet, and she is wearing a crown of twelve stars, and is with child. Next we see a great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns, and his action is

that his tail hurls a third of the stars to earth and is ready to devour the child that is to be born.

Next we see a male child born that is caught up to heaven which makes the dragon somewhat angry. We see a particular reference about that male child who is to rule the nations with a rod of iron, and the next event is Michael and his angels fight against the dragon and the dragon is cast out of heaven and makes war against the woman. Her reaction is to flee into the wilderness for 1260 days. There is an angel named Michael referred to in Daniel 10:13.

The main thing to notice then is the beast from the sea, having seven heads and ten horns and ten diadems on the horns. There are blasphemous names on those heads and the appearance of the beast is like a leopard, has the feet of a bear and the mouth of a lion. One head is mortally wounded but is healed and it is perhaps, I think, again referred to in Revelation 17:8, described as "*Was, is not and is to ascend from the bottomless pit*", which I think corresponds to being mortally wounded but then healed and ascends from the bottomless pit. The action of the dragon is to give his power to this beast to wage war against the saints.

The other part of that vision that I want to concentrate on is the beast from the earth which had two horns as a lamb and face of a dragon. Its activity is to exercise the authority of the first beast that rises from the sea and makes the inhabitants of the earth worship that beast, working great signs and wonders and bids them make an image of that first beast and gives breath to that image. Concluding the image of the figures, we have the lamb on Mt. Zion with 144,000, and they are singing with the voice of many waters, loud thunders and like harps playing.

I'll now go through some of those details and explain how I have tried to understand them.

The Dragon

To me, the figure of the dragon is identified in Revelation 20:2 by the words, "*that ancient serpent who is the devil and Satan*". This is a plain statement which defines the great red dragon as Satan, or the devil. Certainly the character of this figure is in line with that of Satan.

The Woman

We see the woman with the male child ready to be delivered. I'm a little uncertain how to define this woman. To me, the male child is fairly well identified as he who is to rule the nations with a rod of iron and is caught up to God and His throne. This is a clear quotation from Psalm 2:9, which speaks of ruling the world with a rod of iron, and in this section of Psalms it is clearly Messianic.

But how does the woman fit in to that picture? She flees into the wilderness for 42 months, which is the time the church suffers persecution. The work of establishing the church is generally considered the work of Christ, so how could it be said that Christ comes from the church in this picture?

My suggestion would be that it was from the nation of Israel that Christ came in the sense of Romans 9: 4 and 5; *"Who 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"*. It was from that nation of Israel that Christ came. Also, in Acts 7:38, when Stephen was defending himself, he explained that it was from the congregation then standing before Sinai from which a great prophet would come. Stephen is clearly identifying this prophet with Christ. The word translated 'congregation' also has the sense of a church - 'a gathering of people'. In Greek this word has a fairly wide meaning, although we generally think of it as a particular gathering for God's service.

The Beast

Then we have the beast from the sea. We know that empires are very often represented by animals, shown by references in Daniel chapter 7 where Daniel has a vision of four beasts arising from the sea. These beasts are later explained as representing kingdoms. The first beast looked like an eagle, the second was like a bear, the third was like a leopard with four wings of a bird, and the fourth was terrible and dreadfully strong. These beasts are identified for us in Daniel as the kingdoms of Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome, respectively. So when we see this rather unusual beast in the vision in Revelation, which has a body combining all these characteristics, the vision tells me that all the different natures found in those ancient kingdoms are found in this one kingdom depicted as arising from the sea. You might ask how all these nations can exist in one kingdom, but we see the combination of that one kingdom existing at the same time in Nebuchadnezzar's dream in which the image of a man with a head of gold, breast and arms of silver, and legs and toes of iron and clay all exist together when that stone cut out of the mountain strikes the image on the feet. In that picture also, characteristics of past empires exist together.

Horns

There is an imagery of horns representing kings, also found in the book of Daniel chapter 7. What I note about the kingly beast is that it is given a mouth speaking haughty and blasphemous things, which identifies this beast with the Roman Empire because the emperor was promoted as a god. Generally when Rome conquered a nation it was tolerant of that nation's religious practices, and generally worked through the established ruling powers. However, the Christians refused to obey the law that all citizens had to sacrifice to traditional Roman gods and acknowledge Caesar as Lord. (It

is interesting to note that those who sacrificed were given a certificate, 'libelli' in Latin, as in our word meaning 'libellous'. Also Rome promoted the adoration of the Roman state, the 'Pax Romana' (Roman peace), which they considered was the gift of the gods and any dissent from acknowledging that was treason. When Alaric the Hun sacked Rome it was said that 'the city which has taken the whole world is itself taken'. Some pagans claim that the catastrophe was due to forsaking the old gods, and Augustine countered this accusation by writing his book, 'The City of God', which had a profound effect on theological thought up to this day.

The Beast from the Earth

This beast exhibits the same characteristic as that of the first beast in that it speaks proud and haughty things. Of note is that the first beast is not destroyed to accommodate this next beast, so the conclusion is that the rulership continues under a different guise.

However, there are some differences from that first beast in that it has only two horns like a lamb, indicating a softening of its violent behaviour. The first beast arising from the sea indicates the source from which that power comes, because in Revelation 17:15 waters are defined as people and multitudes and nations and tongues. The second beast from the earth suggests it has a milder manner. Further action of these beasts is given in Revelation 16:13; *"And I saw three unclean spirits like frogs come out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet"*. These spirits, performing signs, go abroad to the kings of the whole world to assemble them to a battle.

The False Prophet

You could say that by mentioning a false prophet in Revelation 16:13 in association with the dragon and the first beast, an extra complication is introduced. However, in Revelation 19:20 we read; *"And the beast was captured and with it the false prophet by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who had worshipped his image"*. This description of the false prophet is identical with that of that second beast which had been previously described as making fire come down from heaven and by the signs which it allowed to work in the presence of the beast deceived those that dwell on the earth. So both of them deceive those who dwell on the earth so identifying the Beast from the earth as the same as the false prophet. Perhaps this adds extra detail rather than complicated the introduction of a new figure.

Birds

We also note that later on only the first beast and this false prophet are cast into the fiery pit, the lake of fire. The doom of both these beasts is shown in Revelation 19:17 where all the birds that fly in heaven are to come together for the great supper of God. They eat the flesh of kings, captains, mighty

men, horse and riders. This is after an invitation to the armies of the world to gather together when the false prophet and beast are captured. Perhaps we need to go into more detail in the image (symbolism) of the punishment or destiny that these two powers are to suffer.

The Duo of Beasts

To identify in particular who the figures symbolise, I would understand that the beasts are part of the Roman Empire, on the basis that animals represent empires. Concerning which part of the Roman Empire, I would say that the first beast is that part of the Roman Empire that existed up to the time of Constantine. The second beast would be that established by Constantine, as it gave Christianity the support of the State and brought some humanity to the Empire. However, he brought some old principles of rulership with him, that is, control of religious practice with part of the function of government. Under the old system, the emperor was high priest and controlled the religious year. As I understand it, what Constantine did was that he took that position to hijack the Christian religion for his own purpose, and this example of taking on both a religious and political power supplied the pattern for the Papacy to adopt later. The Papacy started to gain power after the city of Rome was sacked by Attila the Hun in AD.410 and again in AD.429, when the Pope was able to take advantage of the power vacuum as the government of the Roman Empire was not in Rome at that time. It seems to me that the image of the first beast is commanded to be made answer to what the Papacy adopted.

The Harlot and Others

The only symbolic figure I have not discussed is the great harlot, referred to in Revelation chapter 17, who is seen sitting on the scarlet coloured beast . I wasn't confident that I had that overall picture correct. In some ways the harlot has some control over kingdoms of this earth, but those kingdoms are later said to turn on her. She is identified as Babylon the Great in Revelation 17:8, but the name is mentioned earlier without any identification as to where this symbol fits in during the messages from the angelic beings. There are a number of passages about this.

Perhaps I should also have mentioned that it is an image of the first beast that is commanded to be made by the second beast. This also seems to me to be referring to the Papacy, because it was an image of the beast by the fact that it took on both political and religious power. However I may have to consider that further.

For the image of the beast I tried to gather together all the references, and I hope I haven't made it too confusing of how I understand the system of the seven mystic figures.

I trust this may be of value, and help you in your understanding.

NEWS AND NOTES

Lois Beryl Williams

It is with sadness we report the death of Lois Williams, on Friday 3rd February, at the age of eighty-four. Lois was the sister of Joyce Thompson and Colin Giles. She is survived by her husband Ken and her daughters Julie and Wendy, and their families.

New Website

Our new website is now live, so please remove www.cbsm.org.au from your browser bookmarks and replace it with www.newcovenantfellowship.org.au. Most of our recent publications are available to be downloaded from the Publications and Downloads page; hard copies will still be available for those who prefer this format. All email enquiries should now be directed to info@newcovenantfellowship.org.au.

Autumn Conference

Our annual autumn conference this year is to be held from Friday 7th to Sunday 9th April at the Comfort Inn Main Lead in Ballarat, about 2 hours' drive from Melbourne.

Memorial Supper

The Memorial of the Lord's Supper will be held at 8.00 pm on Monday 10th April in the hall at Bayswater South Primary School, Enfield Drive, Bayswater. All Christian believers are welcome to attend. For further information contact info@newcovenantfellowship.org.au.

A Correction

In NCN No. 141 on page 10, in the paper "Jacob's Ladder", it is stated that '... all the Israelites were living under the terms of the Law Covenant'. This is incorrect because the Law Covenant was not established until more than four hundred years later. The author of the article apologises for this error, and thanks the readers who pointed out this mis-statement.

THE NEW COVENANT NEWS

The New Covenant News is compiled by an editor responsible to the New Covenant Fellowship. The thoughts expressed do not necessarily represent the opinions of all of the members of the group, and readers are requested to heed the words:
"Prove all things" (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

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