

# **THE NEW COVENANT NEWS**



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# PAUL'S LETTERS TO THE CORINTHIANS

## (Part 2)

### **SORTING AND ARRANGING PAUL'S INSPIRED LETTERS**

by Russell Collins

#### **Introduction**

As mentioned in the previous paper, in Paul's day Corinth was a city of commerce and prosperity, wealth and luxury, but also a hotbed of drunkenness, immorality and vice. Paul had to remind and caution his Christian converts about that social situation, and did so in 1 Corinthians 6: 9 to 11, *"Don't you know that evil people won't have a share in the blessings of God's kingdom? Don't fool yourselves! No one who is immoral or worships idols, or is unfaithful in marriage or is a pervert, or behaves like a homosexual, will share in God's kingdom. Neither will any thief or greedy person, or drunkard or anyone who curses and cheats others. Some of you used to be like that. But now the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and the power of God's Spirit have washed you and made you holy and acceptable to God"*. (CEV).

In that city of immorality and vice, some of Paul's greatest work was done, and some of the mightiest triumphs of Christianity were accomplished. Paul stayed longer in Corinth than in any other city except Ephesus. He had left Macedonia with his life in peril, and journeyed to Athens. He had little success there, and had moved on to Corinth, where he remained for about eighteen months. We realise how little has been recorded of Paul's work there when we find that the whole account of those eighteen or so months was compressed by Luke into seventeen verses (Acts 18: 1 to 17).

One event worthy of mention was that in AD 52 a new governor named Gallio was appointed to Corinth. Gallio was a person well known for his charm and gentleness. The Jews tried to take advantage of Gallio's new appointment and his good nature, and took Paul before him, charging Paul with teaching behaviour contrary to Jewish law. But Gallio was a Roman, and refused to have anything to do with the Jews' charges or take any action. So Paul was free to continue his work in Corinth before moving on to Syria.

## Collecting and Arranging Paul's Letters

When Paul was in Ephesus in AD 55, he learnt that all was not well in Corinth, and wrote a letter to the church there. On the basis of such evidence as we have, it seems that the correspondence to Corinth is not recorded in the correct order in the New Testament, and some of it may be missing. It is known by scholars and historians that it was not until about AD 90 that Paul's correspondence was collected and efforts were made to piece the fragments of papyrus together. In many congregations the letters, or fragments of them, must have existed only on scraps of papyrus, and piecing them together would have been difficult. So it seems that, when the letters to Corinth were collected, not all the pieces were discovered, and they were not always arranged in the correct order. This is suggested by the following information.

1. There was a letter which Paul wrote before 1 Corinthians, because in 1 Corinthians 5:9 he wrote, "*In my other letter I told you not to have anything to do with immoral people*" (CEV).

This clearly refers to a previous letter, which some scholars believe has been lost. Other scholars, however, believe that the previous letter is contained in 2 Corinthians 6:14 to 7:1. That passage certainly suits what Paul said he wrote about. If we take that passage out of its context and read straight on from 2 Corinthians 6:13 to 7:2 we get excellent sense and connection, as though that passage in question was included later and was not originally where collectors of Paul's writings put it. And so it is that some scholars call this passage "the previous letter".

We must remember and be aware that in Paul's letters, as in all the inspired books of Scripture, there were no chapter and verse divisions. The chapters in the Bible were not introduced until the thirteenth century, and the verses were not introduced until the sixteenth century, so the arranging of Paul's letters would have been difficult so early in the Gospel Age.

2. News had reached Paul from various sources about trouble in the Corinthian congregation.

- (a) News of disputes and disagreements went to him from members of Chloe's family (1 Corinthians 1: 11 and 12).
- (b) News was delivered by Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus during their visit to Ephesus (1 Corinthians 16: 17 and 18). These three believers were able to fill in the gaps in Paul's information.

- (c) Further news arrived in a letter in which the Corinthian congregation asked for Paul's guidance concerning a number of problems. In 1 Corinthians 7:1 Paul wrote, *"Now I will answer the questions that you asked in your letter"*. His answer is contained in 1 Corinthians which he sent to Corinth by the hand of Timothy, as he wrote in 1 Corinthians 4:17.

3. After the Corinthian church received Paul's letter, matters in the church became worse. Although we have no direct record of it, we can infer that Paul paid a personal visit to Corinth. In 2 Corinthians 12:14 he wrote, *"I am planning to visit you for the third time"*. So if there was a third time, there must have been a second time. We have the record of only one visit, the account of which appears in Acts 18: 1 to 17. We have no record of a second visit. In those days, however, it would have taken only two or three days to sail from Ephesus to Corinth, so such a journey would not have been considered to be a major undertaking at that time.

4. The visit to Corinth did not achieve anything for which Paul had hoped. Matters increased in bitterness, and failings in conduct resulted in Paul writing an extremely severe letter. We learn about that letter from 2 Corinthians 2:4. In that letter Paul said, *"At the time I wrote, I was suffering terribly. My eyes were full of tears, and my heart was broken."* (CEV).

In 2 Corinthians 7:8 Paul wrote, *"I don't feel bad any more, even though my letter hurt your feelings. I did feel bad at first, but I don't now. I know that the letter hurt you for a while"* (CEV). The censorious letter was the result of Paul's anguish of mind, and was so severe that Paul seemed sorry that he sent it.

Most scholars believe that chapters 10 to 13 of 2 Corinthians are the severe letter that Paul wrote to the Corinthians and became misplaced when Paul's letters were put together.

These are their reasons.

1. The severe letter cannot be 1 Corinthians or any part of it because this letter is not a tear-stained or deeply-anguished letter. When Paul wrote it, matters, on the whole, were being dealt with and were more or less under control.
2. But when we come to 2 Corinthians, we find a surprising situation. In chapters 1 to 9 everything appears to be resolved; there is complete reconciliation and all are friends again. But at chapter

10 there occurs a sudden change. Chapters 10 to 13 consist of the most heartbroken cry Paul wrote. The chapters show that he had been hurt and insulted as he had not been before or afterwards by any church. His appearance, his speech, his apostleship and even his honesty had all been under attack.

3. Most scholars maintain that to gain the actual chronological course of Paul's correspondence with Corinth, we ought to read chapters 10 to 13 of 2 Corinthians before chapters 1 to 9.
4. If 2 Corinthians chapters 10 to 13 constituted the severe letter that Paul wrote, it could have been sent to the Corinthians with Titus (2 Corinthians 2:13 and 7:13).
5. Paul was deeply concerned about this letter, and was eagerly waiting for Titus to come back with an answer. He set out to meet Titus as recorded in 2 Corinthians 2:13; 7:5 and 7:13. Somewhere in Macedonia, Paul met Titus and learned that all was well. Then, probably at Philippi, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians chapters 1 to 9 as a letter of reconciliation.

By considering these events and developments, we can gain an understanding of what 'the care of all the churches' must have meant to Paul.

### **SUMMARY OF THE CORINTHIAN CORRESPONDENCE**

This is an endeavour to summarise the probable chronology of the Corinthian correspondence from such records as are available.

1. "The previous letter", which may be contained in 2 Corinthians 6:14 to 7:1.
2. The arrival of the people from Chloe's household, of Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus, and of the letter to Paul from the Corinthian Church.
3. 1 Corinthians was written in reply and sent with Timothy.
4. The situation in Corinth grew worse, and Paul paid a personal visit to the church which was such a failure that it almost broke his heart.
5. In consequence the "*severe letter*" was written, which was almost certainly contained in 2 Corinthians chapters 10 to 13, and was sent off with Titus.
6. Anxious for an answer to his letter, Paul set out to meet Titus. Paul met him in Macedonia, learnt that all was well and wrote, probably from Philippi, 2 Corinthians chapters 1 to 9, the letter of reconciliation.

## CONCLUDING COMMENT

Christian believers should not be troubled by the fact that some of the matters discussed are not as clear or decisive as we might wish them to be. It is surely miraculous that Paul's inspired words, written nearly two thousand years ago on sheets of papyrus, and scattered in various churches throughout the Roman Empire, should have survived at all.

The survival of Paul's letters, with all their guiding moral and ethical principles, and all the exhortations and advice for Christian living acceptable to God at all times and in all places, has been overseen by God's protective providence. And so we have today advice and instruction relevant to our lives because God saw to it that all that was needful for Christians and their eternal salvation written by Paul so long ago would be available and accessible now and at all times to every sincere enquirer.



## FUTURE JUDGEMENT

by Colin Giles

When I proposed the theme of *The Kingdom Revealed in Parables*, I thought it should not present any problems in explaining them, but as I considered this sub-topic, I realised that the understanding of the parables required much thought. Understanding the main point of the parable may be straight-forward, but to establish the time of the application of the parable I found more difficult to determine. I consulted a number of books on the subject, but they did not all agree on the interpretation. So I present the following thoughts for you to make up your own minds.

### **Wheat and Weeds** (Matthew 13:24-30)

*"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' So the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'" (ESV).*

An explanation of the detail is given in verses 37 to 40;

*"And He said, 'The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, and the field is the world; and as for the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil one; and the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels. So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.'" (ESV).*

From this we can construct a table giving the correspondence between the parable and its interpretation.

Field	The World
Good Seed	Sons of the Kingdom
Sower of Good Seed	The Son of Man
Weeds	Sons of the Evil One, i.e. the Devil
Sower of the Weed	The Devil
Harvest	End of the Age
Harvesters	Angels

The concluding words of the parable are:

*"Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear."*

The lesson of the parable is somewhere in those concluding words, whereas the preceding words provide the setting. Also, the words of the servants and the master's reply are significant in that a line of action is suggested and reasons are given for an alternative line of action.

The first question to ask is what group of people is the parable about?

The fact that the parable covers the whole time period from the time that Jesus began preaching the good news till the end of the Age indicates that it is not about particular people but about the events that are going

on in the church as a whole. Ideas are sown like seeds by people, and they grow and lead to a life consistent with those ideas.

The advice of the master to delay the removing of the weeds is important in understanding the lesson of the parable. In the parable the work of the evil one becomes apparent only when the plant reaches maturity and the ears of wheat would be expected to form. In the interpretation of the parable the work of the evil one becomes apparent only when wrong thoughts have been preached and they have had time to develop. A premature attempt at removal of the weeds will cause untold damage to the wheat.

The parable teaches that while the plant is growing it can be difficult to tell the difference between weeds and the good plants. It is advice that the members of the church of God have not heeded at times and so have become impatient in maintaining the purity of the church. This is not to say that discipline is unnecessary in the Church of God, but that has to be done with love.

Perhaps the lesson for us can be summed up in the words of James 5:8-9; *"You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door."*

The concluding thoughts of the parable, where the angels are instructed to weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil, opens up the subject of how will God introduce His Kingdom or who will be the agents as indicated by the angels, but this topic will have to be left for another time.

The weeping and gnashing of teeth shows the disappointment of those who considered that they were acting for their master, and therefore the parable is limited to the church. It is not directed to the world in general.

Another aspect to the parable is, do we see at the present time the result of the work of the devil in sowing things that offend as becoming evident today? What are the influences that are making them apparent?

### **The Drag Net (Matthew 13:47-50)**

*"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the*



*evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”*

Although this parable also includes the matter of judgement, it is for a different purpose from that in the parable of the wheat and the weeds.

The essential items of this parable are:

1. A large fishing net is cast into the sea;
2. It gathers fish of every sort;
3. On the shore there is a sorting of the fish into:
  - (a) Good fish
  - (b) Worthless fish
4. Angels are introduced into the parable to do the sorting work;
5. Again there is a final sorting out between the good and the bad which causes disappointment.

However, in this parable there is no mention of a period of growth for the differences to become apparent as there was in the parable of the wheat and the weeds. This indicates that we should seek for a different interpretation of this parable.

We are familiar with the account of the calling of Simon (Peter) and Andrew to be disciples of Jesus, and Jesus' words "*I will make you fishers of men*" (Matthew 4:18,19). (Luke's account gives more detail about Peter's call in that it is linked with the miraculous draft of fishes in Luke 5:9-10.) The interpretation of the symbols of this parable would be that the preaching of the good news would attract all kinds of people and the sorting of who would be admitted to the kingdom would be at the end of the Age.

Although this interpretation of the meaning of the details of the parable is helpful, it may not explain why the parable was given or what its lesson was.

My understanding would be that Jesus was teaching His disciples that their job was to gather all sorts of people into the kingdom and not to determine what kind of people would be acceptable for entry into the Kingdom. From the information that we have in the gospels, Jesus followed that principle in that He spoke to both the rich and the poor, the outcasts, the foreigners, the educated and leaders of the people as well as those that had suffered misfortune and were seemingly not blessed by God.

The work of separating out those who will not meet the entry requirements will be the work of the angels. There have been some suggestions that the preaching of the truth has been a means of distinguishing the good from the worthless, and that the outworking of error within the church is now becoming apparent. However, I consider that that is not the lesson of these two parables.

It is also of interest that those who obtain the Lord's approval are called "righteous", at the end of verse 37. The word has the sense of being upright.

This message, based on the separation of sheep and goats, comes at the end of a chapter of lessons about judgements.

There are:

The Wise and Foolish Virgins	Law of judgement for all the members of church of Christ
The Talents	Lesson for all who would hold office or ministry in the church
The Sheep and the Goats	A lesson on judgement, but I've suggested that it concerns the heathen

### **Sheep and Goats** (Matthew 25:31-46)

The third parable that comes under the sub topic that is my subject is that of the sheep and the goats.

*"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left.*

*"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'*

*"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."*

The setting of this scene is of Jesus sitting on His throne of glory with all the nations gathered before Him and a separation between people as pictured by a shepherd separating his sheep from the goats. But the mention of sheep and goats occupies only a very short part of this teaching, as the lesson then passes beyond the region of a parable into Divine realities.

The picture of Jesus sitting on his throne of glory reminds us of one of the visions in the book of Daniel; *"I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. As for me, Daniel, my spirit within me was anxious, and the visions of my head alarmed me. I approached one of those who stood there and asked him the truth concerning all this. So he told me and made known to me the interpretation of the things."* (Daniel 7:13-16).

The setting where these words are found are when Daniel sees four wild beasts which are like a lion, a bear, a leopard and an animal that was terrible, powerful and exceedingly strong. These portray the four Kingdoms that were to rule the world of which the Jewish nation was a part. They were Babylonia, Persia, Greece and Rome.

The expression "Son of Man", as mentioned in Daniel, has an interesting background in that it is also found in other parts of the Old Testament, such as Psalms, Ezekiel and other prophets. The sense of the words is that they are expressing the generic weakness and frailty of man's nature. This use of the phrase in Daniel's prophecy gives a new direction to the word in that one who shared in man's weakness should be a sharer in God's glory and be the head of the divine Kingdom.

A comment needs to be made about the word "everlasting" in the words "*everlasting punishment*" in Matthew 25:46. In the KJV the Greek word so translated has not been translated consistently, as sometimes the word 'eternal' is used. From the reference works that I have consulted, it has the meaning of 'duration, either undefined but not endless, as in Romans 16:25, or undefined because endless as in Romans 16:26. In the parable just discussed, it is important to note that the nature of the punishment is not mentioned, but only that its effect is described as causing disappointment. It seems that it is not referring to the sentence that was passed or the condemnation given, but rather it is the consequence of the choice made.

The parable of the sheep and the goats starts with the picture of dividing one group from another, then moves to discuss the treatment of each group. This leads each group to question why they should be treated as such as they do not understand the reason for this action of either reward or disapproval. They are both told that it was because of their actions during their lives.

The meaning of the whole account is straight-forward, but the question is, to whom is this message directed? The other question is that there is no mention of faith being required in this parable but only good works to receive the reward of eternal life.

The answer to these questions that makes sense to me is found in the opening words of this parable. This I found during my research for the preparation of this presentation. The answer depends on how some words as given in the KJV should be translated.

*"Before him will be gathered all **the nations**"*, and the word of interest is the word translated "nations" in this phrase. There are reasons for changing the word to "gentiles", as they both come from the same Greek word, and the grammar would suggest the change. The message is therefore not directed towards the people of Israel, who at that time were God's people, but to all people outside that commonwealth of Israel. It gives the standard of conduct that will be the basis for judging those who have not heard the good news of salvation in Jesus.

To conclude my thoughts, I will mention that when I began writing this presentation I thought I understood the parables well, and as far as knowing the detail I was fairly confident, but as I considered the details and lessons they are teaching I realised that I had much to learn. It reminds me that in chapter 13 of Matthew, when Jesus had finished giving a series of parables He asked the disciples whether they understood all

that He had been saying, to which they replied, "Yes". And He said to them, *"Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."* The import of these words is that those that seek to proclaim the gospel, besides telling the well known stories, there is a need to seek out new truths which I have attempted to do.



## A SENSE OF WONDER

by Merv Buckmaster

### Introduction

Jesus spoke many things in parables to the disciples and to the crowds which followed Him (Matthew 13:3), and the disciples wondered why He spoke to them in parables. He replied to their query, *"Because you are permitted to know the secrets of the kingdom of the heavens; but to them (the crowds) this privilege it is not given"* (Matthew 13:11; Diaglott).

An overview of the parables shows that Jesus used everyday situations with which His hearers would be familiar, to illustrate concepts that pertained to the gospel message: the message that a new dispensation from God was about to be established. That overview is summarised in the definition of parables as 'earthly stories with heavenly meanings'.

Since all scripture was written for our learning (Romans 15:4) there can be no doubt that the parables are to teach those who read and study them. Ten parables begin with the phrase, *"The kingdom of heaven is like..."*, an introduction that makes them very attractive, because the kingdom is what Jesus taught His followers to pray for, each time that they responded to God's call to cast their cares on Him because He cared for them.

That call is still in operation. God still cares for His people; those who pray for the kingdom of heaven to be established on earth, and are willing to learn from the parables. We should wonder about them, learn from them; learn about the kingdom of heaven because it is the focus of the Christian hope, the hope that is secure in the promise of God of the reconstitution of all things (Acts 3:21), when He makes all things new (Revelation 21:5). This is one aspect of the kingdom as shown by the parables; that it is something to come; a new order that will be established according to God's timetable.

## The Parables

However, the kingdom of heaven is like ...

... the merchant looking for goodly pearls (Matthew 13), and when he found one that was very expensive he sold all his belongings so that he could afford to buy that pearl. Although a kingdom cannot be like a person, it can be something or provide something of great value, and in this case the pearl of great price has been identified by some as the kingdom of heaven itself. To make it worth everything to obtain the pearl, which represents a place in the kingdom, I think that it is the prize of the high calling. The merchant took action during his earthly life to obtain something of great value, something that would have little value for a life that would shortly end, but whose value would be realised in the future, so this parable teaches the need for immediate action for future reward.

The same may be said of the parable about the treasure hidden in a field (Matthew 13). The man who discovered the treasure sold everything so that he could buy the field and claim the treasure. Like the merchant, he also took immediate action; he did not wait for a future event to obtain the treasure.

The householder who hired labourers to work on his farm paid his workers at the end of the day, giving them all the same wage, irrespective of how long they had worked (Matthew 20). This parable also has an aspect concerning life before the kingdom of heaven comes to earth; action before reward, since the workers were paid at the end of the day for work that they had done.

Similarly, the king who arranged for his son's wedding and invited guests from all walks of life to the feast, sent out the invitation before the wedding feast took place, so that a positive response was needed to become a guest at that special event (Matthew 22). To the guests the invitation came first, the feast was future; as it is for us, the invitation to the kingdom is current, not in abeyance until the kingdom comes. The feast is future when the wedding feast of the Lamb will take place.

The parable of the talents (Matthew 25) teaches that talents should be put to good use during earthly life because of the benefit to come when the giver of the talents calls the recipients to give account of their activities in using their talents. Here again the lesson applies to the present time, because "... *every one of us shall give account of himself to God*", as found in Romans 14:12. The gospel age is the time of judgement for spiritual Israel; the kingdom age is the period of judgement for those of the second resurrection.

Thus the parables, the earthly stories with heavenly meanings, are also earthly stories with earthly applications, teaching that God now requires a positive response to His invitation, while at the same time guiding us, through Jesus' example, to that future kingdom of heaven.

The parables also indicate that the merchant, the man buying the field, the householder, the king and all those who give that positive response, gain temporary access to the kingdom and its peace of mind that Paul, John, James and Peter proclaimed in their epistles, summarised in Philippians 4:7, as the "... *peace of God that passeth all understanding*".

The parables, then, herald the call to the kingdom of heaven. They constitute a small part of Jesus' ministry, and that should make one wonder at their apparently diminutive status in scripture which is in contrast to the importance of their message. They are subsumed in the volume of the gospels and the Acts, the narratives of Jesus' life and work; and are relegated further by the thoroughness and power of the expositions of the gospel message set down by the apostles in their letters to the Jews and gentiles in the churches scattered around the Roman world of two thousand years ago. And they all, parables, gospels and epistles call to us who can read, learn and inwardly digest the words which God has preserved through the centuries of this gospel age.

Just as the parables, the gospels and the epistles make up part of the fabric of the scriptures, the most impressive part of its tapestry is the Old Testament. Its history, its persons of note, its miracles and its presage of what was to come, both for the Jews and for the world of the kingdom are eloquently condensed in Paul's declaration of the purpose of the Law Covenant where he wrote, concerning the Jews, that, "... *the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ*", according to Galatians 3:24. Although that purpose was primarily focussed on the Jews, it has been extended through the operation of the New Covenant to all the tribes and nations of earth.

Thus the message of the parables is reinforced by the gospels, and by the New Testament epistles, and powerfully elevated in significance by the Old Testament. Should we not wonder about the manner in which these several aspects of God's word claim our attention, demanding that we acknowledge the authority behind the truth which they reveal?

The literature of the Bible discloses the spiritual power that awakens us to a sense of wonder about its purpose, but the written word is not alone in its testimony to the truth about a God of love.

## The Universe

That sense was awake in the mind of David when he wrote, in Psalm 19:1, "*The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork*". He wrote in another psalm, Psalm 8:3, "*When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, ...*", and one may wonder how much he knew of the celestial heavens. As our knowledge of the planets and stars increases, the earth and moon seem to dwindle in the immensity of what God created to display His glory.

We can be flown to the other side of the world in a day. Twelve men have walked on the moon. We believe such things, although they take us to the limits of our comprehension. But beyond such astonishing feats the human mind becomes overwhelmed; full of wonder at the physical reality of the solar system, the worlds beyond our own; and yet so near when our sights are lifted from the planets to the stars. From the nature of stars to the conglomerations of stars that are called galaxies, it is all beyond our comprehension. And yet God comprehends it all: He created them.

There was a recent report of a super cluster of galaxies which has just been discovered by inquisitive cosmologists. They have discovered it but have ignored its message. Although the scope of such things is outside our comprehension, the message is clear: in human terms God is demonstrating that the heavens declare His glory so that we may wonder at His power.

From earliest times in the history of mankind, people of all races have wondered at the display in the night-time sky. The stars were taken as portents of divine revelation with completely false interpretations of their origin and nature, giving rise to worship and superstitions that were, and always have been, detrimental to the welfare of society. It appears from his words that for David it was sufficient to express a sense of wonder, even awe, and thus acknowledge the majesty of the celestial display, which show-cased the majesty of the God whom David served so well as the king of His chosen people.

Surely the sense of wonder inspired by the physical power displayed in the universe that we can see is a parable of the power of the spiritual revival (Colossians 3:1) to be gained, like the knowledge of the heavens, by the knowledge of God's promises offered through the New Covenant, and sealed by the resurrection of our Lord and Saviour.



## The Prophets

In Isaiah chapter twenty-nine the prophet described how Israel had become spiritually numbed, like a hungry man who dreams that he has eaten but when he wakes he finds that he is still hungry, but not knowing that he should wonder about his condition. The Israelites were in that situation but were ignorant of it. In chapter 29, verse 9, he wrote, "*Stay yourselves and wonder ...*" [the verb] (KJV), or "*Be stunned and amazed ...*" (NIV). They were weak from hunger and thirst because "*... the LORD (Yahweh) has brought over you a deep sleep*" (verse 10). "*These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me*" (verse 13). "*Therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a ... wonder* [the noun] *among this people*" (verse 14).

But the Israelites had lost their awareness of the miraculous providence that God had given them throughout their history from the time of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Their spiritual weakness blinded them from understanding the prophecy of events that God would allow to come upon them; they did not wonder about their predicament.

Jeremiah chapter four begins with a call to the people of Israel to mend their ways or evil would come from the north with great destruction (verse 6). "*And it shall come to pass at that day, saith the LORD (Yahweh), that the heart of the king shall perish, and the heart of the princes, and the priests shall be astonished, and the prophets shall wonder*" (KJV), "*will be appalled*" (NIV), (verse 9). This situation seems to be similar to that prophesied in Isaiah 29. The king and princes, the leaders of the nation were unrepentant of "*the evil of your doings*" (verse 4) and only the prophets wondered about the consequences of the nation's apostasy.

## The Wonder

In the above references the word 'wonder' comes from a Hebrew word, a verb that means 'to be in consternation' (Strong 8539), except for Isaiah 29:14 where a different word (Strong 6382) means 'a marvellous thing', a noun.

To wonder, or to be in consternation, also occurs in Habakkuk 1:5 thus, "*Behold ye among the heathen, and regard and wonder marvellously: for I will work a work in your days, which ye will not believe, though it be told you*" (KJV). The NIV is a little easier to follow, "*Look at the nations and watch and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told.*"

This is quoted by Paul in Acts 13: 40 and 41. "*Beware therefore, lest that come upon you, which is spoken of in the prophets; 'Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish; for I work a work in your days, a work which ye will in no wise believe, though a man declare it unto you.'*" (KJV). In the NIV it reads thus, "*Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you: 'Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you.'*"

The passage in Habakkuk prophesied the invasion of Israel by the Chaldeans, and the Israelites should have wondered, or been in consternation about what was going to happen to them. Whereas the purpose of Paul's address in the synagogue was not to warn his hearers of an invasion, but to alert them to the gospel message that through Jesus Christ "*... is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins*", a prospect that should have caused them to wonder, the Greek word meaning to dumbfound, that is, to be in amazement, not in consternation, at the merciful providence of God, shown in the wonder of Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection.

The third chapter of Acts begins with the healing of the lame man by Peter and John. "*And all the people saw him walking and praising God ... and they were filled with wonder and amazement at that which had happened to him*" (verses 9 and 10, KJV). Here the Greek words for 'wonder' and 'amazement' are given as 'amazement' (Strong 2285) and 'ecstasy' (Strong 1611).

The brief narrative clearly indicates the astonishment of the spectators at the gate of the temple, and Peter took the opportunity to appease their wonderment by explaining that the lame man had been healed by the power of Jesus, whose message most of them had ignored, and whom they had caused to be killed by the Roman soldiers. After his address, Peter and John were imprisoned by the temple authorities, but despite their incarceration, about five thousand of those who heard Peter's address believed what they had been told, awoken to a sense of wonder and of commitment because of the miracle that they had witnessed.

Had we seen the healing of the lame man we should have wondered at the miracle, but also at the power of rhetoric and history in Peter's speech, for here, from the New Living Translation, is what he said, (Acts 3: 12 to 15):

*" 'People of Israel', he said, 'what is so astounding about this? And why look at us as though we had made this man walk by our own powers and godliness? For it is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of all our ancestors who has brought glory to his servant Jesus by doing this. This is the same Jesus whom you handed over and rejected before Pilate, despite Pilate's decision to release him. You rejected this holy, righteous one and instead demanded the release of a murderer. You killed the author of life, but God raised him to life. And we are witnesses of this fact. The name of Jesus has healed this man and you know how lame he was before. Faith in Jesus' name has caused this healing before your very eyes.' "*

It is not recorded how many were curious to know more about the healing power of Jesus and about Peter's call to repentance.

The two who met Jesus on the road to Emmaus were also stirred to wonder about what they had heard from Jesus when He, *"... beginning at Moses and all the prophets, ... expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself"* (Luke 24:27; KJV).

What a privilege it would have been for them to have heard the gospel message from the messenger Himself. They should have wondered that the God who gave them the repressive Law Covenant should offer them release from it when they accepted the gracious terms of the new dispensation. From slavery to the former, to the promise of salvation through the latter; an absolute reprieve that was assured as the recompense for allegiance to God's appointed king of His kingdom on earth.

This offer of salvation was not a parable but direct action by the creator, and a wonder for all who seek the truth of the scriptures.

### **Increasing Knowledge**

If one should browse through the contents of an encyclopaedia of science and invention, one could learn much of what has been learned about the physical world around us; about the earth and what it is made of, and what a scientific understanding has enabled men and women to fabricate from its substances, all of them brought into being by the God of creation. The vast array of machines that mankind has devised, from microchips to moon-landing rockets, is astonishing in its diversity and complexity. Each new invention is the wonder of its time until its importance is demoted by yet another new invention.

Having thus conquered the material world man deems himself to be above nature by assuming to have the ability to determine his own destiny, subverting the elements of the earth to his own control and extending his assumed powers even to controlling his own biology. And yet there is a supreme designer behind all of science; one who is the author of all knowledge, who is unacknowledged by all but very, very few, scientists and laity alike. Nevertheless, all who seek to advance the boundaries of knowledge are driven by curiosity that is fuelled by a sense of wonder as to the source and consequences of their research.

However, despite man's inventiveness, his machines and their ugliness are completely eclipsed by the wonder-full diversity of the grasses, shrubs, trees and flowers which God has created to beautify the earth.

And if some sort of magic clothes them in a fairer dress, be amazed at God's generosity in giving us the overwhelming array of animals and birds that enrich the fabric of life on earth.

### **The New Spirit**

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. If we think about it, the first sentence in the Bible should leave us puzzled and curious because it is in the nature of mankind to wonder 'When?' and 'How?' and 'Why?' God created everything.

Knowing, as we do, the basic information given to us in the divine record it is only the 'Why?' that can be answered with confidence. When referring to God, John wrote in Revelation 4:11, "... *for thou hast created all things ... for thy pleasure ...*". Many men and women wonder how it can be that a creator can have pleasure in a world so damaged by people who are so disobedient and so disrespectful.

An answer to 'When?' is, "*In the beginning ...*".

The answer to 'How?' is a mystery.

We who have also asked these questions have found the answers sufficient for our faith. And perhaps that should be only some of the answers, because those questions are prompted by our desire to know the truth, which has been revealed in response to the biblical challenge to seek it, and so to find it by rightly discerning and applying that truth as set out in the word of God.

He made a perfect garden and in it He placed a perfect man and woman. That gave Him pleasure: He saw that it was very good, a wonderful achievement, judged from the divine viewpoint of perfection. God's adversary tempted them to disobedience, resulting in the curse of death on the human race, and a curse of deterioration on the earth itself.

In the years that followed the behaviour of men and women became so bad that God destroyed them in a flood of water: a wonder and a terror at the same time. Only Noah and his family were preserved through that catastrophe. That is something to wonder about because of the lesson it embodies.

Among the descendants of the survivors of the flood there are some who are noted in the record; but one man, and his wife stood out from the many who were struggling to cope with a world that demanded hard work for life to continue. That man was Abraham, and his faith is an example to all those who know his story, and should cause us to wonder how God could deal so favourably with him.

God's favour was extended to Isaac and to Jacob from whom grew a mighty nation, but growing in captivity to the nation in Egypt. The Hebrew nation made the Egyptians wonder about their national security, causing them to deal harshly with their Israelite slaves. In due time God worked miracles to oblige Pharaoh to release them, and with wonder upon wonder, He:

- \* empowered Moses, and Aaron, to lead them through the Red Sea on dry land, and across the desert, guided by a pillar of fire,
- \* fed them with manna and quails,
- \* cared for them with clothing that did not wear out,
- \* guided them to Canaan, which was inhabited by pagan nations, the land which God had promised to Abraham as an inheritance for his descendants.

The immigrants to Canaan were instructed to clear the land of the pagan tribes, which they did, but not thoroughly. And being influenced by those gentile tribes, they decided to abandon God as their righteous king and have a man for a king of their own. The line of earthly kings failed after three notable rulers, Saul, David and Solomon, two of whom pleased God and were granted favours in signs and wonders. But the failure resulted in the nation being divided under two renegade kings, Jeroboam and Rehoboam. For several ensuing centuries the prophets, granted power to authenticate their admonitions against the nation's disobedience, were sent by God to hold the diminished nationhood intact, but went unheeded by all but very few.

Thus for an age of history God helped the Israelites when they tried to obey Him, and He allowed calamity to come upon them when they did not. Despite being warned by the prophets of impending abandonment by their God, the nation fell further into godlessness. Eventually ten of their tribes were captured and dispersed by the Assyrians; and some years later most of the remaining two tribes were captured by the Babylonians. The fate of the Israelites was foretold a long time before it took place, a unique feature of history which should cause any reader of history to wonder.

Throughout the Jewish age there were some who understood the prophecies of a Messiah, but when He came they were expecting to be delivered from Roman bondage by a warrior king, and to be restored to their pre-eminent position as it had been in David's day.

- When the Messiah came, His was a miraculous birth.
- When He began His ministry, it was by a miraculous baptism.
- When He needed helpers, He chose twelve special men whom He knew would serve Him well.
- When He taught, He knew everything that had gone before, from the time of creation.
- When He found disease, He healed with miracles.
- When He found hunger, He fed thousands by miracles.
- When He had listeners, He told them parables.
- When He was rejected He lamented man's inhumanity to man, and He grieved their disregard of His gospel message.
- When He was raised to His place in heaven He promised to return.

Thousands who heard Him preach heeded His message. Other thousands who heard did not. They should have wondered why such a message was delivered with such authority and should have wondered about the power behind that authority.

Jesus said that He came to do His Father's will (John 4:34) and He finished the work He was given to do (John 17:4).

Since the miraculous power of the holy spirit ceased with the deaths of the apostles (1 Corinthians 13:8), the age of miracles is past. The plan of the ages has been revealed to us, as far as God has decided that we need to know, and it is a wonder, a marvellous thing that there is a being who has designed and instituted the solution to the wrongdoing that has arisen through disobedience.

Let us rejoice in His promise to make all things new (Revelation 21:5).

### **The Conclusion**

David declared. "*I am fearfully and wonderfully made*" (Psalm 139:14), and he wrote that without our knowledge of anatomy, biology, physiology, pharmacology and biochemistry; his simple words expressing a sense of wonder at the intimate details of his person.

David asked God, "*What is man that thou art mindful of him?*" (Psalm 8:3).

We may ask, **'What is God that we should be mindful of him?'**

The answer, of course, is given spectacularly in the physical universe, and lovingly in His word, written by men who were inspired by God to establish who He is, what He has done and what He intends to do; not only for mankind but for all of creation, revealing information just sufficient but necessary for our understanding of His power and purpose, bringing to us our awareness of Him as creator and heavenly Father. There is further assurance of divine providence in Paul's declaration, quoting Isaiah, that, "*Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the GOOD things which God hath prepared for those who love him*" (1 Corinthians 2:9).

Therefore, when we acknowledge that awareness of Yahweh our God, in thought, ... in song ... and in prayer;

think about Him,

sing hymns to Him,

pray to Him ..... **with a sense of wonder.**



## **NEWS**

### **2017 Conference Report**

This year our annual conference was held at a new venue, the Comfort Inn Main Lead in Ballarat, from Friday 7<sup>th</sup> to Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> April. The motel accommodation with ensuite bathrooms was much appreciated by the older members of the congregation, and the indoor swimming pool was enjoyed by the younger participants! The motel staff were friendly and hospitable in catering to the needs of the 35 residential guests and four day visitors.

The theme for the conference was ‘The Kingdom Revealed in Parables’, with seven presentations elaborating on aspects of this topic. There were also Bible studies of the parables dealing with the ‘thief in the night’ and the ‘rich man and Lazarus’, as well as morning devotions, a fun-filled quiz night and hymn singing. The question study, held as usual on the last morning of the conference, provided an opportunity for all to participate in robust discussion of issues and queries arising during the conference.

Two Christian Youth Classes were attended by a total of nine children. At the end of the weekend the adults enjoyed watching the short movies the children had produced to illustrate what they had learned from the parables they studied (these are available for viewing on our website [www.newcovenantfellowship.org.au/2017-gallery/](http://www.newcovenantfellowship.org.au/2017-gallery/)).

The weekend was an enjoyable break from the normal routine for those who attended, and there were plenty of opportunities for informal fellowship and discussion outside the scheduled sessions. We thank our heavenly Father for this opportunity to worship Him and spend some time together with fellow believers.

We have once again booked the Comfort Inn Main Lead from Friday 6<sup>th</sup> until Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> April 2018, so please mark these dates in your diary. We look forward to meeting with all who are able to join us for more spiritual nourishment at next year’s conference.



## 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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