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News and Notes

PSALM 121

A Song of Ascents

by Ian Miller

Introduction:

When my wife died, I saw the walk that I had to walk as a grim walk through the valley of the shadow of death. The valley, steep, more like a canyon, no way out except to walk forward, creep forward, crawl forward. Steep and pervading cliffs to my left and right, deep, deep shadows to my left, right and even below me. Nothing could be more foreboding or forbidding.

As the months passed, the picture changed. The valley opened to a desert, and the desert walk of the children of Israel came to mind. They spent 40 years in the wilderness, many never to see the promised land. Their desert was without a road, lonely, with little food, or water. A lonely, sapping walk that drew upon their trust, resources and for some, ultimately their faith.

I see that the pilgrim's walk changes from mile to mile. Always new encounters day-by-day. Some are expected, many are not.

Psalm 121 resonates with me for, whether I am in a valley or in a desert, the promise contained within Psalm 121 is universal for the faithful.

Psalm 121 is one of the songs that pilgrims sang as they made their way to Jerusalem to celebrate a number of annual festivals, including Passover, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Tabernacles. The psalm's theme is God's guarding of the pilgrim.

I like Psalm 121 because it can be seen as a walk through many different threats. Many different stages of the walk towards Zion. Many different dangers, many different terrains. You can read into it through many different stages of life. Even our own death, and beyond. But many different aspects of the Lord's protection, even as we get to verses 7 and 8 which provide the most majestic of protection, throughout all ages. It takes me directly back to 1 Corinthians 15.

The word “guard” (šāmar) occurs six times in the eight verses.

Psalm 121:1

“I lift my eyes to the mountains – where does my help come from?”

This to me is a verse of despair. The Psalm 23 description of the valley of the shadow of death is deep and dangerous. You can see on the cliff ridges far above you, no-one. In despair the call is made; “Where does my help come from?”.

Psalm 121:2

“My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.”

The answer is, help comes from the Lord. Not in this case from armour, or a sword, which you have to wear, but from God. But how can this be? How can he help me as I walk this dangerous, lonely walk?

Maker of heaven and earth reminds us of the all-powerful God.

Psalm 121:3

“He will not let your foot slip – he who watches over you will not slumber.”

The answer is in the characteristics of God.

1. Watches over me. Not let your foot slip. A lamp unto my feet. The lamp lights one step. One step only. “Your word is a lamp for my feet and a light for my path.” (Psalm 119:105). My responsibility then is to make sure that today is the day of the Lord. This is the day that the Lord has made.

2. False gods have been accused of being asleep (see 1 Kings 18:27.) At noon Elijah began to taunt them. “‘Shout louder!’ he said. ‘Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or travelling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.’”

Psalm 121:4

“... behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.”

He also watches over Israel. Beyond my horizons. Beyond my immediate needs. Beyond what I may know are my needs. Beyond those things over which I have any control.

Psalm 121:5

“The LORD watches over you. – the Lord is your shade at your right hand;”

A beautiful motif. Isaiah 51:16 says, *“I have put my words in your mouth, and hidden you in the shade (sel) of my hand, stretching out the heavens and laying the foundations of the earth, and saying to Zion, ‘You are my people.’”*

Psalm 121:6

“ the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night,”

This verse tells us that harm can occur to us in both day and night, through thoughts, dreams, actions and inactions. This psalm reminds me of the chorus of BSH No. 165: ‘Oh, what comfort it brings, my soul sweetly sings, I am safe from all danger while under His wings.’

Psalm 121:7,8

“The LORD will keep you from all harm – he will watch over your life; the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.

“Your going out and your coming in”, reflects typical city life, in which the worker left the protective confines of the walled city in the morning to carry out field and pasture work and return to the safety of the city in the evening. That picture is beautiful enough. These two closing verses cover for me the whole panorama of life and death. I can see in these two verses promises for us, the living, and promises for those who may be near death, and promises for those who have passed into death.

Both now and forevermore.



THE CALLING

by Merv Buckmaster

In Matthew chapter 22 is recorded Jesus' parable of the marriage feast in which the king "... *sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding ...*" (verse 3). As is customary, the wedding guests were invited to the feast, from which it may be taken that it was not compulsory to attend, but a matter of choice, although to refuse the invitation would have been an insult to the king. This is illustrated in the parable by those who refused the invitation suffering significant loss as a consequence.

It is generally accepted that the king of the parable represents the LORD God, and the son for whom the wedding is organised represents Jesus. The feast represents the blessings promised to the sincere believer through the terms of the New Covenant. Those blessings include the righteousness that is imputed by God because of faith, and the peace of mind gained by a knowledge of God's plan for mankind, in a world of tribulation during the gospel age.

The invitation to the wedding feast of the parable is also regarded to be the invitation to the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9), described by Paul as "... *the high calling of God in Christ Jesus ...*", thus making it an invitation to be granted resurrection to eternal life and to participation with Jesus in the work of the kingdom age.

One of the ways prescribed in scripture by which we can bear witness to our Christian faith, is observing the ceremony of the Lord's Memorial, thus acknowledging the atoning blood of the sacrifice which Jesus made for us, and for all mankind. It is an action we can take to show that we have heard the call, the invitation to declare our stand with respect to the message of salvation "... *that the truth of the gospel might continue with you*", as Paul explained in Galatians 2:5. Although the bread and wine are symbols of that redeeming sacrifice, partaking of the Lord's supper shows, also symbolically, an understanding of the strong meat of the word of the gospel message, defined in Hebrews 5:12-14.

Another way in which we can show our faith and answer the call is to be baptised. This is another simple ceremony, that of making a promise of obedience to God's laws then sealing it by full immersion in water. John the Baptist called the Jews to repent and be baptised

(Matthew 3:1-12). He baptised Jesus, at his request (Matthew 3:13-17), the Lord thus giving full authority to it. At the end of his ministry the apostles were instructed to *“Go ... and teach all nations, baptising them ...”* (Matthew 28:19). We are told that this is what the disciples did. *“Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins’”* (Acts 2:38). The choice to be baptised is for those who have become mature, or of ‘full age’ in the truth, giving active testimony to a determination to respond to the call, in open witness.

We are called away from the world and its affairs in a forthright manner by John; *“Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.”* (1 John 2:15,16). The stark clarity of these verses was emphasised by James in these words *“... know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.”* (James 4:4).

In Job 5:7 we read that *“... man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward”* (Job 5:7), and as we grow older we become part of the ways and affairs of the world before we are mature enough to recognise the call from God to keep away from worldly matters, as much as it is within our ability to do so. The call to keep away from worldliness and to *“abstain from all appearance of evil”* (1 Thessalonians 5:22) is one of the deeper truths of the gospel. This aspect of the call is also some of the *“... strong meat (that) belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.”* (Hebrews 5:14).

The calling does not take us into the social wilderness to starve, because God’s blessings to the believer are more of a spiritual nature than temporal, and far richer than those obtained through worldly activities; *“... the world passeth away, and the lust thereof; but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever.”* (1 John 2:17). We are called to be separate from the world. *“Wherefore come out from among them, the unrighteous, the infidels and the idol worshippers, and be ye separate, saith the LORD, and touch not the unclean thing;”* (2 Corinthians 6:17).

I believe that this aspect of the calling, to be separate, goes further than separating ourselves from worldliness, although that is very difficult in itself. Just as Jesus asked God to keep his disciples from the world even although they were in the world (John 17:11-17), so we are called to try to do the same. Like them we also live among unrighteous people, unfaithful ones and worshippers of modern idols. It is difficult to avoid being entangled in the shortcomings of these people in our everyday dealings with them, and Peter warned us about such a situation, *“For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning.”* (2 Peter 2:20).

But we are called to go even further, even beyond worldly entanglements, in that we are instructed to keep away from false religious teachings, particularly the spiritual Babylon which harbours the *“abomination which maketh desolate”* (Matthew 24:15; Mark 13:14). The LORD God himself has called from heaven *“Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues.”* (Revelation 18:4).

The consequence of the calling to us, then, is that at some time in our lives we must act according to Paul’s words, *“Let us go forth, therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach. For here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come.”* (Hebrews 13:13,14). We live in the camp, which is the world, in order to work for temporal needs, our daily bread, and for access to institutions that provide worldly education and health care, which, by God’s graciousness, we are allowed to do. But when we are baptised and observe the Lord’s Memorial we are outside the camp, which is also the habitation of worldliness and false doctrine.

Remembering the Lord’s life, death and resurrection by undergoing baptism and partaking of the Memorial Supper which he instituted for the purpose of remembering him, shows that we believe into (that is, commit to) him even though it requires separation from the world. Such separation, brought about by our faith in his sacrifice, and in God’s promise of the resurrection to eternal life, is an affirmation of the consecration of our lives to the Lord.

And by striving to maintain and strengthen our faith until death, we are sanctified by the grace of our heavenly Father. This sanctification is impossible to achieve by our own efforts, and is also unobtainable without the serious intentions of our hearts and minds; and those intentions must be built upon the deepest conviction, which is what faith is (Hebrews 11:1). We are justified by our faith, and justification brings imputed righteousness, a gift from God (Romans chapter 4).

Thus, the calling to believe, to repent and to have faith becomes a life-long challenge to grow in that faith, because those who are justified by their faith will live (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38). The calling is not a race that has only one winner and must be completed in the shortest possible time, but is an invitation to all the peoples of earth, to hear the gospel call. Those who respond and develop a deeper appreciation of that invitation, and are able to overcome the world by faith, will become the chosen few spoken of by Jesus in Matthew 20:16; "... (the) *many be called, but few (will be) chosen.*".

For every overcomer the gift of eternal life is magnified by the blessing of joint-heirship with the Lord. Jesus said "*In the world ye shall have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.*" (John 16:33). And John identified the means of overcoming the world; "*For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith*" (1 John 5:4), maintained through a life of dedication.

Growing in faith begins with taking to heart the parts of the gospel message that bring good cheer; such as the nativity of our Lord, the preaching by parables, the wonders of the miracles and the examples of the lives of the apostles. This progresses to the signifying our intention to serve him through baptism and the commemoration of the Lord's Memorial Supper, which was the culmination of Jesus' ministry. Faith grows even through the awareness of the horror of his death, because he was raised again from death, wherein is sealed God's promise "*... for the hour is coming in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice and shall come forth. They that have done good to the resurrection of life, and they that have done evil to the resurrection of judgement.*" (John 5:28,29).

The knowledge of these historical events and the realisation of their significance should bring relief to our hearts and minds, because the way of salvation is revealed in that knowledge. That way is established through the New Covenant which was ratified by the sacrifice given by the Lord. This new and living way, while being granted by God's grace, requires us to respond to the call from the heavenly Father. It invites us to choose to be reconciled to him, and become his children as Adam was before his transgression.

I believe that what our response to the calling, or invitation, should be is clearly defined by the teachings of Jesus throughout his ministry, and by the epistles concerning those teachings, written by the apostles. Our response is demonstrated by following the example he set for us, living according to the law of love. However, within the call to the many to follow him, God has set about selecting a special group of believers to serve him as his priests (1 Peter 2:9), to work with Jesus as his joint-heirs during the age of reconstitution of all things, which is the kingdom age (Revelation 20:6). The selection process is God's purpose during the gospel age when *"God at the first did visit the Gentiles to take out of them a people for his name"* (Acts 15:14).

To achieve this purpose God has offered a heavenly reward to just a few who are willing to give all they are able towards growing in faith by shifting from the milk of the word to the meat of the word; from the parables and the miracles to the deeper truths of scripture. Paul made clear this aspect of the call near to the end of his own service to the Lord when he said *"I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."* (Philippians 3:14). I think that Paul's sufferings for Jesus' sake reveal the depth of the scriptural truth of the high calling.

From the many who hear the call, or invitation, only a few will go on, through faith, to be overcomers and thus be chosen for the honour to serve with Jesus during the kingdom age (Matthew 20:16). By being baptised and by partaking of the Lord's supper we declare our understanding of the calling and the challenge, relying upon the Lord to strengthen and comfort us when we fail in our endeavours to meet it.

I have heard it expressed that there are four callings from God: a call to truth, a call to belief, a call to repentance, and a call to consecration. However, I consider these to be four parts of the same call, because

I find only one call in operation during the gospel age, and that is the offer to be chosen as one of Jesus' little flock (Luke 12:32), which is the high calling. The prize that Paul saw as his mark or aim, was eternal life in the presence and service of the saviour who accosted him on the road to Damascus. Paul was convinced that he would succeed because he had been commanded, guided and protected by the Lord from the time that Jesus revealed himself to the apostle. He wrote to Timothy, "... for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded (convinced) that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against (until) that day." (2 Timothy 1:12).

I believe that the calling comes to us with the same purpose, God's purpose, while allowing us to choose whether or not to do his will, so that if we choose his way, his purpose will be carried out through Jesus and his joint-heirs. God's invitation requires that we come to know the truth that he has given to us in the scriptures; to realise the need for repentance, and to repent; to believe into Christ and to obey his commands, and thereby consecrate our lives to the one who redeemed us with his blood. From that early response to the call, then through belief and understanding, to build up that precious faith, to receive the grace, the unmerited favour of justification and imputed righteousness. From that basis, the calling, or invitation, is to strive for the heavenly reward for service to God through Jesus as our high priest. There is no greater reward; there is no more worthwhile service.



THE BOOKS OF CHRONICLES

by Russell Collins

Introduction

In the Hebrew Scriptures there are three groups of books: the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. The books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles are each not two books, but one. Each whole book was divided in the third century BC in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint. Chronicles is the last book of the Jewish Scriptures, and is regarded by the Jews as belonging to the Writings, whereas Samuel and Kings are regarded as books of prophecy. Therefore, Chronicles should be considered in a completely different manner from the books of Samuel and Kings.

If the books of Chronicles tend to be neglected nowadays it is for two main reasons.

1. The first nine chapters contain mainly genealogies, with names that are difficult to pronounce.
2. Readers find that many of the accounts in the two books of Kings seem to be repeated in the two books of Chronicles, so they decide not to study Chronicles.

Although the books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles seem to cover the same period of time, the connections between them are not as close as may seem at the first reading. Samuel and Kings cover a period of approximately 500 years, but Chronicles covers a longer period. Samuel and Kings were written soon after the events portrayed in them, while Chronicles was written at a later period of time after the events portrayed. Jewish tradition, internal evidence within the books, and the findings of most commentators indicate that the Chronicles were written by Ezra. The last verses of Chronicles are almost the same as the opening verses of the book of Ezra.

An Overview

The genealogies recorded in the book of Chronicles begin with Adam, and include Adam to Noah (chapter 1:1-4), Abraham to Isaac (chapter 1:28-34), the sons of Jacob, (chapter 2) the sons of David, (chapter 3) and the sons of Aaron (chapter 6:49). The genealogies fill the first nine chapters, and the books finish with the return of the Jews from their exile in Babylonia, while the books of Samuel and Kings finish at an earlier time, during the latter part of the exile. The last verse in Chronicles, chapter 36 verse 23, records Cyrus king of Persia telling the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem.

The record in Kings shows that the people needed an explanation for the reasons they had been sent into exile, but in Chronicles the people knew why, and needed to be encouraged to retain their nationality, and then to be sent back to their land to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and the Temple.

Kings was written during the exile, while Chronicles was written at the close of the exile, or probably at some time afterward. Political history dominates the book of Kings, while religious history is the theme of

Chronicles. Kings was written from a prophetic viewpoint, while Chronicles was written from a priestly viewpoint, the chronologies defining the lines of kingship and the priesthood.

The books of Kings cover both the northern and southern kingdoms of the Israelites in Palestine, while Chronicles, recording the same period of Old Testament history, does not mention any king from the northern kingdom. Apparently the writer was not inspired to be interested in the northern kingdom at all. The difference in coverage is very important.

The book of Kings concentrates on Israelitish kings and their human failings that led to disaster, while Chronicles concentrates on divine faithfulness and the attitude of the rulers of the southern kingdom. In Chronicles, the royal failings are played down in favour of the royal virtues, so in Chronicles there is given a more favourable view of the Jewish kings.

The Chronicler was not trying to change the facts of history, but concentrated on the good actions of the kings. The emphasis in Chronicles is spiritual, and the concentration is on behaviour respectful to God.

Kings openly portrays the kings as they were, either good and obedient to the LORD, or as wicked and disobedient, with no actions or attitudes played down or glossed over. In Chronicles the focus is more on the ritual required by the Law, in the Temple and with respect to the sacrifices, with the emphasis on spiritual rather than moral issues.

The author of the book of Kings was a prophet, Jeremiah, while the author of Chronicles was a priest, Ezra, and the difference between their viewpoints is great and significant. The difference of viewpoints is made clear by what was omitted from Chronicles and what was included in Kings and Samuel.

A Summary

In the books of Samuel, the exploits of Saul occupy about a sixth of them, while the life of David takes up approximately two-thirds of the account.

About half of the first book of Kings gives an account of Solomon's life as the king of Judea, while a record of the history of Samaria, the other part of the divided kingdom, takes up about half of the second book.

Omissions by the Writer of Chronicles

1. No mention is made of Samuel's part in appointing kings according to God's direction.
2. Saul is barely mentioned. His death is recorded in chapter 10 of 1 Chronicles.
3. David is mentioned at some length, but there is no mention of his struggles with Saul, nor of his seven-year reign in Hebron, nor of his many wives. The rebellion of David's son Absalom is omitted, and the whole episode concerning Bathsheba does not receive a single line.

This selection of material is highly significant. The Chronicler included some favourable events concerning David while omitting the unfavourable ones, so that the nature of David appears very favourably as that of a powerful and upright king.

By a similar assessment so also does Solomon appear to be given a favourable appraisal. There is no mention of Solomon's many wives and concubines, nor about the pagan idols that were brought into the palace, nor of Solomon's failure to deal with the presence of pagan temples in the kingdom, along with his deteriorating relationship with God.

The writer's positive focus on favourable events continued throughout Chronicles. After the kingdom of Israel became divided into two kingdoms, Samaria in the north and Judea in the south of the country, the Chronicler did not give any account of the kings of the north, but concentrated on the kings of the south. The accounts about God-fearing kings such as Josiah and Hezekiah were given much space, but the morally bad kings of Judea were accorded very little coverage.

Inclusions by the Writer of Chronicles

Firstly, the Chronicler was concerned only with the royal line of David. None of the kings of the north was in the royal line, so they were not mentioned. Chronicles is first and foremost a history of the kings in that royal line, whereas details about Saul were not included because he was not of that royal lineage.

However, a record about one man was included at some length, one who received little mention in Kings, namely Zerubbabel. He was the only one of the royal line who came back from Babylon, and it was through him that the people's hopes for the Messiah lay. There is half a chapter in Chronicles setting out Zerubbabel's family tree, where the royal line is presented in a manner showing its great importance.

The books of Chronicles are especially concerned with the attitudes of the kings to the Ark of the Covenant and to the status and function of the Temple. The writer concentrated on records concerning the people's treatment of the Ark, and of the Temple as the place where God would dwell with his chosen people.

We are told in Chronicles how David took the Ark to Jerusalem, of his desire to build the Temple, of his preparations and plans concerning it, and being a musician, about the arrangements of choirs and services of worship in great detail. Such detail is mentioned only briefly in the books of Samuel and Kings.

In Chronicles David is portrayed as the leader of worship, the writer of psalms, and the man who wanted the Temple built. So, David and Solomon are depicted in appraisals different from their portrayals in the books of Kings.

In Chronicles, six of the nine chapters focussing on the reign of Solomon are almost exclusively concerned with his part in building the Temple that his father, David, was not allowed to build. When its construction had been completed the Chronicler recorded Solomon's prayer when the Temple was dedicated, and how the glory of the Lord came down upon the Temple, and the dwelling place of God's spirit was filled with His glory.

From this brief consideration there is a clear indication that the focus of Chronicles shows that it was written from a priestly point of view. A prophet would have concentrated on the wrongdoing of the kings of Israel which brought God's judgment upon the nation, which is the attitude displayed by the historical record in the minor prophets. But the priestly author of Chronicles concentrated on the building of the Temple, the arrangement of choirs and services, and the establishment of the place and worship acceptable to God.

After the reign of Solomon, when the kingdom was divided, the Chronicler was interested only in the affairs of the southern kingdom, where the Temple and God's priests were located, and where the royal line of succession was maintained.

The priestly Chronicler selected eight kings of the southern kingdom of Judea, seven of whom were respectful to God and his people. The good kings were David, Solomon, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Joash, Hezekiah and Josiah. However, some information about a bad king, Jehoram is given, because he is important to the *whole* history, since during his reign, his wife Athalia, the daughter of Ahab, contrived to have the royal princes killed. However, one, Joash, was saved. He was kidnapped by the priest, Jehoiada, and hidden for six years, so that the royal line of David was preserved. The Chronicler ignored the twelve disrespectful and disobedient kings.

The Chronicler also dealt extensively with the time of the reign of Josiah, who returned proper services and feasts to the Temple, and strove to reform the nation from idolatry and other rites of pagan worship.

Crucial to the understanding of Chronicles is to note that the book ends with the Jews being sent back to their land by the decree of Cyrus the Persian king to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and the Temple. The Jews at that time had not seen God's Temple, and had not been ruled over by a king of David's line. The Chronicler sets out for them three things that God, through Ezra, wanted to re-establish: their roots or ancestry; the importance of their royalty as God's chosen people; and the great importance of their religion which was the worship of the God of heaven and themselves. Therefore, the book of Chronicles has a clear purpose. It is not simply a record of history.

The Three Things the Returning Jews Needed to Know

1. The Jews returning from exile needed to know that they had national roots, an ancestry that reached back to Adam. Later, it was God who chose Abraham individually out of all the earth's inhabitants, (Genesis 15:1-6), then subsequently he had singled out the descendants of Jacob from the whole human race (Amos 3:2), preserved them as a nation, and made them his own special people.

2. The second thing the Jews needed to know was that they were a royal people with their own kings, men chosen by God who was their rightful king. The royal line had been preserved, and it was to be maintained until the Jews were again to have their own king (Ezekiel 21:27).

3. The third thing the Chronicler wished to convey to the Jews was the purpose for which they existed as a people. They were God's chosen people, who, if they were obedient, would become a "*kingdom of priests*", as outlined in Exodus 19: 5,6, and their worship was to be an example to the nations around them.

The book of Chronicles was a message for the remnant of the nation returning to Palestine to encourage them to persevere during the difficult times ahead. The people were poor; they had to struggle against adversity to make a living in the impoverished land of Palestine, and building the walls of Jerusalem and the Temple itself was to be slow work, carried out over many years.

The importance of that message was strengthened by God when he sent them two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, to urge them to persist in the work. The writer of Chronicles wanted to instil in the minds of the Jews that although they had an earthly king, God had to come first in their life as a people, and that their duty was to him alone.

APPLICATIONS TO JESUS' MINISTRY

The themes of the book of Chronicles are picked up in the record of the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus.

Ancestry

The gospel of Matthew begins with Jesus' genealogy, and Luke takes the genealogy right back to Adam. Jesus was born a Jew. He was not a person coming out of obscure or unknown ancestry into history, but was sent by God to be identified with a particular people and to fulfil their expectations of the prophesied Messiah.

Royalty

The genealogies show that Jesus was born of the royal line of David, and could rightfully claim to be the son of David, that is, David's descendant and therefore heir to his throne. He could in fact claim and inherit David's throne for two reasons. Firstly, he was the Son of

God and could therefore inherit it because David's throne was the throne of the LORD. David was anointed to be God's king of the Jews (2 Samuel 5:4). Secondly, through his earthly mother he could inherit David's throne because she was of David's line of descent.

Religion

Jesus was the fulfilment of Israel's religious hopes, because he actually became the Temple, the spiritual temple for the nation. John wrote that "*The Word was made flesh and dwelt (tabernacled) among us ...*" (John 1:14). Jesus said, when referring to His body, "*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.*" (John 2:19). Jesus was telling his hearers that he was the focus of their worship of God, the one who fulfilled the symbol of the Temple as the place of God's presence. His meaning was that the earthly and literal Temple would be destroyed, so that it could no longer be the only place for the worship of God to be made, and that He would become the only way through which acceptable worship of God could be offered. In other words, the Lord said that the old form of worship symbolised by the Temple would be destroyed, and that a new form of worship through him and him alone would be established.

APPLICATIONS TO CHRISTIANS

Ancestry

The apostle Paul explained that Gentile believers have been symbolically "*grafted into*" God's people (Romans 11:17,19,24), so that even as Gentiles it may be said that in that symbolic sense, there is a connection to Jewish ancestry. In a similar manner there is a link to Jewish genealogy because gospel age believers, both Gentiles and Jews are, by faith, children of Abraham. These connections are really more significant to us than our own genealogies, because our own family trees will disappear at death. The Jewish family tree could be taken as our spiritual genealogy, because through faith in Jesus' sacrifice we are promised to inherit a share in the blessings promised to Abraham.

Royalty

The apostle Peter reminded us that we have been invited to be a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:5,9). As recipients of the favour of that calling we should conduct ourselves in the manner shown by Jesus' example because we are promised the inheritance of reigning with Jesus over this world for a thousand years (Revelation 20:4). The book of

Revelation also tells that God, through Jesus, has redeemed the people of *all “nations, kindreds and tongues”* from whom he will select that royal family to reign on the earth (Revelation 7:9). We can therefore live confidently with the dignity conferred by God’s grace, knowing who we are and what our destiny will be.

Religion

When the Jewish Temple was destroyed by the Romans, Christian believers became temples of God, according to Paul, who wrote, *“Know ye not that ye are the temple of God ...”* (1 Corinthians 3:16,17). The manner of that process is through the indwelling of a measure of the holy spirit described in Romans chapter 8, to be a guide and comforter, not as with Jesus’ appointment to be the mediator of the New Covenant (Hebrews 12:24).

Thus, gospel age believers collectively have been afforded the privilege of being the temple of God. And personal individual bodies are temples of the holy spirit, as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 7:19. The manner in which we live should reflect these privileges, and our worship should identify our allegiance to the one God and to Jesus, our saviour.

In a similar manner to the Israelites at the time of Chronicles, we are really in exile. In such circumstances they were pilgrims and strangers in a foreign land, whereas we live in countries around the world and are citizens of those countries, but our spiritual citizenship is really in heaven (Philippians 3:20; NIV). It may need diligence and patience to maintain good relationships with unbelieving relatives and friends, because we belong to God’s family. We must always strive to set good examples of friendly and loving conduct to fellow believers, to members of our earthly families, and to our friends and colleagues.

Conclusion

Chronicles, therefore, is not simply a tedious book of Jewish history, recording and duplicating what had already been written. It contained a message for the Israelites and it contains a message for us; a message of hope for the future, showing us that God’s purpose displayed in Chronicles will continue here and now, as we find our purpose in life as God’s people with our citizenship in heaven.



Notes from a Group Study of the Epistle to the HEBREWS

Hebrews 5:1-6

1. *For every high priest taken from among men is ordained for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins:*
2. *Who can have compassion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way; for that he himself also is compassed with infirmity.*
3. *And by reason hereof he ought, as for the people, so also for himself, to offer for sins.*
4. *And no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron.*
5. *So also Christ glorified not himself to be made an high priest; but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son, to day have I begotten thee.*
6. *As he saith also in another place, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.*

It was recognised that verses 1 to 5 contain a definition of the high priest. He was chosen by God (verse 4) to offer gifts and sacrifices (verse 1) for himself and the people (verse 3), and he had to be compassionate towards those he served as priest (verse 2). He was not to seek the appointment (verse 4) but to acknowledge his own faults (verse 2 and chapter 3 verse 15). Aaron was the first high priest chosen by God to serve under the Law Covenant. Jesus was also chosen by God, but to serve as the high priest under the New Covenant.

One of *“the principles of the doctrine of Christ”* (chapter 6 verse 1) is the difference between Aaron, who had to sacrifice a bullock for his own sins before he could offer a sacrifice for the people (5:3), and Jesus, our high priest, who needed no sacrifice for himself, because he was perfect.

When the ruling authorities were involved with appointment of the high priest, he was not always chosen wisely. This is shown by the Jews' dissatisfaction of the political appointees set up by the Romans at the time of Jesus, who accepted the position for the honour it conferred upon them. The giving of gifts under the law was for thanksgiving, and wave offerings (Leviticus 8:29) to the temple, and to feed the priesthood. The sacrifices under the law were for disobedience against the laws of the

covenant: sacrifices for individuals, for families and clans and for the nation itself. Some details are given in Leviticus chapter 4.

The gifts and sacrifices of verse 1 were part of the Mosaic Law, and included burnt offerings, grain offerings and fellowship offerings which were all voluntary; and sin offerings and guilt offerings which were compulsory. These are also recorded in Leviticus chapter 4. Their purpose, in number and detail, was to make the Israelites continually aware of their inadequacies under the Law Covenant, and of the demands of the law which they could not fulfil. Jesus removed with all those sacrifices with one all-atoning sacrifice, (Hebrews 10:12) by symbolically “... *nailing them to his cross.*” (Colossians 2:14).

Verse 5 indicates that it was God who called Jesus his son and who appointed that son to be high priest. That appointment was for him to be a high priest after the order of Melchisedec (verses 6 and 10 and chapter 6 verse 20 et seq.).

The day when Jesus was begotten by God is not identified. It could have been at creation, or at his earthly birth or at his resurrection. His appointment to the position of high priest could have been at any one of these occasions, since he was “... *the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.*” (Revelation 13: 8). However, he took up the authority of that office at his resurrection when he was given all power in heaven and earth (Matthew 28:18).

The similarity of Jesus to Melchisedec was in that both were appointed by God, and both had the positions of high priest and King. Further discussion was anticipated upon consideration of chapters 6 and 7.

Hebrews 5:7-9

7 Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared;

8 Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered;

9 And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him;

The “*days of his flesh*” in verse 7 could mean all of Jesus’ life on earth or the period of his ministry or the time from his twelfth birthday anniversary

when he told Mary and Joseph that “... *wist ye not that I must be about my Father’s business?*” (Luke 2:49).

A note in the NIV suggested that the “... *prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears ...*” referred to Jesus’ agony in the garden of Gethsemane. However, they were also involved in his trial and crucifixion which followed. He also suffered as when he wept over the death of Lazarus (John 11), when he lamented over the apostasy of Jerusalem (Matthew 23:37), when he declared he was distressed by the baptism to come (Luke 12:50), and at other times. Jesus knew the purpose of his mission on earth (John 12:27), and it weighed upon him all the time.

Jesus’ suffering during “*the days of his flesh*” (verse 7) occurred mainly during his ministry.

Also from verse 7. it was asked whether the phrase “... *save him from death ...*” meant to prevent his death during his ministry or to save him out of death. The latter is probably correct because Jesus’ was killed. His death was not prevented, but God did rescue him out of death, which is the state of non-existence. It was suggested that during his ministry he was protected by angels, and thus was saved from death, that is, his death was avoided, as on the hill at Nazareth when he “... *passed through the midst of them ...*” (Luke 4:16, 28-30).

Although Jesus was not disobedient, he came to understand the full value of obedience through his suffering, and that in turn shows his superiority as a high priest. He suffered in temporal matters when he was hungry, thirsty and tired. He suffered physically when he was beaten, and he suffered mentally because of the hard-heartedness of the scribes and Pharisees. He saw others suffering and lamented the fallen state of man. His suffering may have begun from the age of twelve when he debated the truth with the teachers at the temple; and he suffered in the severest degree on the cross. Yet throughout his ministry up to and including that dreadful night, he rose above all his suffering in service to the Lord God in heaven.

The suffering made him perfect, that is, complete as a high priest. Although never disobedient he proved his obedience in adverse circumstances and through severe tribulation, proving himself to be the perfect example for all those who believe into him.

Hebrews 5:10-14

- 10 Called of God an high priest after the order of Melchisedec.**
- 11 Of whom we have many things to say, and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing.**
- 12 For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat.**
- 13 For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe.**
- 14 But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.**

In verse 11 Paul told the Hebrews that what he had to say about Melchisedec was difficult to explain because they were “*dull of hearing*”. He took them to task for this in verse 12, which indicates that he had to teach them “*the first principles of the oracles of God*” or “*the principles of the doctrine of Christ*” (chapter 6 verse 1) which is the truth of “*the word of God*” (chapter 5 verse 12). Thus, they must have forgotten what they had learned about the truth, and were unqualified to be teachers. Jesus promised the disciples understanding through the “*spirit of truth*” (John 16:13) and that promise was fulfilled at Pentecost. The apostles would have given the Hebrews the inspired truth to make them, in turn, teachers of that truth, and so pass it on to their hearers and to succeeding generations.

Since they lacked the basic knowledge of the scriptures, Paul compared them to babies which need milk for nourishment, instead of them being mature people who can cope with solid food. As babes in the truth they were “*unskilled*” (verse 13) that is, immature or undeveloped, not with respect to age, but in their knowledge and experience in scriptural matters. A similar situation concerned the Corinthians who were as babes in Christ because of their carnal or fleshly nature (1 Corinthians 3:1-3).

Paul explained to the Ephesians that Jesus appointed apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers “*for the work of the ministry*” (Ephesians 4:11,12) which depended greatly upon the spoken word, because there were few written works at that time, and also probably because many people were unable to read.

Without the basic knowledge of the gospel, the Hebrews were unable to apply it and therefore were unskilful at discerning “*both good and evil*” (verse 14). It has always been the case that a knowledge of the scriptures confers the ability to learn right from wrong. It also gives a divine standard so that the knowledge can be used and put into practice. The senses have to be exercised, that is, trained in applying the principles of Christian truth. In this way the believer develops spiritual maturity, and gains strength by progressing from the milk to the meat of the word.

The mention of “*good and evil*” in verse 14 indicates that the people Paul was writing to were not advanced far enough in the knowledge of the gospel, and gives a motive for the discussion of the subject matter of chapter 6.

Maturity is important in both the knowledge and in the exercise of that knowledge. There is really no offer to choose either one or the other in this matter. The believer needs to have and to remember the basic truth upon which to build further understanding. However, to gain only an intellectual knowledge is not as important as showing the evidence of the knowledge by applying it daily. That is “... *rightly dividing the word of truth ...*” (2 Timothy 2:15). The difficulty of doing this is shown by Peter who believed fervently, but denied his association with the Lord at a time of severe stress.



NEWS AND NOTES

Vale Zoe Tsakonas

It is with great sorrow that we report the death of Zoe Tsakonas from the Adelaide class on 24 October 2020. She is survived by her husband Anastasios, daughter Jane, son Arthur, daughter-in-law Soula, son-in-law Ian and grandchildren Edward, Zoe and Yiota. Zoe’s daughter Helen died in 2019. Zoe was a devout follower of Christ and a great blessing to all who knew her, providing both practical help and spiritual sustenance. She loved to talk about God and his wonderful promises so we look forward to the time when those promises will all be fulfilled and we shall meet her again in His Kingdom.

Sunday Meetings

Our Sunday meetings will continue to be conducted via Zoom for the time being. We try to intersperse weekly Bible studies with talks and other presentations every few weeks. All interested persons are welcome, so please contact info@newcovenantfellowship.org.au for the meeting link if you would like to join us.

Memorial Supper

The memorial of the Lord's Supper will be on Saturday 27 March 2021. The format of this service is yet to be determined so please see our website (www.newcovenantfellowship.org.au) or contact us for up-to-date information at (info@newcovenantfellowship.org.au).

Autumn Conference

We have a booking for our annual autumn conference at the Foothills Conference Centre in Mooroolbark for Friday 9 to Sunday 11 April 2021. However, given the ever-changing nature of local COVID-19 outbreaks and state border closures, we will need to review this closer to the proposed dates.

Please see our website (www.newcovenantfellowship.org.au) or contact us for up-to-date information at (info@newcovenantfellowship.org.au).

If the conference does go ahead, our theme will be "What is the World Coming To?", in which we will examine the state of the world and what the Bible tells us about the future. The program will include talks, Bible studies, devotions and fellowship.

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 the members of the group, and readers are requested to heed the words:
"Prove all things" (1 Thessalonians 5:21).



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