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John, the Disciple Whom Jesus Loved

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Purposes

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**Notes from a Group Study
of the Epistle to the Hebrews**

News

JOHN, THE DISCIPLE WHOM JESUS LOVED

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I'm sure that we have all wondered what it must have been like to walk with Jesus, to experience the wonder of his words and the miraculous deeds which God's power allowed him to perform. How would we have felt to hear his parables and ponder their meaning, to listen to him speak of his suffering and death and feel our own hearts grieved at understanding something of the pain of a perfect man? Jesus' disciples must have shared an intimate knowledge of our Lord and saviour through their daily, personal experience and interaction with our master, but perhaps none would have felt this closeness more keenly than John, "*the disciple whom Jesus loved*" (John 20:2).

Names and Titles

John has been known to Christians throughout the Gospel Age as John the Divine, the Theologian, the Evangelist, the Revelator, the Apostle and "*the disciple whom Jesus loved*". Each of these titles is in some way derived from John's life and works or the traditions that surround him. The name John comes from the Hebrew 'Johanan' and means 'Jehovah-favoured'.

To look at all aspects of John's life and works would be a major study, so I have selected a few areas to examine.

John the Disciple

The account of John's calling to discipleship occurs just after Peter's, as is recorded in Matthew's gospel (Matthew 4:21). It is interesting that Peter and John were usually found together when quoted in the New Testament. As both were fisherman, it is probable that they knew each other very well, and some commentators even suggest that Peter and Andrew were brought up together with John and his brother James. John was a Galilean, the son of Zebedee and Salome, and was generally mentioned after his brother James, perhaps indicating that he was the younger of the two brothers.

Luke 5:10 records that James and John were fishing partners with Simon, while Mark 1:16-20 tells us that when the brothers were called by Jesus, they left their father in the ship with the hired servants. Having the wherewithal to hire servants possibly implies that John came from a fairly prosperous business background. It also seems likely that he had a house in Jerusalem, as is suggested by John 19:27 and Acts 1:13.

On a social and spiritual level, it seems that John was also active in different circles. He must have been very aware of the Jews' desire to see their Messiah, as it seems he was both a disciple of John the Baptist (as John 1:35-44 seems to indicate) and apparently was also well acquainted with Caiaphas, the High Priest. John 18:15 records that when Jesus was taken in before Caiaphas, Simon Peter and "*another disciple*" were following him. Verse 16 tells us that this 'other disciple' was allowed into the courtyard, as he was "*known to the high priest*". The NIV footnote relating to verse 15 comments that "*known to the high priest*" refers to more than a casual acquaintance. He had entry into the high priest's house and could bring Peter in, indicating his high standing with the Jewish leader.

John's Relationship with Jesus

Once called as a disciple, John seems to have experienced a singularly close relationship with Jesus. Halley's Bible Handbook suggests that John may have been Jesus' cousin. John 19:25, when compared with the Matthew and Mark accounts (Matthew 27:56 and Mark 15:40) suggests that John's mother, Salome, may have been Mary's sister. Whether this be true or not, John was certainly present at a number of important times in Jesus' life and ministry: he was one of the three disciples to witness the transfiguration (Matthew 17:2), he was sent with Peter to prepare the last supper in Jerusalem (Luke 22:8), and he was apparently seated next to Jesus at the last supper, before later being one of the three invited into the Garden of Gethsemane to be with his Lord during his final hours (Mark 14:33).

The King James Version's account of John's role at the last supper is of some interest. "*Now there was leaning on Jesus' bosom one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved. Simon Peter therefore beckoned to him, that he should ask who it should be of whom he spake. He then lying on Jesus' breast saith unto him, Lord, who is it? Jesus answered, He it is, to whom I shall give a sop, when I have dipped it. And when he had dipped the sop, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon*" (John 13:23-26).

Since Jesus surely loved all his disciples, it seems a little unusual to read the words "*one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved*" here, then a few chapters later, "*the other disciple, the one Jesus loved*" (John 19:25) and then again towards the end of John "*the disciple whom Jesus loved*" (John 21:20). These unusual words may have been used for two reasons:

- To identify the special, close relationship John had with the Lord (rather than trying to suggest that Jesus did not love the other disciples);
- To indirectly identify John as the author of the gospel.

Regarding the way this disciple was said to have been “*leaning on Jesus’ bosom*”, Isaac Asimov in his book *Asimov’s Guide to the Bible* tells us that the phrase was merely a common metaphor used to signify that the disciple was seated in the place of honour on Jesus’ right. Again, we see the special closeness that John had with his Lord through the fact that Peter asked John to enquire of Jesus, rather than asking the question himself.

John was present at the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law, the raising of Jairus’ daughter and the two miraculous catches of fish. He was entrusted with the care of Mary, Jesus’ mother, when Jesus was on the cross.

On one occasion John’s mother asked for her sons to have places at Jesus’ right and left hands in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 20:21). Interestingly, in the Mark account, it is the brothers themselves who asked Jesus for this favour, which caused some contention amongst the disciples.

“When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:41-45, NIV).

So it seems that John was close to Jesus and was given many privileges, but was not above reproach.

John’s Work as an Apostle

Immediately after the resurrection it seems that John was the first disciple to arrive at the tomb, being faster than Peter (John 20:4). Early in Acts, we read that John was embroiled in controversy, being thrown into prison with Peter for the healing of the crippled man at the Temple Gate (Acts 3:1-10). Yet a little later he is mentioned by Paul as being one of

those who “*seemed to be pillars*” of the church and one who offered to Paul the right hand of fellowship (Galatians 2:9 and Acts 15:4-6), so it appears that John was a key figure in the early church in Jerusalem.

John’s Gospel

According to Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons (circa 80 AD), John moved from Jerusalem and settled in Ephesus after the martyrdom of Peter and Paul. Halley’s Bible Handbook records that by the end of the first century Ephesus ‘had become the geographic and numerical centre of Christian population’, so this is probably where he came in contact with false doctrines which he wished to refute, and thus he wrote his gospel with the stated aim: “*But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing, you might have life through His name*” (John 20:31).

It is notable that John’s gospel is very different in character and content from the other three gospels. According to the book One Hundred Saints, Polycarp, quoting Irenaeus, claimed that John opposed the heresies of the Ebionites and wrote his gospel to refute gnosticism, hence requiring a different emphasis and writing technique from the other gospels. The Encyclopaedia Britannica reiterates John’s stated purpose, that those who read his Gospel may **believe** and that ‘The author, therefore, does not merely narrate a series of historical events, as do the other evangelists, but chooses details that suit his purpose in writing. Even the sayings of Jesus are presented in a special manner: unsympathetic listeners find them enigmatic, but the followers of Jesus find them full of meaning.’

The Authorship of Writings Ascribed to John

Some commentators question whether it was John the apostle who wrote the books normally attributed to him, namely the gospel of John, the three epistles and Revelation. Chadwick, in his work A History of Christianity, states that ‘it is highly unlikely that a Galilean fisherman whose native dialect was Aramaic could have written a gospel in scholarly Greek’. He also believed that the Revelation must have been written by another John, as the gospel writer ‘did not think that the world would end soon’. For an involved commentary on the authenticity of John’s writings, Chambers’ Encyclopaedia has some helpful information.

I personally have no difficulties believing that the gospel, the letters and the Revelation were John’s work for the following reasons:

1. John 21:24 identifies the author as being *“the disciple whom Jesus loved”*. Using a number of references in that gospel along with the other gospels for comparison, it seems clear to me that this disciple must have been John.

2. The writer of the gospel displays both local knowledge and the recollections of an eyewitness, such as the fragrance of the broken perfume jar, mentioned in John 12:1.

3. Commentators may not always appreciate the power of the Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost, the apostles were given the ability to speak in tongues. Annas and Caiaphas noted that Peter and John were *“unschooled, ordinary men”* (Acts 4:13) which made their words and testimony extraordinary to the ruling class. Furthermore, we are told by Paul in his letter to Timothy that all scripture is inspired by God (2 Timothy 3:16), so it seems reasonable to me to believe that John had the ability, given to him by God, to produce the writings ascribed to him.

4. Given his especially close relationship with Jesus, it is not surprising that his emphasis was on love and belief in the Saviour, as is seen in his gospel and epistles. This relationship would make him a suitable candidate to receive the commission of Revelation 1:11, to write down the words of this prophecy.

5. Revelation identifies the writer as *“I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ”* (Revelation 1:9; KJV); in other words, the writer was a fellow Christian and most likely known to his original recipients.

6. Other historical evidence (for example, from Irenaeus and Tertullian) supports John as having written the gospel as well as his having been banished to Patmos, again making him the likely author of the Revelation.

Further Traditions

Regarding John's gospel, Schaff, quoted by Halley, called it 'the most important literary production ever composed'. To early Christians, John was such an important figurehead and his words so well regarded that he was considered a saint, and the Roman Catholic and other churches still celebrate St. John's Feast Day on December 26th or, for the Eastern Orthodox churches, September 26th each year (World Book Encyclopedia).

Chadwick relates the tradition that John was to be put to death under the orders of the then Roman emperor, Domitian. Many early Christians believed that this would be a fulfilment of the words of Jesus in Mark 10:30, that James and John would “*drink this cup*”, indicating that they, too would be killed by the Romans. However, according to Tertullian, John was to have been martyred by being immersed in boiling oil but when he was miraculously unharmed, the emperor was forced to exile him to the Isle of Patmos, an Aegean island which the Romans used as a penal colony (Britannica).

Epiphanius, another early church notary, wrote that John died in 100 AD during the reign of the emperor Trajan. This is in contrast to the view expressed in the Apocryphal Acts of John which records John’s body disappearing from Ephesus in reported fulfilment of Jesus’ words to Peter “*If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?*” (John 21:22). We should be mindful, however, that the gospel author himself sought to dampen speculation of this sort when he wrote in verse 23 of the same chapter: “*But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, ‘If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?’*”

It is quite likely that John was the last apostle to die, seeing as he describes himself in 2 John 1 as “*The Elder*”. It also seems likely that he wrote other letters (see 1 John 2:14; 3 John 9), either general in nature, as is his first epistle, or to specific audiences, as are his second and third epistles. Jerome wrote of a very old John always saying to his congregation “*My little children, love one another*”. This is certainly the overarching message we gain from reading his letters.

John has long been considered a saint by the nominal church, and has, as his symbol, the eagle, supposedly to denote his inspired visions in Revelation (Britannica). There are numerous other traditions and interesting stories about John. Having now briefly looked at some of his life and works, let us finish this brief summary by hearing what John has to say to us through the words of his first letter:

“Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: we know it by the Spirit he gave us” (1 John 3:21-24).

May God continue to bless you as you strive to obey his commands, that He may consider you, too, a disciple whom Jesus loves.



PURPOSES

**To everything, turn, turn, turn,
There is a season, turn, turn, turn,
And a time for every purpose under heaven**

Merv Buckmaster

Introduction

Many of you will recognise these words from the song made popular by The Seekers, who would have known that they were singing the words of Ecclesiastes chapter three, verse one; *“To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven”*. In this short statement from Solomon we have an assurance that we and the world around us exist for a purpose. In the following verses he elaborated on the statement with specific items that encompass all aspects of everyday life. There is a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to reap; a time to weep and a time to laugh, and so on.

Everything under heaven has a purpose at its proper time, so we should be aware of God’s underlying purposes at all times, and of his supreme power. The apostle Paul expressed the same idea that God is a god of purpose in his address to the Athenians when he said *“For in Him we live, and move and have our being ...”* (Acts 17:28), and to the Romans when he wrote *“And we know that all things (that is, God’s purposes) work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose”* (Romans 8:28).

Although only God knows the end from the beginning (Isaiah 46:10) his word explains some of those purposes and their times. Here are some examples.

A Time to Plan

The many, many things that have a purpose under heaven are, of course, parts of God’s overall purpose to bring about the reconciliation of the human race, in harmony with the restitution, or reconstitution,

of all other aspects of the created universe. While God is revealed to us by the things around us, and by what he has revealed of himself in the earthly ministry of his son and in the written word, it is the instruction we receive from that word of truth which reveals his purposes.

Paul outlined the fundamental aspect of God's overall purpose in Ephesians chapter 3: *"If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God ... which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, how that by revelation He made known unto me the secret ... that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs ... of His promise in Christ by the gospel: whereof I was made a minister ... to make all men see what is the fellowship of the secret ... to the intent that now (to reveal) the manifold wisdom of God, according to the eternal purpose which He purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord"*.

In the Diaglott the latter part of that quotation, verse eleven, reads *"according to a plan of the ages, which He formed for the anointed Jesus our Lord"*. The purpose of God's plan of the ages is *"... the dispensation of the grace of God ..."*, the reconciliation of mankind.

The definition of having a purpose means to have the intention to achieve something, therefore to act according to a purpose means to work towards that achievement, that is, towards a desired result. Using this definition, Ephesians 3:11 becomes '... the manifold wisdom of God according to the desired result He intended to achieve in Christ Jesus our Lord'.

Many Times: The Ages

Those ages have their own purposes which fit into the plan, and Peter helped to define the ages for us in chapter three of his second epistle, separating the world (kosmos) that was from the world that now is and from the new heavens and new earth which will constitute the world to come (2 Peter 3:6,7,13).

The period of the existence of the world that was destroyed by the flood is properly referred to as the antediluvian age. The world that exists now includes three different aspects of God's dealings with men: firstly, with the patriarchs during the Patriarchal Age; secondly, with the nation of Israel under the Old Covenant, the Jewish Age; and

thirdly, with the Jews first and then with all mankind, from the time Jesus began to preach the gospel message, the Gospel Age. It will end when this order of things is replaced by the new heavens and new earth; that is, when the heavenly Jerusalem, God's righteous order of things, comes to earth and heavenly rule is established throughout the world (Revelation 21:1,2). God has appointed Jesus to rule as his king on earth for the thousand years of that Kingdom Age.

During the antediluvian age men began to spread across the earth, but that order of things became corrupt, and the reason and the purpose for the flood which ended the age was to cleanse the earth of the wickedness of mankind. The lesson for us is that God will destroy wickedness, and that has consequences which impinge on our own lives every day.

The purpose of the patriarchal age was to establish God's dealings with men of faith, to grant them rewards for obedience, in due time making them princes in all the earth (Psalm 45:16). It began with the promise that ultimately there would come someone who would bless all the families of earth.

Also during the patriarchal age God made an arrangement through the Old Covenant that should have shown the Israelites that mankind of itself was beyond redemption without a mediator. Moses was the mediator of the Old Covenant, but since neither righteousness nor forgiveness of sins could be obtained through the law (Romans 3:19,20), the covenant, while not working against God's promise of reconciliation, had its purpose, which was to cause the Israelites to look for a better way of salvation. As Paul wrote in Galatians 3:24, *"Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster, to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith"*.

With the New Covenant ratified by the new mediator, *"... the man Christ Jesus; who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time"* (1 Timothy 2:5,6), the purpose of the new arrangement, and the purpose of the gospel age, was defined by James, saying *"Men and brethren, harken unto me: Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the gentiles to take out of them a people for His name"* (Acts 15:14).

Although the primary purpose of the gospel age is the selection of Jesus' little flock, in that many are called and only a few are chosen (Matthew 22:14), from the vantage point of our time near the end of the age we can see that, in Jesus' command to go and teach all nations, it was also God's purpose to provide all mankind with the hope, no matter how it is misunderstood, for a better future.

After the gospel age will follow the kingdom age. For a thousand years the chosen ones, God's nation of priests, will work at Jesus' behest, in the restitution of all things. There can be no greater purpose than this. *"... the restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of His holy prophets since the world began"* (Acts 3:21).

A Time to Create

In the beginning *"God created the heavens and the earth"*. (In Genesis 1:1, God is translated from the Hebrew word 'Elohim'. In Genesis 2:4, and onwards throughout the Old Testament, 'the LORD' is Yahweh.)

In the last book of the Bible John was inspired to record that *"Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created"* (Revelation 4:11). God's purpose in creating all things was for his pleasure; to display his glory, and power; and to receive from his creation honour and worship. And it is displeasing to God and to us that through the influence of Satan, all things do not now glorify nor honour their Creator. To fulfil his purpose God has promised to bring about a reconstitution of all things, as Peter explained in Acts 3:21.

The Fall; a Time of Loss

When Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the forbidden tree *"... the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us to know good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken"* (Genesis 3: 22,23). The consequences of disobedience began with their expulsion from the garden.

Following the shock of losing the home that God had made for him and Eve, Adam came to realise that he had become alienated from God, that he had forfeited eternal life, and that he and all his descendants would suffer in many ways before they died. And perhaps he could see in God's promise to Eve that her 'seed' would bruise Satan's head, the beginning of "*... the much diversified wisdom of God, according to a plan of the ages, which He formed for Christ Jesus our Lord*" (Ephesians 3:11).

From this event, its cause and its effect, can be seen God's purpose, which was to make Adam's punishment an example of his divine justice. Since he declared to Adam that he would die if he ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, justice required that the punishment should be delivered.

This attribute of God's nature was also displayed in Paul's argument concerning God's righteousness, "*To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus*" (Romans 3:26).

The Flood; a Time of Cleansing

Many years after man's first disobedience "*... God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually And the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them And God said unto Noah ... I, even I, do bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh wherein is the breath of life, from under heaven; and everything that is in the earth shall die*" (Genesis 6:5,7,13,17). The wickedness in the world grieved the creator so much that he decided to send a flood, with the expressed purpose to wash the earth clean of mankind's wrongdoing.

God decided that when there remained only one family which served him faithfully, it was the time for that purpose to be fulfilled. At the head of that family was Noah, who was "*a just man, perfect in his generations, and who walked with God*" (Genesis 6:9), with his wife, their three sons and their wives: just eight people.

“Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord” (Genesis 6:8), so another purpose of this episode of the flood was to show God’s grace: an example of that unmerited favour that, at another time, would eventually include all mankind, even those who were destroyed in the flood because of their wickedness. This miraculous event was to become a step forward in God’s overall purpose of providing the rescue from a world of wickedness.

A Time of Faithfulness

“And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up and went unto the place of which God had told him and Isaac spake unto Abraham ... and said ... where is the lamb for the burnt offering? and Abraham said, My son, God will provide Himself a lamb for a burnt offering; ... And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand and took the knife to slay his son. And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven ... and said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, I have sworn, saith the LORD, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld ... thine only son from me I will bless thee ...” (Genesis 22:3,7-12,16,17).

In these abbreviated verses is the inspirational testimony to Abraham’s faith; the knowledge that he must obey God whatever the cost to himself, and the conviction that to do so would be for good, both to himself and to his maker. God’s purpose in dealing with Abraham in that manner was to establish justification by faith, as was set out clearly by Paul in Hebrews 11:17, which reads, *“By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac; and ... received the promises”*, and in Romans 1:17, *“The justified by faith shall live”*, Ephesians 2:8, *“For by grace ye are saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God”* and Romans 4:3, *“Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness”*.

And so God declared his supreme purpose; through faith, to justification; to imputed righteousness and salvation of all mankind.

The Exodus; a Time to Leave

One of the best-known events of biblical history is the deliverance of the Israelites, under the leadership of Moses, from their Egyptian captivity, and the demonstration of God's power over a hard-hearted Pharaoh in order to save his chosen people. Books have been written about it, and motion pictures have been produced to portray the epic event. These contemporary testimonies are the fulfilment of the prophesy in Romans 9:17 which reads, *"For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might show my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth"*.

God's purpose to display his power was twofold in this instance. It was displayed physically in the miraculous plagues and the awesome crossing of the Red Sea. And it was revealed symbolically, in that, while Moses led the nation of Israel to salvation, he was a type, or symbol of Jesus who will lead spiritual Israel to salvation (1 Corinthians 10:1-11).

It had been God's purpose that the nation of Israel was to have been an example to the nations around them, if they had kept the law, that he was a god of benevolence and justice.

Through God's promise to Abraham, spiritual Israel, the spiritual house of 1 Peter 2:5, is to participate in the enlightening of all the families of the earth during the Kingdom Age, thus fulfilling God's purpose despite the failure of the Israelites.

A Time for War

There are two main themes discernible in the annals of history: one is exploration, the other is war. This is true of the history of the Israelites, although their successes and disasters resulted from their turbulent association with Yahweh. Many of the dark chapters of Jewish history involve the invasion of Palestine and the destruction of the nations that occupied the land before them.

Ham, the son of Noah, had a son named Canaan, who was the progenitor of the Canaanites. During the period from Noah to Abraham the Canaanites grew to consist of eleven nations, although large tribes may be a better description of them (Genesis 10:15-20).

They spread throughout the area from Sidon to Gaza, and the land was named after Canaan. It was well occupied when God promised the land to Abraham as an inheritance (Genesis 12:1-7). By that time the Canaanites had ignored the creator and become a heathen nation.

Thus God exerted his influence on behalf of the Israelites, when they entered Canaan after their forty years in the wilderness, with the purpose of fulfilling his promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The boundaries of the land were defined to Moses by God and the land was divided among the Israelites according to lot (Numbers 33:50-56; 34:1-12).

The destruction of so many lives in the conquest of Canaan was the price God paid to fulfil his promise to the patriarchs. However, God's purpose extended far beyond the possession of Canaan by the Israelites, because the promise to Abraham foretold of one of his descendants who would bless all the families of the earth: *"Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed which is Christ"* (Galatians 3:16).

Furthermore, by demonstrating his physical power to his chosen people through warfare, and ruling them with the Old Covenant, he indicated his purpose to supply his spiritual power to his chosen people under the New Covenant, which is a spiritual covenant.

A Time for Peace

In the Biblical chronicle there is a noticeable gap of about four hundred years between the book of Malachi and the gospel of Matthew. I am unaware of any reason given in scripture for this discontinuity. There have been attempts to add other writings to bridge the gap, but they have been rejected when the criteria for deciding the written works that are acceptable in God's word were applied to them.

However, a consideration of the events of history spanning those four hundred years reveals that the Roman Empire slowly established a period of relative calm and civil order that extended throughout an extensive area of the Middle East, and lasted for the duration of the life of Jesus and the period of the establishment of the early Christian church.

The thought then follows that the stability of that period was for God's purpose to provide the best social conditions for the introduction and confirmation of the change from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant.

That period of relative social calm provides a contrast to the conflicts which have raged through those countries continually during the following centuries until the present day.

The Call: a Time to Speak

As we grow from our earliest years, each of us has to learn the meaning and the effects of choice; of being able to choose. We come to learn that we were created to exercise the privilege of being able to choose, and it follows from this realisation that we can wonder at the choices that God has made down through the ages. God's holy word explains those choices, sometimes in detail and sometimes only in principle.

He chose Abraham because of his faith, and as a consequence of that choice God dealt only with some of Abraham's descendants, the Israelites, as his people. *"You only have I known of all the families of the earth"* he said in Amos 3:2, with the corollary that he had no dealings with all the other nations around the globe. His purpose in giving the Israelites his special attention was to make them as a nation of priests (Exodus 19:6), an example of administering his jurisdiction, an example to the rest of mankind.

However, the Israelites failed in their obligations to Yahweh, and did not obtain the rewards that were offered to them. Moreover, they failed to recognise that a better way of reconciliation was necessary, and they also failed to see that a better way had been planned in the promise of the Messiah. Both aspects of their failure were defined by Paul when he explained that *"... the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ"* (Galatians 3:24).

That promise was fulfilled when Jesus was born and began teaching the gospel message of salvation. Once again God dealt, at first, only with the nation of Israel. Jesus' ministry was to offer them a sure way of redemption to become that nation of priests, thus continuing his purpose with them. Paul and Barnabas stated this to the Jews when they were at Antioch, *"It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you"* (Acts 13:46).

But the record shows that the Jews were envious of the apostles' willingness, in obedience to the Lord's command, to preach the message to the Gentiles, and they spoke against what Paul and Barnabas were preaching, contradicting the apostles and blaspheming the truth.

Then follows, for us who are Gentiles, one of the most uplifting statements in the Bible. They said, "... *but seeing ye put it (the word) from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles*". By calling believers from among the Jews and from the Gentiles; that is from all the peoples of earth, God's purpose to establish that royal priesthood would be accomplished with justice and impartiality (Acts 10:34).

The Time of New-for-Old

To bring the Gentiles into his plan for reconciliation God had to replace the Old Covenant with another covenant, because the Old Covenant was made only with the Israelites. But Paul explained in Hebrews 8:8, quoting from Jeremiah chapter 31, that "*For finding fault with them (the Jews), Behold the days come, saith the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah*".

God offered the New Covenant firstly to the Jews. "*And this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel ... saith the LORD: I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts*" (Hebrews 8:10).

By planning to establish that New Covenant through the sacrifice of his son at Calvary, God turned the Old Covenant into an Old Covenant that was "... *ready to vanish away*" (Hebrews 8:13). Jesus "*is the mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises*" (Hebrews 8:6). And with his sacrifice he "... *took away the first so that He could establish the second*" (Hebrews 10:9). The way in which the failure of the Israelites to keep the Old Covenant was overcome by the New Covenant, and the revelation of the secret to make it a covenant for all people, displays quite clearly God's great love for the people of his creation, and his purpose to restore it for his pleasure.

A Time of Regal Purpose

God's purpose in allowing Saul to be proclaimed King of the Israelites was to show that he, Yahweh, was, and is, the only one worthy to be our King; notwithstanding the thousand year reign of Jesus. The lesson for us is to acknowledge no other being as King over us, although the joint-heirs will have the privilege of acknowledging Jesus as king, and bringing all men to the same understanding, until he returns absolute rule to the Heavenly Father at the end of the kingdom age.

God's purpose in strengthening David during the continuation of the conquest of Canaan, in spite of David's shameful conduct with Uriah and Bathsheba, an episode which has its own reason, its own purpose and its own lesson, was to show that he will strengthen everyone who fights against physical and spiritual enemies for the sake of their conviction that he is the one true God.

God's purpose in giving Solomon great wisdom was to make clear that the exercise of wisdom is the most precious activity of the mind, and that he alone has perfect wisdom, a truth recognised by the apostle Paul (Romans 16:27). Solomon recognised this principle in the opening and closing verses of his *"... words of the Preacher"*, closing with *"Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments for this the whole duty of man"* (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

Furthermore, Solomon's fall from grace showcases the folly of abandoning wisdom after having employed it, especially when in a position of great responsibility. This lesson fits God's purpose to have all men come to an accurate knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4).

A Time to Rest

There is a purpose for everything under heaven. There is a reason for everything God has done, although we can know about only those things which he has had recorded in his word for us to learn. All those things that were written beforehand were written for our learning (Romans 15:4), and therefore there is a lesson for us in every one of them.

Whether we choose to plant or reap, to build up or break down, to dance or mourn, to keep or lose, to gather or discard, to sew or rend; there is a time and a purpose when truth and wisdom guide those choices.

Gaining such knowledge and judgement will have its reward in the age to come, but there is a reward for these times given through God's mercy for those who try to worship him in sincerity and truth. That reward is a rest in "... *the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, (and which) shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 4:7).

We must search the scriptures; seek the reasons for the events that took place and try to understand the words that God has spoken through the prophets and the apostles. Find the purposes underlying them and so find the lessons he has had written for us "... *and not to us only, but unto all them also who love His appearing*" (2 Timothy 4:8).



LAUGHTER

by Jenny Roe

Laughter is a form of exercise.

Laughter burns calories (kilojoules).

The science of laughter and its effect upon the body is called Gelotology.

Laughter releases happy hormones.

Laughter releases the hormone human growth hormone (HGH) which boosts the immune system.

Adults laugh 15 to 30 times a day; women more than men.

Babies laugh 300 times a day.

Our sacred book, the Bible, deals with serious themes. So much of its content is narrative, sometimes confronting, dealing with life and death issues. But there is some humour. God has created us with the ability to laugh so I want to look at some instances in Scripture which cause me to smile.

Balaam and his talking donkey! Sounds like a fairy tale, yet recorded in Numbers 22:21-39.

The account of Gideon and the smashed vessels is found in Judges chapter 7. Do you remember that God instructed Gideon to fight the Midianites yet Gideon only had a tiny army? God told Gideon to organise his small army into three divisions and to surround the Midianites' camp at night. They were to carry a trumpet in one hand and their concealed torch in the other. At a given signal they were to sound a blast on each trumpet and smash each vessel thus exposing the lights, and to cry out "*The sword of the LORD and of Gideon*" (Judges 7:20). The enemy fled in terror being totally unprepared for the sudden lights which advanced in seemingly huge numbers and from three directions.

In 1 Kings 14:1-6 I am amused by the account of Jeroboam's wife. Jeroboam told his wife to disguise herself and go to the prophet Ahijah to ask his advice. Two things make me smile. The prophet was old and blind so could not see Jeroboam's wife anyway. So her disguise was wasted. Secondly, God told Ahijah that Jeroboam's wife was coming, so after all her trouble of probably putting on a wig, maybe partially covering her face with a scarf and wearing unusual clothing, Ahijah called out from inside "*Come in wife of Jeroboam, why this disguise?*"

Young David the shepherd boy was dressed by Saul into Saul's armour just prior to David facing Goliath. Can you imagine slender teenage David being scarcely able to move in the heavy armour of King Saul? Can you imagine the expressions on the faces of David's brothers when they saw their little sibling, not protected in any armour and carrying a simple slingshot? What a challenge in facing the intimidating, gloating Goliath!

Moving on to the New Testament, Jesus calls James and John the "*sons of thunder*" (Mark 3:17). Did they have loud voices? Were they strong impressive personalities? When they spoke, did people take notice? I'm not sure but the nickname makes me smile.

And what about the wonderful account of Acts 5:17 and onwards? The apostles had been thrown into prison for preaching the Gospel. During the night an angel opened the prison doors and sent them to

the temple courts. When the High Priest and his associates went to the jail, the guards were still standing at their posts and the doors were locked. What a smack in the face for those elite Jewish office bearers! How could this be? I am smiling just to think of the apostles enthusiastically preaching in the temple court while the High Priest readjusts his incredulous expression!

Think of Mary Magdalene in the garden following Christ's resurrection. She is speaking to her Lord without realising it. She asks Jesus if he might know what had happened to the body of her friend. She is speaking to the very one and asking questions about himself. I love that account! I find Christ's unique reply of "Mary" both amusing and very moving. Can you imagine Mary's face upon realising to whom she spoke?

Dear friends we have the best knowledge in the world. We are so privileged to know of a great future which the Lord has planned for you, for me, for those who have loved the Lord Jesus and for those who have never known Him. Let us be a people of joy. Let us embrace Proverbs 17:22 which reads "A cheerful heart does good like a medicine, but a broken spirit dries the bones". A cheerful heart

May each of you find joy in serving our Lord, in the everyday tasks of life, and in knowing the promises ahead.



Notes from a Group Study of the Epistle to the HEBREWS

Hebrews 13:1-3

- 1. *Let brotherly love continue.***
- 2. *Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.***
- 3. *Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body.***

The exhortation for brotherly love to continue is essential to Christian fellowship. The Greek word is 'philadelphia', and occurs in other places such as Romans 12:10, 1 Thessalonians 3:4, Titus 3:15, 1 Peter 1:22 and 1 Peter 3:8. Brotherly love is an aspect of love, just as is 'agape' or unconditional love.

In verse 2, to “*be not forgetful*”, that is, to remember, means not to neglect opportunities to do good, as in Galatians 6:10. To “*entertain*” means to be hospitable to, generous and accommodating. The “*strangers*” are those outside the congregation, whether they are known or not, even if they are not necessarily looking for the truth. Christ showed that kindness to them is a part of Christian duty. To be “*unawares*” is when the interest or intention of the stranger is not known. The cases of Abraham (Genesis 18:2), Gideon (Judges 6:12) and Manoah (Judges 13:11) who entertained angels unawares are examples from the Old Testament, but as such, do not signify that similar occurrences can be applied to the gospel age because of its different dispensation.

In verse 3, to “*Remember them that are in bonds*” has the same meaning as to “*be not forgetful*” in verse 2, of those believers who are imprisoned because of their faith, since other prisoners have been convicted of crimes and deserve to be in prison. And remember “*them which suffer adversity*”, those who are in the church, just as you are, and just as if you were suffering in the same way or for the same reason. This may mean to sympathise with them, to pray for them or to do something active such as providing support with food, clothing or visits for encouragement, depending on the circumstances of each case. Paul stated the principle of benevolence in Galatians 6:10.

This is supported by Paul’s reminder to the Hebrews of the afflictions they suffered soon after they came to a knowledge of the gospel message, as mentioned in chapter 10 verses 32 to 34. This exhortation to be compassionate is still relevant because persecution can still come to believers. Examples of such religious persecution occurred during the world wars.

Hebrews 13:4-6

- 4. *Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge.***
- 5. *Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.***
- 6. *So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me.***

From verse 4; marriage is an honourable institution because it was established at the beginning when God made a wife for Adam and

commanded them to be faithful to each other, as Paul reminded those at Corinth in 1 Corinthians 7:1-7. The alternative of not marrying was acceptable if it was for the purpose of giving better service to God. One man, one wife was a divine rule, although there were exceptions to it during the Jewish age where they served God's purposes. The marriage relationship could be taken as symbolic of the Lord and his people, with Jesus as the head of the church, since there is only one true church, chosen by him. Jesus could not be unfaithful, but in the sense that the church could be, believers are warned to keep away from adultery in their marriage, and from apostasy in their faith. Disobedience in either case would be judged by God, perhaps in the manner of the last verse of the previous chapter. An example was Joseph who refused the temptation by Potiphar's wife, even before the ten commandments were formalised at Mount Sinai (Genesis chapter 39).

In verse 5, conversation is not only the words spoken but also actions taken; that is, conduct or behaviour, which must be without covetousness, which is the desire to have something which belongs to someone else. Although the Diaglott here renders covetousness as essentially the love of money, the tenth commandment prohibited the desire to have anything that was owned by another. Paul pointed out to Timothy that the love of money was a root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:6-10).

The prohibition of covetousness is followed by words of encouragement to *"be content with such things as you have"*. Jesus told his disciples to take no anxious thought for food or clothing, but to give a higher priority to gaining the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 6:32-34). He also warned them to fear anyone who could lead them away from the truth (Matthew 10:28). Paul told the Romans that nothing could separate the believer from the love of God as shown by the willingness of Jesus' sacrifice (Romans 8:38-39). A believer may have little or much of worldly goods, but such possessions were of little value compared to the promise of salvation and everlasting life, offered through the terms of the New Covenant. The arrangements of the old Covenant were lost to them, but the New Covenant offered more than enough to make them content.

Then in verse 6 the believer is told not to fear what man can do. Such faith that takes away fear is based on God's promise that he will not forsake those whom he has chosen, and it has been demonstrated by the martyrs down through the gospel age. Moses told the Israelites that God would not forsake them (Deuteronomy 31:6), and God re-affirmed the promise to Joshua (Joshua 1:6). Jesus said he would be with the

disciples until the end of the age (Matthew 28:20), and while God supported the Israelites in their physical battles, the support for the believer of the gospel age is essentially of a spiritual nature.

Because of this promise the believer can claim that the Lord is his helper and be confident of that help, especially with the problems associated with the matters mentioned in verses 3, 4 and 5. This is the same confidence as that which enables the believer to approach the throne of grace in prayer as in Hebrews 4:16. God is the highest authority in everything, and the help he offers is his guidance for all man's activities, available from the word of truth, by study in private or with other brethren.



NEWS

Memorial Supper

The memorial of the Lord's Supper will be held on Saturday 12th April 2025, which falls during our Autumn Conference (see below). Please contact us (info@newcovenantfellowship.org.au) for further information.

Autumn Conference

Our annual autumn conference will be held once again at the Foothills Conference Centre in Mooroolbark from Saturday 12th – Monday 14th April 2025 and we look forward to exploring our theme of "What is the World Coming To?". The program will include talks, devotions, Bible studies and opportunities for informal fellowship. For further information please contact us (info@newcovenantfellowship.org.au).



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 understandings 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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