

# Glad Tidings

*of the Kingdom of God*

1586

***Bringing the Future to Life - page 3***  
***Real Peace - page 5***  
***The New Life - page 12***  
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# Glad Tidings

of the Kingdom of God

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men and women that soon Christ will return to Earth as judge  
and ruler of God's world-wide Kingdom.

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## Contents

Bringing the Future to Life.....	3
Real Peace.....	5
The Reliability of the Gospels - Evidence from Archaeology ...	7
Joseph's Faith .....	9
The New Life.....	12
Absolute Morality .....	16
God Revealed in Hosea.....	17

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# Bringing the Future to Life

We are beings with senses, and we like to be able to feel things. If we can see it, hear it or touch it, then we believe it. We often hear that 'first hand' experience is best, we want to 'see things for ourselves' and we tend to trust 'what we can feel'.

The British poet John Keats once wrote in a letter: 'Nothing ever becomes real till it is experienced.' Great efforts are made to bring concepts or ideas 'to life', to make them real so that people can experience them.

## Bible Realities

God recognizes that human beings need to feel things in order to really believe them, and so He shows His purpose in ways people can experience. Right back in the Garden of Eden, He warned Adam and Eve about the consequences of disobeying Him:

*Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die (Genesis 2:17).*

When they did defy Him, He told them that they would die and demonstrated it to them by clothing them in dead animals' skins (Genesis 3:21).

In teaching Israel to worship Him, God gave them a system of priests, the tabernacle (a tent of worship) and eventually the temple in Jerusalem. These things were not for His benefit, but He established them to help His people better understand Him, and how He wants to be approached.

To show men and women what He is like, and what He wants us to be like,



God used the ultimate example. He sent His Son, the Lord Jesus, to bring those godly qualities to life in everything that he did.

## Living Promises

When God makes promises to men and women, He does the same thing. His promises are not empty, vague or open to loose interpretation. They are specific and concrete, and typically have a real experience associated with them.

God promised a number of great things to Abraham in Genesis chapters 12 to 22. These included the land of Israel, a great number of descendants, and one specific descendant – the Lord Jesus – in whom all people will be blessed. How could God make Abraham 'feel' these? At least two ways are described.

When promising the land, God told Abraham to experience it first hand, to look at it and to walk up and down in it:

And the LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him: "Lift your eyes now and look from the place where you are – northward, southward, eastward, and westward... Arise, walk in the land through its length and its width, for I give it to you" (Genesis 13:14–17).

The promise of descendants would have been particularly poignant for Abraham, as Sarah his wife was barren. They had no children and they were now too old, without God's help. In Genesis 18:1–15, angels told Abraham that he would have a son by Sarah, and this was fulfilled precisely:

*And the LORD visited Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken. For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him (Genesis 21:1–2).*

So Abraham had this brought to life, the experience both of having a son and of God's promises being fulfilled.

## **The Real Kingdom of God**

Thankfully, this applies to God's promises and prophecies to all men and women. The Bible explains that Jesus will return to set up the world-wide Kingdom of God, where faithful believers will be raised from the dead (if necessary) and live for ever in a perfect world. This is a marvellous prospect, but how can we imagine it? We do so through the very specific pictures of the kingdom 'painted' in the Bible, and through the physical demonstrations God gave.

When we read the descriptions of God's kingdom, we find that they are really detailed in terms of the places

and conditions involved. Look at the following examples:

*For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem (Isaiah 2:3).*

*There will be an abundance of grain in the earth (Psalm 72:16).*

*There shall come forth a rod from the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots (Isaiah 11:1).* This names the future king's ancestor Jesse. He was the father of David, a great ancestor of Jesus.

*The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole, and the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper's den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:8–9).*

It is worth reading the whole of these chapters to get a fuller picture, which really is detailed and gives a great sense of what the kingdom will be like.

What about raising the dead and living for ever? Well, on several occasions Jesus raised the dead, describing himself as 'the resurrection and the life' (John 11:25). When Jesus himself was raised from the dead and made immortal, he met with his disciples several times and there were over 500 eye witnesses of the risen Son of God (1 Corinthians 15:3–8).

God brings the future to life in His word and gives us real, tangible evidence that His kingdom will come soon and will be wonderful. Let's take time to read about it!

**Editor**

# Real Peace

Across the meadow from where we live is a pool. It is a place of peace. No fish ever breaks the surface of the water; no kingfisher ever disturbs the reeds; no water fowl ever calls to its mate. Across the surface of the pool there is a layer of thin green weed. There is peace at this place – peace by stagnation. It is the peace of death.



There is an equivalent to this in real life. An existence which avoids the challenge of faith and is detached from the issues of life is never disturbed because it is never interested enough to be concerned. The cares of life give no anxiety because they are ignored. It is not upset by the pains and problems of others because it seldom recognizes them. This is in its way is a life at peace. But it is the peace of stagnation.

## The Peace of God

The peace of God is something altogether different. It is the peace to which the Apostle Paul referred when he said *“Let the peace of God rule in your hearts”* (Colossians 3:15).

Consider for a moment the circumstances under which these words were written. They were penned from Rome where Paul was in prison, daily and hourly expecting a violent death. They were written in days of persecution, when political and religious animosity was fierce. This tells us something fundamental about the peace of God.

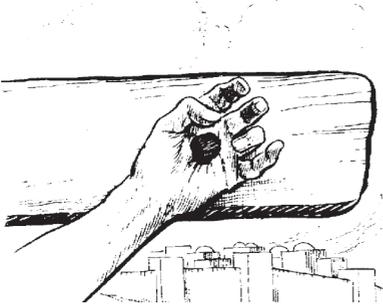
A man who had it and urged others to keep it, was in danger, at the point of death, surrounded by bitterness and hatred – yet there in his heart was the peace of God. So evidently we do not have to buy a cottage in the remote seclusion of the country to enjoy this peace; it is an internal condition, a state of the heart and mind.

To understand this, we need to look at the context: read Colossians 1:15–23. Notice what Paul is saying: The Lord Jesus Christ is the pinnacle of God’s creation, and he is the centre of God’s plan. Then he declares that this unique, perfect man spilled his blood to reconcile men and women to God. And then as a consequence, he is able to present us absolutely faultless in the sight of God.

Just think of those words again – holy, blameless and above reproach before God. Could there be anything more peace-inspiring? In a distressing world we are seldom at peace. We often find ourselves wanting harmony, but finding only discord; wanting to do good but struggling to carry it out; blown around by ambition, desire, endeavour – but no peace. Perhaps we think we have found peace and then it is broken by some event; it seems we have tranquillity and then some new adversity invades our little world.

## The Dreadful Cost

There is a powerful and moving backdrop to this. The Lord Jesus, the one who best represented God, suffered the awful and lonely tragedy of crucifixion. In that bruising death he made peace through the blood of his cross.



This is challenging, especially when we consider the awful discord and lack of peace in people's hearts and in the world. Even those trying to please God will recognise that they disobey Him and sometimes feel powerless to do better. Then we take up the New Testament and read that: *Justified by faith we have peace with God (Romans 5:1).*

## Free from Fear

We need no longer be afraid. Our disobedience has been cancelled. This is something to cling to at all costs. The Creator of the universe gives us absolution through the death of His Son.

The supreme example of this peace is in the Lord Jesus himself. Think of him in the presence of Pilate, who held Jesus' fate in his hands (or so he thought!). Of the two men, Pilate and Jesus, who do you think had the most peace? Jesus going to his death or Pilate to his breakfast? Pilate's mind was in turmoil and his conscience was

tearing him apart. There is a sense in which he was a microcosm of restless humanity.

Jesus could have had the other kind of peace, the peace of stagnation. He could have avoided the danger and sidestepped the cross. But he was not that kind of man. He faced life with all its reality. He met sin and death face to face, and he defeated them. By dying despite his perfection, he overcame human weakness for himself and for all of us, giving true peace today and the hope of life in the kingdom of God.

*He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon him, and by his stripes we are healed (Isaiah 53:5).*

## Peace Ruling in Our Hearts

We can have great peace in the knowledge that this has been done for us. Through Jesus we can enter a new life, pardoned for our faults and reconciled to God. Not only this, but God cares for us now:

*All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).*

The best is yet to be. The Kingdom of God is soon to transform His people and the whole world.

This does not mean that we shall never worry, indeed sometimes worry is necessary. But with the right perspective this is concern without panic, anxiety without despair. The peace of God is a lifeline in today's world.

**Dennis Gillett**

## The Reliability of the Gospels - 3

# Evidence from Archaeology

One method for confirming the reliability of the gospel accounts is to compare them with archaeology. Surely, we can simply look at the gospels, find a corresponding archaeological dig and compare the two.

Sadly, it isn't as simple as this, particularly as many incidents in the gospels would leave no trace. The feeding of the five thousand, for example, would leave only footprints and crumbs, and these would not be preserved for archaeologists to discover. Archaeology finds the remains of buildings and inscriptions. Unless an event is commemorated in an inscription it is unlikely that any traces would be preserved (the one exception is a battle where one might find arrowheads – but there are no battles in the New Testament).

### Consistent Evidence

However, there are elements of the Gospels that can be confirmed or discredited by archaeology. There are accounts which give a good description of some place where an event took place, there are references to known individuals and there are descriptions of customs and lifestyle at the time of Jesus. This brings a second problem, which is that archaeologists have not yet discovered everything that could be found and some things never will be found.

Nevertheless, Israel is one of the most excavated countries in the world, and there is a considerable amount of evidence from the time of Jesus. What is interesting is that none of it contra-

dicts the Bible picture; everything found so far confirms the idea that the Gospels are accurate records. As one scholar has said: *“The critics of the 19th century have been completely overturned by the archaeologists of the 20th century”*.

### Real Places

Let's look at some examples. The first is a place mentioned in the Gospel of John which has been found by archaeologists.

*Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades (John 5:2).*

This is part of a passage which describes a healing miracle that Jesus carried out near this pool. The description of the pool is very similar to that of pagan healing sanctuaries dedicated to the Greek god Asclepius. In the nineteenth century critics used to hold this up to ridicule as a major error made by John. After all, who would build a pagan healing sanctuary right next to the temple in Jerusalem? Then the pool was found. It has been excavated several times, and the solid conclusion is that it was a healing sanctuary with five colonnades.

The critics held onto their theory for a long time. Through the first half of the twentieth century commentaries on John's gospel were written which indicated the supposed allegorical meaning of the building and assured the reader that the place never really

existed. For a whole century after the discovery of the remains by archaeologists, the sceptical critics continued to ignore the evidence and declare that the Gospels were wrong. Most scholars at last accept the very close correspondence between the New Testament and the archaeology of the period, but many sceptics still use the writings of the earlier critics in an attempt to attack Christianity.

It is notable that John's Gospel mentions a wide range of places in Jerusalem, places like Gabbatha or Lithostratos (John 19:13), Golgotha (John 19:17), the pool of Siloam (John 9:7,11) and the Temple precincts (e.g. John 10:23). These have all been found by archaeologists.

## Real Lives

Some of the people in the Gospels are also known from archaeology. An inscription in Caesarea records the dedication of a temple to the Emperor Tiberius by Pontius Pilate the governor. An ossuary (a box containing the bones of dead people) found in Jerusalem belonged to Caiaphas, the High Priest, and probably contained his bones, along with bones from other members of his family. The tomb of Herod the Great, king at the time of Jesus' birth has also been found, but so far his coffin has not been discovered.

But the most striking results of archaeology are the illumination of tiny points of lifestyle. For example, consider the miracle of turning of water into wine in Cana.

*Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons (John 2:6).*



The significant point here is an incidental detail: the water jars were made of stone. This was not common practice in the ancient world. Water jars were overwhelmingly made of earthenware. However, in Judea and Galilee this was not the case. Under the Law of Moses, if an earthenware jar became unclean it could not be used again and had to be broken; a stone jar only had to be washed clean and could then be used again. Thus stone jars were used instead. This fact is clear from excavations in Judea and Galilee; here alone jars were made of stone. The details of the Gospels are correct.

This is important because the Jewish War of 66–73 AD destroyed the communities in Judea and Galilee. After 70 AD the inhabitants were Gentiles who did not speak Aramaic and did not follow the Jewish law. The lifestyle changed and nothing of the old way of life was remembered. The details of life are recorded accurately in spite of this.

The correspondence between archaeology and the Gospels is startlingly good. It tells us that the Gospel writers had an accurate knowledge of life and events in Judea and Galilee at the time of Jesus, and that they wrote those details into their records. This is good evidence for the reliability of the Gospels.

**John Thorpe**

# Joseph's Faith

The words on a gravestone can tell us a lot about the person who is buried there. When we look in the Bible, we learn about how men and women lived and died, and the choices they made based on their belief in God. A fantastic example of this is Hebrews chapter 11, where we have observations about the lives of people who lived 'by faith'. This list, with its comments, is special: being inspired by God, it is from God's point of view.

One such person is Joseph, whose story starts in Genesis 37. He began life in Israel as a shepherd boy, and ended up ruling the mighty nation of Egypt. The example used in Hebrews 11 is in verse 22, where we read:

*By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and gave instructions concerning his bones.*

So why is Joseph mentioned in this 'faith chapter', and why is this example used? It is indeed a strange mix of people: Noah builds an ark, Abraham lives in tents rather than a house, and Joseph says what he wants done with his remains after he is dead; all recorded as examples of acts of faith.

In fact, a great deal of the life of Joseph seems to be about faith.

## Difficult Relationships

As a youth, he was involved in the family shepherding business, either as a shepherd with his brothers, or going between them, gathering the profit and loss information about the flocks: how many lambs were born, how many



sheep died from wild animals, theft, and so on. In Genesis 37:2 Joseph brought a bad report to his father about the brothers' business, which made him very unpopular indeed.

It did not help that Joseph was his father Jacob's favourite son, and this preference was no secret. Jacob made Joseph a coat of many colours, or pieces, which would have been very expensive, and would suggest that Joseph had some authority over his brothers.

As if this was not enough, Joseph had some unusual dreams. In one dream, he and his brothers were binding sheaves of wheat in the field, and when Joseph's sheaf stood upright, all the other sheaves bowed down to it. In another dream, the sun, moon, and eleven stars all bowed down to Joseph. No wonder his brothers hated him! Despite all this, Joseph seems to have been a confident seventeen-year-old, and when his father asked him to go out and see how his brothers were getting on, ranging far and wide to get good pasture for the flocks, he immediately responded.

## Exile and Prison

Walking maybe sixty miles, Joseph met his brothers, only to discover them ready to kill him and to tell his father that some wild animal had eaten him. They stripped him of his coat of many colours, and threw him into one of the local open pits. One brother, Reuben, tried to protect Joseph, but failed when another suggested that they sell him as a slave and keep the profits. So they sold Joseph to some travelling merchants for twenty pieces of silver, just as so many years later, Judas would betray the Lord Jesus for thirty pieces of silver.



Arriving in Egypt, Joseph was sold to Potiphar, one of the chief bodyguards of Pharaoh (Genesis 39:1). He did so well there that Potiphar made him the senior servant in his home, and God made the household prosper because of Joseph.

But Potiphar's wife tried to seduce Joseph and he fled, leaving his coat in her hand. Of course, she protested her innocence to Potiphar and claimed that Joseph had tried to rape her.

Joseph remained faithful to God, but found himself in prison in Egypt. However, God continued to care for him, and he eventually became a trusted senior prisoner.

While he was in prison, two fellow-prisoners had dreams, which Joseph interpreted for them. Joseph's interpretation proved totally accurate: the royal baker was executed, and the royal butler was reinstated to his former high position. Despite asking the butler to remember him when he was freed, Joseph spent another two years in prison. That is a long time to be incarcerated, thinking that you have been forgotten. We may wonder how Joseph kept his faith in God during these dark years.

## Joseph's Rise to Power

At the end of these two years Pharaoh, king of Egypt, had a dream that really bothered him. The dream was rather strange: he dreamed that he stood by the mighty river Nile, and seven extremely well-fed cows came up out of the river, and grazed in the nearby meadow. Seven very thin and ugly cows then came up out of the river, and stood by the other cows. Without warning the seven gaunt cows ate up the fat cows, but became no fatter.

Going back to sleep, Pharaoh had another dream. Seven ears of corn came up on one stalk, strong and good. Then seven thin and wind-blasted ears of corn sprang up and devoured the full and strong ears, but were not improved. None of the magicians or soothsayers of Egypt could offer an interpretation for the king.

Finally the butler thought of Joseph, who was brought out of prison, cleaned up and presented to Pharaoh.

*Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that you can understand a dream, to interpret it" (Genesis 41:15).*

Joseph replied: *“It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh an answer of peace”* (v16).

Pharaoh happily recounted his dreams about the thin and fat cattle, and the thin and thick ears of corn. Joseph explained that the message of the two dreams was the same. There would be seven years of great plenty, with amazing harvests throughout Egypt, followed by seven years of appalling famine, so bad that the good years would be completely forgotten.

*And the dream was repeated to Pharaoh twice because the thing is established by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass* (v32).

Joseph was given great honour: the signet ring of the king, fine linen clothes, a gold chain and use of the second carriage of state, behind Pharaoh himself. He was also given great power. Managing all the store-houses of Egypt during the seven good years, Joseph had control of all the corn sales, and therefore the entire nation of Egypt, when famine came.

## **Fulfilment and Reconciliation**

During the years of famine, Joseph’s brothers came down to buy food from the great granaries of Egypt. They didn’t recognise him at first and did in fact bow down to him, exactly as he had dreamed all those years before. His father, Jacob, and all his family later came to live in Egypt as honoured guests of Pharaoh.

Eventually, Jacob died in Egypt and was embalmed, but was taken to be buried in Israel. Maybe this is what prompted Joseph to give “instructions concerning his bones” as we saw in



Hebrews 11. The exact words are recorded in Genesis 50:24–25:

*And Joseph said to his brethren, “I am dying; but God will surely visit you, and bring you out of this land to the land of which He swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.” Then Joseph took an oath from the children of Israel, saying, “God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here.”*

So after all his adventures, Joseph wanted to be buried in the land of Israel. He understood that God had promised the land to his great-grandfather, Abraham, and he wanted to be part of that promise. Having showed faith to God throughout his often difficult life, he did so at its end. And God acknowledged this in Hebrews 11.

God also promised that all nations will be blessed through Abraham’s one special descendant, the Lord Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:16). Jesus will soon return to the earth and fulfil these promises, raising his faithful followers from the dead and establishing the Kingdom of God, reigning from Israel. Let’s be faithful, just like Joseph, and be part of that wonderful time.

**Peter Hale**

# The New Life

The Bible teaches clearly that baptism is essential to be part of God's family and to have the hope of everlasting life in His kingdom. That was the message in the last part of this series. But what happens after baptism? What comes next? This part of our series looks at the practical and spiritual aspects of this new life.

In Acts chapter 2, a great number of people followed the apostles' advice and were baptised. They were not then left without guidance and support. Verse 42 tells us that after they were baptized:

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers.*

These four things are essential parts of true Christians' lives.

## Essential beliefs

The apostles' teaching was based on what Jesus taught, which was founded on the Old Testament. If all the New Testament verses that depend on the Old Testament were removed from our Bibles, there would be little left; and what remained would not make much sense. The only way for us to stay faithful to the apostles' teaching is for us to read from the whole Bible regularly, preferably every day.

There is a suggested Bible Reading Planner included in each December issue of *Glad Tidings*. You can request this on our web site or by post – all the details are on the back of this magazine. By following it you will read all of

the Old Testament once and the New Testament twice, each year. When you



have a question, you will often find the answer as you continue to read, because the Bible contains its own explanations. You are also very welcome to send your query to one of the addresses in this publication.

Very few of us can read the Bible in its original languages, which are Hebrew and Greek plus a little Aramaic. We depend on translations. It is best to use a translation that keeps as close as possible to the language used by the writers, not a loose translation or paraphrase. That way you are getting as close as you can to the inspired words of God rather than being presented with the opinions of a translator, who could be biased. The translations mostly used in *Glad Tidings* are the New King James and English Standard Versions, which try to stay close to the original text.

## Christian Fellowship

The converts in Acts were not left on their own after they were baptised.

They met together to support and encourage each other in their new lives. As ‘brothers and sisters’ in the Lord Jesus they rejoiced to be members of God’s family. They studied God’s word together and helped each other in many ways – including preaching to others:

*And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people (Acts 2:46–7).*

## **Breaking of Bread**

The New Testament contains four records of the last meal that Jesus shared with his followers before his death. You can easily read the accounts for yourself in Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22 and 1 Corinthians 11:24–29. At the end of the meal we read that Jesus...

*...took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:19–20).*

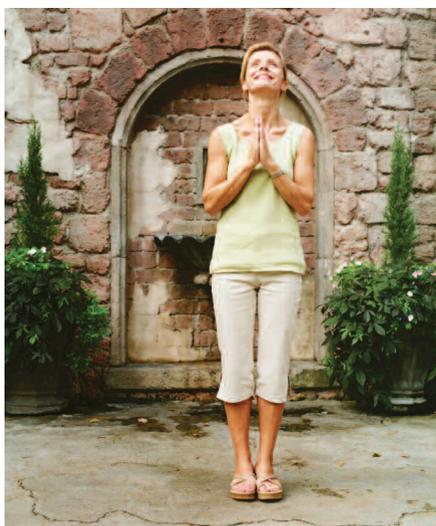
Jesus told us to do this as the right way to remember him and contemplate his sacrifice. It is his direct command and so we should obey it regularly. The Apostle Paul advised that at these times we should examine ourselves individually, to search our own hearts and motives, face up to our failures, and resolve to serve God better until Jesus returns as king (read 1 Corinthians 11:23–29).

## **Prayer: How We Speak to God**

It gives God pleasure when we pray to Him sincerely:

*The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD, but the prayer of the upright is acceptable to Him (Proverbs 15:8).*

We can pray to Him as individuals or as a group. Our prayers show that we believe He is our Creator, that He knows our thoughts, and that He desires to help us. By prayer we thank Him for all He does for us. We show Him that we really do believe His promises and want more than anything else to be part of them, in His mercy. We confess our sins (all the times when we fail to live as Jesus did), and we ask Him to forgive us and guide our lives. We tell Him that we have forgiven all the people who have sinned against us in the past, and that above all we want Him to set up His Kingdom here on earth. Jesus himself gives us guidance in ‘The Lord’s Prayer’ found in Matthew 6:9–13.



*This is the confidence that we have toward Him, that if we ask anything according to His will He hears us (1 John 5:14).*

Gradually our whole life can become like a prayer to God and we value His mercy more and more. This spiritual growth comes if we seek to live new lives now, seriously trying to follow the example Jesus left us.

## **Living a New Life**

Jesus was asked *“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”*

His answer was this: *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22:36–40).*

Jesus knew that if we really obeyed these two simple rules, as he did, we would do all the good things and avoid all the bad things without having to think too much about details. Sadly, though, human nature means that all too often we want to go our own way.

Jesus obeyed his Father because of his love for Him, but he received a great reward, and if we follow him he will share it with us!

*Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to Him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him (Hebrews 5:7–9).*

## **Serving Others**

Even Jesus himself found it difficult to always put God first and to think of others rather than himself – although he did manage it. For instance, when he was very tired and sad because John the Baptist had been executed, he found a quiet place to rest and talk with his followers. But when the crowds followed him with all their needs and problems, Jesus put his own needs aside and served them. You can read about it in Mark 6:31–45. To his followers Jesus said:

*Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:26–8).*

## **A New Creation**

The Bible says: *If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17).*

One of the meanings of baptism is the death of the old life and the birth of a new life – a new creation. Baptism is the way that we start our service to God, and it is the key to the new life,



but its meaning is symbolic. In and of itself it does not change us. It is not the end but the beginning. The challenge is to really change our way of life, and accept Jesus as the loving Lord of our lives.

Many of the new converts in Corinth came from abhorrent, sinful backgrounds and they had to work hard to change their habits. Paul wrote to them:

*Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:9–11).*

Only by reading God's word regularly, prayerfully and thoughtfully, will our minds be transformed, and then our lives can be changed and become nearer to the example of the Lord Jesus Christ.

## **Members of God's Family**

All of this is made easier if we can do it with others who share our faith. We can learn, pray and develop together, helping each other where we can. In the same way as those believers in Acts 2, Christians should meet together to read the Bible, to Break Bread together and to preach the message to others. All of this builds towards growing into a family in Christ, which is what 'fellowship' really means. In some places this may be dif-

ficult, although modern technologies make communication possible for fellow-believers who live far apart.

The right approach is to make every different part of our lives orientated towards God, following the example of Jesus. All of our work, study, leisure or family activities can and should be influenced by being part of God's family. Writing to Christians in Philippi, Paul wrote:

*Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things (Philippians 4:8).*

If our daily activities are in harmony with 'these things', we are truly 'living new lives' now. If not, then we can start to put them right. Paul puts it beautifully in the Letter to the Colossians, speaking of figuratively dying to the old way of life, and then focusing on the things to do with God, with the prospect of eternal life:

*If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (Colossians 3:1-4).*

**John Woodall**

*Bible Quotations from the English  
Standard Version*

# Absolute Morality

Human morality changes. What seems wrong to one generation becomes acceptable to another. By comparison, God's morality never changes. His moral code comes from love, a sense of absolute justice and a hatred of every kind of wrongdoing. These principles were laid down at the very beginning of man's existence:

*Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die (Genesis 2:16–17).*

## Right Rules

As Creator, God has the right to set rules for those using His creation and He warned of the consequences of breaking them. The rules were set primarily to help humans, but God was also considering the well-being of the rest of His creation.

When the rules were broken, which we call sin, then the consequences were initiated, which we know as death. We can see that God's action was fully justified, because within a few generations the results of mankind's rule-breaking were clear:

*The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence (Genesis 6:11).*

Even after God removed the evil in the flood, whilst saving Noah and his family, corruption soon returned.

The detail of God's morality is given in the laws He wrote for Israel in Exodus and Deuteronomy. Most cultures recognise that murder and theft

are wrong, but how many societies fail to see the benefits of God's absolute morality?

He instructed His people to honour parents, to keep a Sabbath day of rest, not to covet others' possessions or way of life, to show mercy and to try to reflect His character. He knew that this would make people happier as individuals and as a civilisation. The first of God's laws to Moses was:

*You shall have no other gods before me (Exodus 20:3).*

## Still Valid

The same concepts, described as "hungering for righteousness", were set out by Jesus in his 'Sermon on the Mount' (Matthew chapters 5–6). He taught in Matthew 5:8 that:

*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*

How many of us could even begin to think of ourselves as 'pure in heart'? God knows that without His moral guidance we would degrade ourselves completely. The actions of men and women, for example during the Holocaust, are ample evidence of how evil any of us can become. It's just as well that God gives us a moral standard to aim for, even if we can't always live up to it.

The morals God offers us provide a secure, safe foundation for how we live with Him, other people and ourselves. How much better that is than unstable human morality!

**Cynthia Miles**

## Thinking About God - 4

# God Revealed in Hosea

Hosea is the first of the ‘minor prophets’, so called simply because their books are shorter than the ‘major prophets’.

It is very different from other written prophecies in the Bible. It is intensely personal, telling us in the first three chapters much about the life of Hosea and his family. The remaining eleven chapters show how Hosea’s feelings for his family were a reflection of God’s feelings for His people, the nation of Israel. When Israel went astray, He felt it acutely and this book gives us a real insight into God’s response.

As the events unfold, we see that Hosea’s family were an enacted picture of Israel’s future.

The prophecy was written in about 700 BC. By this time the nation of Israel had been split into two parts, Judah in the south, and Israel in the north. Hosea’s work was directed at the northern kingdom, which was ruled by a succession of godless kings. This part of the nation was in terminal decline, only 20 years from its final invasion and defeat by Assyria.

### Named to Show God’s Distress

As the book begins, God tells Hosea to marry a woman who had been a prostitute, and to have children by her. This must have been a terribly distasteful thing for a godly man like Hosea, though he obviously loved her as time went on. He married Gomer, described as the daughter of Diblaim, and had a son by her. He was called Jezreel, which means “God sows” or “God scatters”. There was a reason for this.

*And the LORD said to him, “Call his name Jezreel, for in just a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel. And on that day I will break the bow of Israel in the Valley of Jezreel” (Hosea 1:4-5).*

Later Gomer had a daughter. The account does not suggest this time that Hosea is the father. This daughter is called Lo-Ruhamah, meaning “She has not received mercy” or “Not beloved”. Again the reason is given:

*She conceived again and bore a daughter. And the LORD said to him, “Call her name No Mercy, for I will no more have mercy on the house of Israel, to forgive them at all” (1:6).*



Hosea's family builds up as a picture of God's thoughts towards Israel. Having weaned Lo-Ruhamah (when she was possibly as old as 2 or 3) Gomer had another son, called Lo-Ammi, meaning "Not my people":

*And the LORD said, "Call his name Not My People, for you are not my people, and I am not your God" (1:9).*

This dramatically portrays God's disappointment and anger towards His people.

### **Desire for Reconciliation**

However, the Lord reminds Israel of His earlier promises in Genesis 22:

*Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered. And in the place where it was said to them, "You are not my people", it shall be said to them, "Children of the living God" (1:10).*

This was still God's purpose, so Hosea talks of the way God would restore them. God would to punish His people to bring them to their senses, but this was a prelude to restoration. So Hosea's second chapter opens with two of the children being renamed.

*Say to your brothers, "You are my people", and to your sisters, "You have received mercy" (2:1).*

So Lo-Ruhamah became Ruhamah, and Lo-Ammi became Ammi. Hosea was then to do all he could to prevent his wife from continuing to misbehave:

*Therefore I will hedge up her way with thorns, and I will build a wall against*

*her, so that she cannot find her paths. She shall pursue her lovers but not overtake them, and she shall seek them but shall not find them. Then she shall say, "I will go and return to my first husband, for it was better for me then than now" (2:6-7).*



God would take His people out of their land in order to woo the nation back to him once more.

*Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her... And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD (2:14, 19-20).*

### **Making His Feelings Clear**

Reading these earlier chapters of Hosea it becomes obvious that this is not just a record of one family, but it is about the Lord God and His family, the people of Israel. The later chapters echo this. God lays out the charge:

*Hear the word of the LORD, O children of Israel, for the LORD has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the*

*land; there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed (4:1-2).*

God had brought Israel out of Egypt and through Moses had given them the Law, to regulate their conduct and properly order their personal and national lives. But they had often ignored it and they had gone their own way. So there was a call for Israel to return to God.

*Come, let us return to the LORD; for He has torn us, that He may heal us; He has struck us down, and He will bind us up. After two days He will revive us; on the third day He will raise us up, that we may live before Him (6:1-2).*

There are hints here of the resurrection of Jesus on the third day, as God muses on the waywardness of His people.

*What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away (6:4).*

As the sun rises so the dew evaporates, and Israel's love for God had been just as temporary.



## **Divine Gentleness**

Later in the prophecy Hosea spells out God's feelings for Israel even more clearly. *"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (11:1).*

These words applied firstly to Israel coming out of Egypt. The expression also has an application to the early life of the Lord Jesus, when Joseph and Mary took him there to escape Herod, and subsequently returned to Israel.

The tender language of Hosea's prophecy helps us to see that the concept of God in the Old Testament as only a fierce God of retribution is an incomplete picture. He is also a God of affectionate compassion, with great care for the needs of His people. He feels distress when they are unfaithful to Him, is sad when they suffer and really desires to be close to them.

Hosea concludes his prophecy like this:

*Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity... Whoever is wise, let him understand these things; whoever is discerning, let him know them; for the ways of the LORD are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them (14:1, 9).*

This appeal from the Lord God is still active today; He wants us all to know Him and His ways, to walk with Him and to be close to Him.

**Mark Sheppard**

*Bible Quotations from the English Standard Version*

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