St Julians Group Study Book

Scripture, reflection and life together.

32 published studies · 7 sections

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This study is a lightly revised version of the original work by Andrew Wright of St Julians Church, adapted to better suit web viewing.

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SECTION 1

Acts

1 study

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The early Church



We read Psalm 95:1-7 together, and then Psalm 96, and sang some songs. Last week we thought about the day the wind blew and the fire fell. But was this a demonstration of God's power simply for the delectation of those in the Upper Room? Onlookers thought they were drunk — until they heard their own native language being spoken by unlettered men. So was the fire merely an intoxication for their delight? Are we to seek such inebriation? Anyone witnessing the "Toronto Blessing" a few years back might have thought that was what it was all about. People rolled on their backs laughing for

hours and spoke in tongues to each other rather like a music hall act. It was disconcerting, to say the least, especially as those in Toronto were barking like dogs! Certainly, people were being encouraged to ask for “more, more” when we felt they had already had too much.

So clearly you may gather that, although much good came from the Toronto Blessing, when depressed people were given joy and many were healed, there was also a great deal of self-indulgence. I remember being asked to preach on the subject many years ago, and I felt led to counsel that the effervescence should be tempered by a good meal of God’s Word. Those who drink on an empty stomach can often lose control.

No, clearly the descent of the Holy Spirit was not intended merely to make the recipients “feel good”. So what was the purpose, please? Yes, of course — to send them out into the world to preach the Word and bring sinners to faith, and then to make disciples of them, as Jesus had commanded them (Matthew 28:19). As you know, 3,000 came to faith at that first outpouring; they were from all nations and were “cut to the heart” by the message (Acts 2:37). So what did these first Christians begin by doing? Incidentally, they were not called Christians until Antioch (Acts 11:26); until then they were generally known as “The Way”, probably after John the Baptist’s proclamation: “Prepare the Way of the Lord.”

They began, as detailed in Acts 2:42, by devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. What was the apostles' teaching? Fortunately there is a very simple, historical answer to this in the form of the Didache (pronounced DID-achee). This can be read to this day, although there is only one complete copy of it. It dates from the late first or early second century and begins with six chapters on the two ways — one of life and one of death. The entire document is known as "The Lord's Teaching through the Twelve Apostles to the Nations", and it is written in Koine (popular) Greek. It deals also with Christian ethics, rituals such as baptism and Eucharist, and Church organisation. The Lord's Prayer is included in full. Fasting is ordered for Wednesdays and Fridays, and baptism is by immersion where possible. Local bishops and deacons are taking the place of an itinerant ministry. There is a lot more that could be said about this, but anyone seriously interested can Google it. The other notable factor in the very early church was the "many wonders and signs performed by the Apostles" (Acts 2:43). Many today feel that these signs and wonders should be experienced in our own place and time. Others feel it was limited to there and then; such people are called cessationists. There is a little feeling between the two, and that feeling might be termed impatience! Impatience on the one part toward those who are deemed stick-in-the-muds, and on the other part towards those who are deemed unrealistic idealists. A lot of angst and energy goes into the latter

movement — i.e. those who feel the Lord Jesus still heals today — on the basis that Jesus said in John 14:12-14. Well, let's just read that, shall we? Read it, and if you are a cessationist, find a way round it; and if you are a charismatic, accept what it says. I'm being really naughty, am I not?

But seriously, this and similar statements do lead to needless controversies. St Paul counselled against controversies. But this is such a basic controversy. Genealogies, the dates of the Creation of the earth, whether we should espouse millennialism, or predestination, etc. — such things can lead nowhere. But as to whether Jesus still heals today, a lot depends. I would just add one little observation and go no further. The well-known evangelist J. John preached in Shrewsbury, an event for which Lexie and I were appointed prayer co-ordinators, and the result was — for him and many of us — quite disappointing. But when the same man, with the same message, went to India, even as he preached — without expecting anything except a few conversions — hundreds were healed before his sight. The lame walked, the blind were given sight, the deaf could hear, and the Lord's Name was glorified. It would not be helpful to pursue this into the ground, but I just offer it as an observation. He wasn't trying to prove anything, nor did he predicate his evangelistic outreach upon these events. In fact, they surprised him as much as anyone. But we cannot claim this extraordinary healing here in our country, where there is so much unbelief,

so much materialism, so much apathy, so much luxury for so many, and — where there is genuine poverty — great dissatisfaction. Maybe if God brings our nation to its knees, we might see signs and wonders. Who knows? After all, God's Kingdom is a kingdom of power, not of words (1 Corinthians 4:20). And Jesus said, "Whatever you ask for, believe it and you will have it" (Mark 11:24). He said this in many different ways.

What else characterised the very early church? They held everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had needs. That sounds like communism, and in a way it was, only without the ghastly side effects of that political system. Some have tried to set up communes, especially in the 1960s. But they were doomed to failure because the participants still retained their basic independence, pride, suppressed jealousy, anger and unredeemed souls. I know because I was very close indeed to one particular group who attempted this and bought a sprawling farmhouse on the side of a Welsh hill, well-nigh inaccessible to anything but a four-wheel drive. It was beautiful at the outset but broke up with accusations, animosity and hurt feelings after a few years. Would it work today without regenerate hearts? In those very early days, we read that they broke bread in their homes, ate together with glad and sincere hearts, and enjoyed the favour of all the people (Acts 2:46-47). We are then treated to a notable miracle

at the Temple's Gate Beautiful. Read Acts 3 for as long as you feel like it! But — and it's a big but — they landed up in jail, as we read in Acts 4. Why? I will leave the answer to that question for you to read, and simply say that Jesus promised this kind of persecution from those who thought they were doing God's will (John 16:2). Even St Paul himself started by hounding Christians (Acts 8:3). The point I want to make is that, in those heady days, "the apostles performed many signs among the people" (Acts 5:12). As a direct result, "more and more people believed in the Lord and were added to their number". Read on and see how impure spirits were driven out just as Jesus prophesied. But what was the result? Once again it was — what? — jealousy! Note in Acts 5:17 that the High Priest and all his associates were Sadducees. What does that tell you? That they were indeed very heady days is further substantiated by quite extraordinary miracles. Read Acts 5:17-26. You will be tempted to go on; the story is riveting. But "to be fair", as my plumber says, "to be fair"... these were the very early days, when an angel appeared to Peter, shackled between two guards, and told him to follow him. The dramatic story is in Acts 12, and there's a hilarious conclusion... Have we time to read this? But to emphasise that these were clearly extraordinary events, let me remind you that dear Pastor Wurmbrand was incarcerated in a ghastly Romanian prison and suffered indescribable horrors. Read "Tortured for Christ" — one of his autobiographies. He actually preached in this pulpit many years ago, and I have a

recording of his message. But he got out! Similarly, Brother Yun experienced terrible tortures, and yet God brought him out of a Chinese prison after he had fasted 72 days and had his legs broken by the prison guards who hated his godliness — yet I met him in Hereford and slapped his tubby little knees in disbelief. He signed my book — in Chinese, since he spoke no English. Yes, such people exist. The New Testament is still in force, but think of the suffering these people endured. Would you like to heal and see the dead raised? Would you like to give sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, and liberty to the captives, so that they may leap and dance as the beggar at Gate Beautiful? Would you? Well, be prepared to suffer indescribable torture, deprivation, loss of all your worldly goods, and great antagonism (1 Peter 4:12-19). And if you say, "Why would anyone want to behave that way?" just remember Jesus' words: "If they do it to me, they will surely do it to you" (John 15:20), and that enigmatic statement in Luke 23:31. Read it. The green tree suggests that there was sap rising, but the dry indicates a period of dry unbelief and sectarianism, such as existed during the horrific Catholic Inquisition when people were burned at the stake, or drawn on the rack, for holding a slightly different interpretation of Scripture from their persecutors. Praise God we have moved on from there, but now there are different inquisitors and different victims. Go to North Korea and attempt to proclaim the gospel, or Eritrea, or Pakistan, or Iran, or any number of Islamic countries, notably Saudi Arabia. Yes, we have moved

on, but into what? Have we lost that total commitment and fire of passion of the early church? If we have, then we need to ask whether we shall expect to mirror the success of the early church both in evangelism and in healing. Well, the Book of Acts is a wonderful read, and we have a beautiful word-for-word re-enactment on DVD. If you would like to see it, maybe we could show it next week, eh? Make a change from listening to me.

Let's sing something.

Why not try something aspirational like:

- 480 SoF
- 755 SoF

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SECTION 2

Amos

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The Book of Amos: Chapter 1



This study was recommended by Cheryl. Feel free to suggest new topics from time to time. Let's start after prayer & a song or two with Chapter one verse one. Where is Tekoa? It's in the hill country of Judah about 12 miles south of Jerusalem. See 2 Chronicles 11:6. 'Two years before the earthquake' Very specific but when was the earthquake? Archaeologists suggest

around 760 BC and Bible Scholars date it between 760-755 BC during the overlapping of the reigns of Uzziah of Judah & Jeroboam of Israel. This was a real experience this dear shepherd had on a very specific day. Let no one despise shepherds; they were visited by angels to announce Christ's birth and Jesus announced Himself as the Good Shepherd didn't He? The point is that Amos SAW this vision; he didn't think it up, he didn't dream it, he didn't imagine it , he SAW it. It was a vision, so we may try to imagine it as he describes it. He was one who 'stood in the Council of the Lord'

Amos 1:2. The Lord roars. How do you imagine God speaking? To Elijah on Mount Sinai, He whispered. Often people, like my dear wife, hear Him speak authoritatively but calmly. Here, however, He ROARS! Help! It would have frightened me to death. I'm surprised Amos survived it. He thundered from Jerusalem. We did a Bible study on “thunder”; do you remember? Thunder was often thought of as the voice of God, and no wonder — it's so majestic. See Psalm 29 and Joel 2:11. As a result, in this instance, the pastures of the shepherds dry up — and Amos was a shepherd. He saw it. We see it today in parched fields. Is God speaking right now to Europe, or have things changed? It is a new dispensation. The top of Carmel, where Elijah prayed for rain — remember? — and my goodness, did it not rain! But now it's parched. Then it was a judgement, and here again it is a judgement. Amos 1:3-15: judgement on Israel's

neighbours, as in Isaiah 15-24. First Damascus, as in Isaiah 17. It might be worth reading Isaiah 17:12-14. Wow! Here we have nations and peoples roaring like the sea. So often, the roaring of the sea equals the tumult of the people, as in Luke 21:25; but here it is God who is thundering, as in Psalm 29:3-4. So, what is all this noise about? The answer comes in Amos 1:3ff. Note the poetic refrain. The phrase “for three sins... even for four” serves as a literary device in the Book of Amos to emphasise the certainty and completeness of God's punishment for the various nations' sins. It is not a literal count but an emphatic idiom that conveys the totality of guilt and the need for divine judgment. The repetition of this phrase across Amos's oracles highlights the cumulative guilt of the nations and the imminent judgment that follows. This rhetorical pattern is also found in other Hebrew poetry and wisdom literature, catching the listener's attention and driving home the point that God is fully aware of each nation's cumulative guilt and passes judgment only after unwavering patience.

Why this condemnation? Because in Amos 1:3, “she threshed Gilead.” The phrase “they threshed Gilead with sledges of iron” uses agricultural imagery. In the ancient Near East, farmers attached sharp stones or iron points to a wooden sledge and dragged it across harvested grain to separate the kernels from the husks. Here, “threshing” conveys violent oppression or a ruthless, crushing attack. While Scripture

occasionally uses figurative language — cf. 2 Kings 13:7, where the Aramean king is said to have made Israel “like the dust at threshing” — Amos’s specific mention underlines the severity of the Aramean atrocities in the ninth and eighth centuries BC. See 2 Kings 8:12, but let's read this very poignant story from 2 Kings 8:7-15. I find this so moving because, again, we see this in our mind's eye, and we know that Elisha clearly SAW these events, almost like a video movie in his head. These prophets stand in the counsels of God, unlike so many false prophets today that we considered last week. Aram, of course, refers to ancient Syria and includes Damascus. The Valley of Aven is often identified with the region of Baalbek in modern-day Lebanon, known in ancient times as Heliopolis. This area was notorious for its pagan worship and idolatrous practices, which were prevalent in the northern territories of Israel and its neighbouring regions. The association with Baalbek is due to the presence of a significant temple complex dedicated to Baal, a Canaanite deity, which aligns with the idolatrous connotations of “Aven.” I visited Baalbek when I was in Syria and marvelled at the huge pillars that still remain. In Hosea 10:5, we read that the people of Samaria will fear for the calf of Beth-aven. Indeed, its people will mourn over it with its idolatrous priests — those who rejoiced in its glory — for it has been taken from them into exile. Both Aven and Eden indicate places of pleasantness, but the fulfilment of this dire prophecy is clearly detailed in 2 Kings 16:5-9. Read to the end

of verse 9. It's rather complicated, but as you see in 2 Kings 16:9, the inhabitants were deported to Kir, which is a region subject to Assyria (Isaiah 22:6), in Iberia, the same as that called now, in Armenian, Kur, lying by the river Cyrus, which empties itself into the Caspian Sea. The point of all this to us today is that we need to hear a prophet who, as in Jeremiah 26:2, speaks everything the Lord commands. It is not so much the physical location but the spiritual location that matters. Many voices speak to us today; I pray for the authentic voice which tells us how our behaviour as a nation will have its inevitable outcome. I sincerely believe that God is thundering today. Will we listen and obey? Or will we simply bleat about climate change?

Now the prophet hears the Lord speak to Gaza. My goodness, is this not too relevant to today. We saw how utterly smashed the poor inhabitants of Gaza have been. But this prophecy had a more immediate answer. What had she done? She took captive whole communities and sold them to Edom. The Amplified version says 'because [as slave traders] they carried away captive the whole [Jewish] population [of defenceless Judean border villages, of which none was spared, none left behind] and delivered them up to Edom [for the slave trade].' Ashdod is north of he Gaza and 20 miles south of Tel Aviv and Ashkelon is also north of the Gaza Strip, around 13 kilometres, but in those days these three cities would be joined as part of Philistia as was Ekron. Amos ministered in

the mid-eighth century B.C. (about 760–750 B.C.), and his first oracle denounced Gaza: “I will send a fire upon the wall of Gaza” for handing over captives to Edom (Amos 1:6–7). The chronology here is vital: Amos does not belong to the “late tenth century B.C.” as some would suggest. He prophesied during the reigns of Uzziah of Judah and Jeroboam II of Israel (Amos 1:1), squarely in the eighth century B.C.

Then in verses 9ff we have a prophecy against Tyre, who was guilty of doing the same as Gaza, despite having engaged in a treaty of brotherhood with Israel. This moral failure was deemed unforgivable by the Lord Notice that the Lord sends fire upon the walls of Gaza, of Tyre and of Edom Rabbah in Ammon. If we consult the archaeological remains of these cities we see that so many times during their existence, their gates were consumed by fire. God uses more powerful neighbours to exact His vengeance on unfaithful cities.

In Amos 1:11-12, we learn that Edom pursued his brother with the sword. Who, then, was Edom's brother? We will remember the origins of Edom: he was the same as Esau, Isaac’s son. Edom means “red”, and Esau gained this nickname because, if you remember, he sold his birthright for a mess of red — or split lentil — pottage stew. He was admittedly famished, but that scarcely excuses it. So his brother, of course, was Jacob. And it was the descendants of Esau, the Edomites, who pursued the descendants of Jacob, or

the Israelites. Edom's territory stretched from the southern tip of the Dead Sea down towards the Gulf of Aqaba, and their capital city was the “rose-red city” of Petra, which I visited in 1970. It is an amazing place with that famous Treasury, featured in the film “Raiders of the Lost Ark”. Edom trusted in their geography rather than fearing God. Have you ever relied on your own defences instead of God’s protection?

Obadiah’s most serious charge came in Obadiah 10-14. When Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, Edom didn’t just watch — they participated. They cut down refugees trying to escape, looted homes, and gloated over Judah’s calamity. God takes violence against His people personally, especially when it comes from those who should show family loyalty. Edom appears in judgments pronounced by multiple prophets: Isaiah 34 describes Edom’s land becoming burning pitch as divine retribution; Jeremiah 49:7-22 announces that Edom’s wisdom will fail and their strongholds will fall; Ezekiel 25:12-14 condemns their vengeful attacks on Judah; Amos 1:11-12 accuses them of pursuing Israel with the sword and stifling compassion; and Malachi 1:2-5 confirms God’s love for Jacob and His judgment on Esau’s descendants.

Where is Teman in Amos 1:12, and where is Bozrah? Teman is a high-plateau district in south-central Edom, identified with modern Tawilan, c. 18 km east-southeast of Petra. The name means “south” or “right hand”, drawn from its position

relative to Judah. High-resolution satellite mapping confirms massive mesa-top fortifications that command the caravan routes between Arabia and the Levant.

Bozrah is the capital and royal citadel of Edom, today Busayra in southern Jordan. Excavations uncovered casemate walls, six-chambered gates, and a palace-temple complex with an ash layer dated by radiocarbon to 605–586 BC — the period of Nebuchadnezzar's western campaign, matching Amos's prophecy.

Now in Amos 1:13-15, we hear of the violent deeds of Ammon. The Ammonites were a nation descended from Lot and were situated east of the Jordan, whereas Gilead was also east of the river and well known for its balm. These two peoples were, not surprisingly, often in conflict. I call to mind the present-day conflict between the Israeli settlers and the indigenous Palestinians. But God sees everything and takes a very dim view of the mutilation of "innocent" women and unborn children. I use the word "innocent" in that they are not involved in fighting or warfare. Where is Rabbah? The little map shows its relationship with Gilead. It is the only city mentioned in relation to Ammon, so we may assume that it was the chief or capital city of the nation. 2 Samuel 10 deals with David's battle against Ammon.

But after all this investigation, what can we learn? You may like to suggest some lessons, but if you ask me, I would say God is showing the prophet what is in His mind and what He intends to do; so we probably need to seek His face for our own nation, and then beware.

Let's move on to Amos 2. The familiar refrain introduces a powerful word against Moab. What had she done? She had burned to ashes the bones of Edom's king. During the ninth–eighth centuries BC, Moab, Edom, Israel, and Judah formed four contiguous kingdoms east and west of the Jordan rift. Moab and Edom, though ethnically related to Israel through Lot and Esau respectively (Genesis 19:37; 36:1), were habitual rivals. Assyrian campaign reliefs, the Mesha Stele (c. 840 BC), and pottery inscriptions from Kir-hareseth confirm the era's chronic conflicts and the violence of Moab's king Mesha (2 Kings 3). 1 Samuel 31:12 shows that cremation was used only rarely and usually to prevent further disgrace to mutilated corpses. Ordinarily, Israelites and their neighbours practised burial in family tombs (Genesis 25:9; 2 Kings 23:30); bodies were considered part of the covenant community even in death (Genesis 50:25). To reduce bones to quicklime went far beyond cremation. It obliterated identity, eliminated any possibility of honourable re-interment, and, by extension, attempted to erase the deceased from communal memory and covenant lineage — an ultimate act of contempt against the image of God (Genesis 1:27). 2 Kings 3:26-27 narrates Moab's

desperation when Israel and Edom marched against King Mesha. Though the biblical text highlights Mesha's human sacrifice of his heir on the city wall, Mesha's own stele records that he "dragged" Edom's king into captivity. Coupling these witnesses with Amos 2:1, the prophetic charge likely refers to Mesha's later execution and systematic calcination of the Edomite monarch's skeleton, a boastful desecration intended both to demoralise Edom and to curry favour with Chemosh, the national deity of Moab. Why Yahweh condemns the act:

1. Violating Human Dignity: Genesis 9:6 grounds human life in the imago Dei. Amos indicts Moab not primarily for military aggression (common in Near-Eastern warfare) but for stripping a fellow image-bearer of post-mortem dignity.
2. Fracturing Familial Bonds: Edom descended from Esau, Israel's brother; enmity already violated the kinship ethic (Obadiah 10-12). Erasing Edom's royal remains aggravated the sin.
3. Usurping Divine Prerogative: lime-burning sought to annihilate remembrance and afterlife hope, arrogating to Chemosh authority that belongs to Yahweh alone, "who kills and makes alive" (Deuteronomy 32:39).
4. Escalating Brutality: the prophetic formula "for three… even for four" underscores habitual, intensifying

violence (Amos 1:3ff). Moab's act epitomised a pattern of cruelty demanding divine answer.

There is considerable archaeological evidence for this practice, but the details are very complex.

Theological Ramifications

Desecrating a corpse assaults God's creative sovereignty (Ecclesiastes 12:7). By spotlighting this offence, Amos affirms Yahweh's universal moral jurisdiction: He judges not only covenant Israel but also Gentile nations by the same intrinsic law (Romans 2:14-16). This anticipates the New Testament revelation that Christ "will judge the living and the dead" (2 Timothy 4:1).

Christological Foreshadowing

Where Moab pulverised bones to eradicate remembrance, God raised Jesus bodily, leaving behind an empty tomb (Luke 24:39-43; 1 Corinthians 15:4-8). The resurrection reverses the ancient world's greatest dishonour — corpse defilement — by demonstrating incorruptibility (Psalm 16:10; Acts 2:31). Thus, Amos 2:1 indirectly heightens the gospel's promise of bodily restoration for all who trust in the risen Lord (Philippians 3:21).

Moral Application

Modern violence — abortion clinics turning foetal remains into medical waste, and genocides that bulldoze mass graves — echoes Moab's contempt. The prophetic warning summons every society to uphold human dignity from conception to natural death, reflecting God's character and pointing to redemption through Christ alone (John 14:6).

Kirioth was a city east of the Dead Sea; it appears again in Jeremiah 48, which is all about Moab. Jeremiah 48:24 especially references Kerioth, which seems to be distinct from Kiriathaim, the plural form of Kerioth.

But now, in Amos 2:4, to the horror of Amos's listeners — for he surely recited these prophecies long before they were written down — we have an indictment against Judah! As long as the judgement was against Israel's foes, it was fine; but now it comes close to home. The sin? Rejecting the Lord's decrees and being led astray by false gods, or by lies — which amount to the same thing. If we know our Old Testament, we will know how Israel constantly went after the gods of their neighbours, notably the Baals. So the Lord will send fire on their fortresses. Amos 2:6-8 details the sins; they speak for themselves. We know that the Lord always favours the poor and the oppressed. But the mention of wine in Amos 2:8 is interesting. In the ancient Near East, wine was a staple commodity, integral to daily life and religious practices. It was used in offerings, feasts, and as a symbol of prosperity and

divine favour. However, the Bible also warns against the abuse of wine and the moral implications of acquiring it through unjust means. The Bible consistently upholds the principles of justice, mercy, and humility before God. The acquisition of wine through fines, especially when these fines are unjustly imposed, is contrary to these principles. It reflects a heart that prioritises personal gain over the well-being of others, a theme that is repeatedly condemned by the prophets.

Then, in Amos 2:9, who were these Amorites? Two kings of the Amorites named Sihon and Og were defeated by the Israelites under Moses' leadership (Deuteronomy 31:4). In Joshua 10:10, five Amorite kings were defeated by the people of Israel, and the victory was decisively won in Joshua 11:8. In the time of Samuel, peace existed between Israel and the Amorites (1 Samuel 7:14). Less than a century later, King Solomon forced the remaining Amorites into slavery: "All the people who were left of the Amorites . . . who were not of the people of Israel — their descendants who were left after them in the land, whom the people of Israel were unable to devote to destruction — these Solomon drafted to be slaves" (1 Kings 9:20-21). The Amorites are last mentioned in Amos 2:10. It is assumed they either died out or were absorbed into the culture of Israel. In Amos 2:10, we are reminded that Israel was given the land of these Amorites. Then, in Amos 2:11, we remember that the Lord raised prophets and Nazirites like

Samson. First, the individual enters into this vow voluntarily. The Bible says, “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘If a man or woman wants to make a special vow, a vow of separation to the LORD as a Nazirite’” (Numbers 6:2). This shows that it is individuals who take the initiative to consecrate themselves to the Lord. There is no divine command involved. While generally done by the individual by his own choice, two individuals in the Old Testament, and one in the New Testament, were presented to God by their parents. Samuel and Samson in the Old Testament (1 Samuel 1:8-28; Judges 13:1-5), and John the Baptist in the New Testament, received the Nazirite vow from birth (Luke 1:13-17). I can't find an instance where a Nazirite was forced to drink wine, but prophets were God's messengers, tasked with delivering His word to the people. By commanding the prophets not to prophesy, the Israelites were rejecting divine guidance and silencing God's voice among them. This act of defiance is reminiscent of other instances in the Bible where God's messengers faced opposition, such as in 1 Kings 22:27, where Micaiah was imprisoned for speaking God's truth. The suppression of prophecy indicates a hardened heart and a refusal to repent, leading to inevitable judgment. This rejection of prophetic voices can be seen as a foreshadowing of the ultimate rejection of Jesus Christ, the greatest prophet, who was also silenced and rejected by His own people (John 1:11). So then, the Lord prophesies some very severe punishments upon Judah for these acts of rebellion. Jewish

tradition and Scripture attest that Judah possessed a special responsibility flowing from the Davidic line, the temple in Jerusalem, and God's covenant established with the house of David (2 Samuel 7:12-16). In Amos 2:4, the major sin identified is that the people "rejected the law of the LORD and have not kept His statutes." This places Judah's disobedience firmly in the realm of violating covenant obligations. Many other prophetical judgments address pagan nations for cruelty, idolatry, or pride, but Judah's violation is magnified by their direct covenant relationship with God.

The southern kingdom had the temple worship system at Jerusalem, which served as the centre of proper worship (cf. 1 Kings 8:27-30; 2 Chronicles 7:12-16).

The Davidic Covenant was an eternal promise (2 Samuel 7:16), tying God's steadfast love to David's lineage and kingdom. This created heightened responsibilities for Judah to uphold God's law.

The significance of this factor helps explain why the focus of Amos 2:4-5 is on Judah's disregard for God's law, setting it apart from judgments on foreign nations or even on Israel, where idol worship, injustice, and cruelty were primary themes — though Israel was also under Mosaic Covenant obligations. Amos 2:5 proclaims, "So I will send fire upon Judah, and it will consume the citadels of Jerusalem." This stark image finds parallels in other prophetic statements,

such as the destruction that would eventually come upon Jerusalem by Babylon (2 Kings 25; Jeremiah 39:1-10). The metaphorical or literal “fire” in Amos draws attention to the thoroughness of divine judgment, in keeping with the biblical pattern seen from Genesis onward, where God’s judgments are both just and total.

We have come to rest on the necessity of obeying God's laws if we, as a nation, are to prosper. So, after this meaty, complicated study, what can we conclude? That as a nation, we must be very alert to God's laws, as summed up by the Lord Jesus: “To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbour as yourself.” If we did this, we would be sure of success, of peace, of joy, of flourishing, of blessedness. But I don't think we do, do we? So let's sing and pray.

> **Amos Summary** - https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-amos/

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The Book of Amos: Chapter 2 - 3



> **Sing:**
> Let all mortal flesh keep silence. (You Tube)

We finished last Saturday with Amos 2:12. Now we shall continue with Amos 2:13–16. Amos 2:13 suggests a thorough crushing, because a laden cart would weigh around 500–600 kg (if this helps!). If it rolled over your toe, I imagine you

might need to go to A&E! Normally, one might expect the swift to be able to run from danger, and the strong and the warrior would be able to resist it. Archers fire their arrows from a distance, and any horseman would expect to be able to flee at great speed. But God's judgement will be irresistible. Defeat would be so complete that the warriors would abandon even their clothing and equipment in desperate flight. Nakedness portrayed shame, exposure, and the loss of dignity, as in Isaiah's warning of captivity. Those who had oppressed the weak and relied on their own security would be left without protection before the invading enemy. They would take off their armour as they tried to flee.

In Amos 3, we are reminded that the Lord chose Israel out of all the nations on earth (Deuteronomy 7:6-8). So, as a result, their punishment must be all the more severe. I think we may conclude that, as children of the Most High, we will be more severely judged than unbelievers who have never even thought about God. Do we agree with this or not?

In Amos 3:3, the Hebrew word "yaad" (agreed) refers to an appointment or agreement to meet, rather than absolute uniformity in all matters. This verse suggests that walking together symbolises intentional fellowship and co-operation, indicating that walking together does not imply identical opinions on every issue. Instead, it emphasises the importance of gathering and meeting to establish a shared

purpose and commitment to one another. I think of our monthly Prayer for the Nation meetings. We meet for that purpose, but if we talk afterwards, we may have very different views on life.

Does a lion roar? (Amos 3:4). Lions are apex predators, renowned for their power and presence. Their roar is arguably one of the most iconic sounds in the natural world. However, attributing this behaviour solely to hunger is a significant oversimplification. Understanding lion vocalisation requires a deeper dive into their social structure and communication needs. It has to do with territorial defence, social cohesion, dominance assertion, and communication across distances. So this is the weakest of Amos's similes; however, clearly Amos is saying that God does not act arbitrarily. We then move through Amos 3:5 to Amos 3:6, and the response is very clear: the Lord has sounded a trumpet blast, and Israel should quake. And how does the Lord sound a trumpet? Why, through His chosen prophets who “stand in the courts of the Lord”, i.e. who receive a direct revelation of God's intentions (Amos 3:7). So then Amos reiterates his metaphor: “The lion has roared” — the Lord has spoken. Smell the coffee!

Amos 3:9 is a little strange. God summons representatives from Philistia and Egypt, nations long associated with Israel’s enemies and temptations, to witness His indictment of

Samaria. Ashdod stood among the principal Philistine cities on the coastal plain, while Egypt remained a dominant regional power. Even pagan nations would recognise the corruption of Israel, making the Northern Kingdom's guilt especially shameful. Samaria, of course, is the capital of Israel, and Amos speaks from Judah. Amos 3:10 would indicate that Israel had looted without sanction from the Almighty. Sometimes God commands the obliteration of an enemy and the taking of lawful booty, as in Numbers 31:9-12, but Israel had acted outside God's command. As a result, in Amos 3:11, those very fortresses will themselves be plundered. Jeremiah 17:10-11 says the same. "As you have treated others, so will you be treated" is the basis of "As you have given, so will it be given to you". As we reflect upon our lives, would we be happy to be treated as we treated others? Pause for thought.

Then in Amos 3:12, pursuing the imagery of the lion, Amos draws a devastating image of a mutilated nation; look at his warning: yes, the nation of Samaria will indeed be rescued, but only a bed head or a piece of fabric from a couch will be left. The Hebrew of this passage is obscure. Looking at the Hebrew, if you will forgive me, it reads "bipeat" (with the corner of), "mittah" (a bed), "oobidmesheq" (or the cushion of), and "ares" (a couch). Not much use to anyone. You have probably seen the bombed-out dwellings in Gaza, or in Ukraine, or the aftermath of an earthquake in Venezuela. It

makes us weep, does it not, to see lives destroyed with only a little child's toy or teddy remaining of what was once a family home. We cannot extrapolate from these devastating scenes to assert that those who have suffered have necessarily sinned like Samaria, but as Jesus said in Luke 13:4, “unless you repent, you too will all perish”.

Finally, Amos invites us to hear what the Lord, the Lord God Almighty, says. אֵל שַׁדַּי (El Shaddai) is the Hebrew expression for “Lord God Almighty”, conveying God’s almighty power, sufficiency, and covenantal faithfulness. It is a central biblical name that reassures believers of God’s ability to protect, provide, and fulfil His promises, appearing prominently in the narratives of the patriarchs and foundational covenant texts. But actually, when I look at the Hebrew, I find a much grander title. It runs YHVH (Lord), Elohey (God), hatsabaot (of Hosts). This indicates the LORD who revealed Himself to Moses on Mount Sinai, and as the ruler of the hosts of heaven (look at the fiery chariots who surrounded Elisha at Dothan in 2 Kings 6:17). When we acknowledge God as the Maker of all things visible and invisible, we may allow ourselves a moment to envisage the mighty heavenly warriors indicated by this apparently disingenuous name. This mighty God declares in Amos 3:14-15 that He will destroy the altars of Bethel by causing the horns of the altar to be cut off. Now two things confront us here. First, Bethel — the House of God. After the kingdom of Israel was split into two kingdoms on

the death of King Solomon, (c. 931 BC), Jeroboam, the first king of the northern Kingdom of Israel, made two golden calves (1 Kings 12:28-33) and set one up in Bethel, and the other in Dan in the far north of his kingdom. This was apparently to make it unnecessary for the people of Israel to have to go to Jerusalem to worship in the temple there. It seems that this action provoked the hostility of the Judaeans. A story is told in 1 Kings 13:1-10 of how a man from Judah visited the shrine at Bethel and prophesied that it would eventually be destroyed by Josiah (640–609 BC). Thus, this prophecy in Amos 3:14 was fulfilled by King Josiah. Then we need to consider the horns. What were they for? The horns were integral to the altar's design, made as one piece with the altar itself, often overlaid with bronze (Exodus 27:2; Exodus 30:2) to signify permanence and holiness. They were used in sacrificial rituals, particularly in sin offerings, where blood was applied to the horns to symbolise atonement and mediation between God and humanity (Leviticus 4:7; Leviticus 16:16-18). This act highlighted the altar as a sacred space where divine forgiveness and mercy were accessible through obedience and sacrifice.

In Amos 3:15, we hear of the winter house and the summer house. Israel's prosperity under Jeroboam II had enabled the wealthy to maintain seasonal residences, designed for comfort in both cold and heat. Such abundance stood in sharp contrast to the oppression of the poor and the corruption of

justice condemned throughout Amos. The LORD would not overlook a society in which luxury flourished while righteousness was neglected. These houses were often adorned with ivory. Ivory ornamentation marked the extravagant homes of Samaria's ruling class; excavations have uncovered carved ivory pieces consistent with such wealth. Ahab had earlier built an ivory house (1 Kings 22:39), and the luxury associated with royal and elite households had become a symbol of Israel's pride and self-indulgence. God's judgement would reach even the most splendid possessions obtained and maintained in a nation marked by idolatry and exploitation. I think of those who have second homes in warmer climes, or even simply in Wales or Cornwall, keeping them empty so they can nip over there for the occasional weekend. They are symbols of luxury which stand in contrast to those who have to rent their homes and need to visit the food bank to keep body and soul together. Amos says that such luxurious edifices will be demolished. Today's lefties would rejoice, but are they guilty of promoting sexual sins which would appal our Holy God? It's a tightrope we need to walk.

Sing: "If faith can move the mountains" (YouTube)

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The Book of Amos: Chapter 4



> **Sing:**
> Lord of our Life and God of our Salvation

I hesitate to embark upon Amos 4 with its reference to the "cows of Bashan", but I will tread delicately on such a text. To call a woman a "cow" is about as gross an insult as we might find, so maybe this is where the insult originated. These are obviously those well-built wives who dominated their meek, subservient husbands, rather as in "Keeping Up Appearances", in which Hyacinth Bucket — pronounce it

“Bouquet”, please — orders her meek husband, played by Clive Swift, to fetch, carry, and fulfil her every strange desire. Bashan, east of the Sea of Galilee, was renowned for fertile pasture and well-fed cattle. We hear of it in Psalm 22:12. Samaria, we know, is the capital of Israel, the northern territory. These well-fed women were oppressing the poor and crushing the needy. How so? Well, we might ask how the wealthy in our nation are responsible for depriving the poor of their basic needs. Every socialist government attempts to “level up” our society, but every effort they make is thwarted by the canny awareness of the well-fed, who resort to ever more complicated methods of tax avoidance, whether by creating offshore accounts or, in the last resort, by emigrating to kinder regimes where they may enjoy their wealth in peace, doubtless fuelled by plenteous alcohol. But they should be aware that the Lord does not overlook their indulgence, for either liver cirrhosis or a heart attack will foreshorten their lives, which will end in the Judgement Hall of the Most High.

But look at the horrific punishment of these women! To be dragged away with fish-hooks seems an extremely gruesome method of removal, but Assyrian armies did literally march captives out by inserting hooks through the lips or noses (2 Kings 19:28, referring to Sennacherib, king of Assyria, and

Ezekiel 29:4, referring to Pharaoh, king of Egypt). In Isaiah 32:9-14 there is an uncomfortably similar warning to the complacent women of his day.

The picture is humiliating and public, reversing Israel's pride (Proverbs 16:18). God here promises a literal exile; history records Samaria's fall in 722 BC exactly as foretold (2 Kings 17:6). However, the Hebrew allows "away in baskets" instead of "hooks", and "the last of you in fish baskets" instead of "with fish-hooks". This would be kinder, but probably inaccurate. Harmon: some scholars suggest Harmon may have been a real location, possibly in the region of Samaria, near Mount Hermon, or farther north-east under Assyrian control. It could represent a distant region where the Israelites would be exiled. But Amos 4:3 can be translated in two different ways. Another word division translates as "out, you mountain of oppression". But the Hebrew clearly reads "vehishlakhtenah" ("you will be cast out") and "haharmonah" ("to the Harmon"), so other translations such as the AV are unhelpful. I have found on many occasions that the AV reads like nonsense ("ye shall cast them into the palace!"), and upon looking at the Hebrew, it is shown to be totally misguided.

Amos 4:4 is clearly sarcasm. Bethel and Gilgal were the secondary places of worship which were intended to give way to Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. As we saw last week and earlier, Amos was preaching around 760–750 BC. Solomon's

Temple was not destroyed until 587 BC, so it was standing proud in Amos's day. We learned that Jeroboam placed golden calves in Bethel and Dan soon after Solomon's death to entice people to forsake Jerusalem. He reigned from c. 931–910 BC. So when Amos was delivering God's Word, it was nearly 200 years after this idolatrous worship was established. Thus Amos's sarcasm: “You may go to Bethel or to Gilgal with all the correct devotions, your sacrifices, your tithes, burning leavened — rather than unleavened? — bread, and boasting about your freewill offerings, because you love to do this!” Hosea says in his prophecy, Hosea 4:15: “Do not go to Gilgal nor Beth-aven!” No sarcasm here, just straight talk. And what does Beth-aven mean? “House of Wickedness”! We remember the Pharisee's boast in Luke 18:12. Wasn't he boasting to God?

Amos 4:6 asks why the Israelites had not realised that their empty stomachs and lack of bread were very cogent signs of something really wrong! Hunger is a very basic sign to earthly-minded people. If the rains fail in Africa, then crops do not grow and people perish from hunger. Do they ever enquire as to the reason the rains fail to come? Amos deals with this in Amos 4:7. God had withheld rain at a crucial time, as He did to our country and to the whole of Europe. In fact, to make it even more obvious that it was His hand which was withholding, He sent rain on one town and withheld it from another. Selah! But did any politician, any newspaper ask why God had withheld the rain? No, they spoke of El Niño —

pronounced “Ninyo” — climate change, global warming: anything rather than our behaviour. But do you think our nation is loyal to the Lord? With so much atheism, so much selfish indulgence, so much outright paganism — the lady living opposite us is a self-styled pagan — with witches’ covens and shops even in our own town selling spells, do you think the Lord is pleased? Selah.

In Amos 4:9 we see God striking gardens and vineyards with blight and mildew. In 1 Kings 8:37, look what it says: can we read this? The context is Solomon's great prayer after the building and consecration of his Temple. When there was no rain, or when famine, plague, blight or mildew, locusts or grasshoppers, or any other disaster came upon His people, they were to spread their hands in prayer towards the Temple, and Solomon prayed that God would hear from Heaven and deal with them according to all they did. In 2 Chronicles 7:14 there is perhaps the most famous and memorable prayer ever uttered as to what we should do as a nation. Shall we read it together and ponder it?

Now, as we read through Amos 4:10, we will doubtless begin to recognise the literary device Amos is using. After every proclamation, increasing in intensity, he says, “yet you have not returned to me!” Can you hear him agonising over each cry? The Lord has even treated Israel as He did the Egyptians, which was indeed a “strange work” (Isaiah 28:21). Plagues!

Then the Lord killing young men! 2 Chronicles 36:17. Then the stench! See Joel 2:20 and Isaiah 34:3. Isaiah 34 is not a chapter of this glorious prophet that I have ever heard, nor expect to hear, preached upon except perhaps by the most alarmist and admonitory of preachers — the kind who used to wander the streets of London with placards stating that “the end of the world is nigh”. In Amos 4:11 the Lord says He has overthrown some of the cities of Israel like Sodom and Gomorrah. Do you remember that Jesus admonished Capernaum, Chorazin, and Bethsaida in Matthew 11:21-24? It will be more tolerable on the Day of Judgement than for them. The severest of warnings! When I read Isaiah 34, I realise that judgement of the most terrible kind will come from the hand of our gracious, merciful God when at last His patience runs out. I hear so many say, “How could a loving God allow such and such?” — whether the flood of mud in Nepal, the hurricanes of Florida and the Southern States, the earthquakes, the devastation across poor and vulnerable lands like Venezuela — all these come from Him, for He creates weal and He creates woe (Isaiah 45:7, where the NIV translates it as “prosperity and disaster”). The reason I'm dwelling upon this is that even we ourselves may wonder how God would allow some of the dreadful “natural” disasters that occur and horrify us. I realise that all these things are the result of the Fall, but nevertheless God does nothing to prevent them, any more than He stepped in to prevent Satan afflicting Job. But after reading Isaiah 34 and Isaiah 24, we should be prepared

for anything, and we know that the Day of the Lord is going to be a Day of Destruction (Isaiah 13:6-8). So whilst we long for that Day, because we believe it will be a Day of Salvation, it will also be a Day of Judgement, and every face will grow pale. But look at Amos 4:11b. John Wesley famously felt he was a “brand plucked from the fire” after his miraculous salvation from the devastating fire of 1709, which burned down the Epworth Rectory. Young “Jacky”, as his mother called him, was only five at the time, and he awoke and called out. His father set and climbed a ladder and pulled him out just as the roof collapsed. Susannah was quoting Zechariah 3:2, where the Lord rebukes Satan over Joshua the High Priest. It's worth reading, but leave it until later; we must push on. And we do push on to Amos 4:12, where the famous line appears: “Prepare to meet your God.” Again, placards in profusion announced this to howls of derision in times past. But as Marcus Aurelius famously recommended, we should live each day as if it were our last on earth, and tens of thousands have lived by this rule. Bishop Ken, in his lovely hymn “Awake, my soul, and with the sun...”, wrote in verse 2: “Live this day as if ’twere thy last.” It's not alarmist; it's realist, because as Jesus said so memorably in Matthew 24: the Day of the Lord will be a dreadful Day, and Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:2 says it will come “as a thief in the night”, and Peter in 2 Peter 3:10 says the same. So whilst we long, as I hope we all do, for the great Day of the Lord, remember that it will be accompanied by devastation. In the next chapter, Amos 5:18,

it is spelled out better than I could ever say it: “Woe to you who long for the Day of the Lord...” So, long for Yeshua, and call upon His name, that you may be saved. But we must end with Amos 4:13. We are reminded of creation and of Psalm 90, and of the breath of the Lord, which is ruach. “Who turns dawn to darkness”? That's a bit pessimistic, isn't it? But we remember that Moses was commanded to make darkness fall over Egypt — such impenetrable darkness that they could not even see each other — and darkness fell during the day whilst Jesus hung upon the cross. It indicates a portent, does it not? “God treads upon the heights of the earth” reminds us of Micah 1:3, and look what happens when He does!

Well, brethren! Has this study put you off ever coming to another Bible study? If so, remember that it is he — or she — who endures to the end who will be saved (Matthew 24:13). Let's pray!

P.S. According to two American friends of mine, the reason Christians voted for Trump was that they hoped his antics would bring on the second coming of Christ!

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The Book of Amos: Chapter 5



> **Sing:**
> My Hope Is Built On Nothing Less
> God of justice (Tim Hughes)

I was so encouraged by the response to last week's quite challenging message that I feel emboldened to continue with Amos, because it will get better — have no fear. May I suggest you keep a bookmark in Amos so you won't keep having to turn it up?

So why is Israel often called a virgin? The term is also seen in Jeremiah 31:4, where God speaks of Israel as being restored and built up again, so she will once more take up tambourines and go and dance with the joyful. I don't know about you, but I personally find this a very beautiful image. Lexie and I used to go to Messianic gatherings where girls danced Israeli dances. God delights in these. But here, the girl is deserted, as in Lamentations 2:1-22. It is a little strange that Israel, which was the name given to Jacob, has now undergone a sex change! So there's nothing new under the sun!

But this is a lamentation, and the term reappears, as we saw, in the Lamentations of Jeremiah. So what does this say about our God? That He has a tender heart, I feel. A heart that knows that judgement must fall on the unrepentant, but nevertheless weeps at the falling. You will all remember how Jesus wept over Jerusalem as He sat on the Mount of Olives, seeing the terrible devastation that would finally come upon His dear City. It had to come because His Father is a Holy God and cannot abide unfaithfulness and unbelief, but His Son weeps. Thank you, Father God, for Your patience and graciousness. But there is a powerful positive message here for us. A virgin is essentially one who is pure and faithful, with the idea of being chosen and having an intimate relationship with God. We are being called to return to that original state of purity and holiness. As we were thinking

earlier this week, our prisons are full to overflowing and our churches are closing week by week. What does this say about our nation? And that is not to mention those deeper sins of shame which never come to court. Amos's listeners would have sensed a similar call to return to spiritual faithfulness and purity, to live as a Holy Nation. We sing merrily about us being a Holy Nation in that well-known song “Ye are a chosen people”, which we sang to start with, but we aren't, are we? Sadly, we have, as a nation, departed so far from God that He must hide His Face in disappointment — and then we ask why we don't see many miracles today. Last Saturday, Chris suggested we preach not so much a loving God, which of course He is, but a Holy God who requires holiness from His people. And we can only return to this state through the cleansing power of Christ's blood. Selah!

In Amos 5:3, we see a depletion of the strength of Israel's armies as a result of defeat before their enemies. This would be especially shameful for the nation which delighted in the overthrow of their historic foes. We looked at Amos 5:5 last week. “Seek Me and live,” pleads God. If we seek His face, as in Psalm 27:8, then we will live, as God tells them in Amos 5:4, and as He said to us many years ago in our weekly Prayer for the Town. As we saw last week, they should not go to Bethel or Gilgal or — now here's a new venue — Beersheva. Beersheva was a place of significant encounter with the Lord by both Abraham and Isaac, and Jacob also paused there to

sacrifice on his way into the Promised Land. In 2 Kings 23:8, we read of good King Josiah desecrating all the high places from Geba to Beersheva where the priests had burned incense. From this we learn that this town, once sacred to Israel from the time of the Patriarchs, had fallen to ritual and unbelief. What might this say of our Canterbury and York, or St Winefride's Well, among the many sites of traditional pilgrimage now visited by all faiths and none, out of pure superstition?

Twice then, in Amos 5:4 and Amos 5:6, God says, “Seek Me and live.” The alternative will be that God will sweep through the tribes of Joseph like a fire. Which, then, were the tribes of Joseph? Yes, look back at Genesis 48:5, where Isaac blesses the two sons of Joseph. Do read it. And then the prophetic reversal of the natural order in Genesis 48:14-20, where Isaac flatly refuses Jacob's pleading. Ephraim is to receive the greater blessing. So now we see that these tribes, the inheritors of especial double blessings, are being threatened with a fiery devastation without hope of extinguishing. This reminds me how very blessed our land has been through the days of Victoria and the Edwardian age, but now has fallen into idolatry whilst the church sits by and acquiesces. Of course, I am speaking generically — there are always those who spread out their hands or who stand in the streets to

invite passers-by. Thanks be to God for all these, but this nation of ours is still under judgement — we who have, like Ephraim and Manasseh, seen great blessings in the past.

So what was Israel up to that so displeased the Lord? In Amos 5:7, it is clear that they were perverting justice. I think at once of Isaiah 59:14; if someone would read it. Actually, it links Isaiah 59:4, Isaiah 59:8, Isaiah 59:11, and Isaiah 59:15. I think you will remember that God is particularly keen on justice. Psalm 89:14 states that “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne.” The KJV says, “justice and judgement are the habitation of Thy throne.” But let's look at the Hebrew. Righteousness is tsedeq and justice is mishpat. Foundation is mekon; in 1 Kings 8:39-43, three times it is translated as dwelling place. Only here and in the mirror passage in Psalm 97:2 is it translated as foundation. Do you know, I really like the idea of God's dwelling place. He is a righteous God who dwells in justice. We could say He inhabits justice. Where there is justice, He is there. So does that mean that even if unbelievers act justly, as it advises in Micah 6:8, they will encounter God? Yes, I think so — what do you feel? That doesn't mean they are saved by acting justly, but it does mean that God is pleased. It's a small step to trusting His Son for salvation.

Ah! Now in Amos 5:8, we learn that God made the Pleiades and Orion. I love this. In the streets of Jerusalem, I looked up and Orion sprang out at me as if he was somehow there protecting and watching over me. Those who have been to the Middle East will agree that the skies are so much brighter there at night. To see them, you will believe. Whereas here we might, on a clear night, count maybe a hundred stars and make out three constellations, there one is dazzled by a million twinkling points of light. It is quite overwhelming, and Psalm 8 at once comes to mind. “When I consider the heavens”, and I can picture young David sitting close to his sheep, looking up and wondering. Orion is so recognisable, isn't he, especially throughout the winter, and to find Pleiades, or the “seven sisters”, you only need to trace Orion's belt to the right and you will encounter them as a fuzzy patch, only resolvable through a medium-strength telescope. These things, I guess, have been there since the days of Abraham and David, whilst things on earth come and go and the scenes on earth our fathers saw, we can scarcely discern today. This, to me, speaks of an eternal God whose justice and righteousness stand fast and remain for ever. But keseel (Orion) can refer to any notable constellation and keemah (Pleiades) to any star cluster, so we are directed to an amazing God far beyond our limited understanding. Yes, we have massive telescopes today and can peer into the fathomless depths of the universe, but what do we find? Stars at unimaginable distances whose light, travelling at 186,000

mph, can take many years to reach us; and that they are incandescent giants, some bigger than our sun. So even the most unimaginative amongst us can dimly perceive that the Creator is infinitely vast, uncontrollable, fearsome in majesty, but who nevertheless dwells in the hearts of the most humble amongst us. Selah!

Then He turns midnight into dawn, which reverses the curse of Amos 4:13. But then He can also do the opposite. These verses should be taken symbolically, so that weeping may turn to joy and joy into weeping at a Word from the Lord. The waters of the sea pour over the land — so clearly Amos knew about the hydrologic cycle! And I bet you didn't! I didn't until I Googled it. It involves the evaporation of the sea, which turns into clouds, which then fall on us as rain. And Amos knew about it, and I think Job did also. Ah yes, in Job 36:27-28. And in Isaiah too, in Isaiah 55:10, a very well-known passage. But where did it all begin? Yes, where everything else begins: in Genesis 2:6. Wonderful — then in Amos 5:9b we get drama! Hydrology is slow and incessant, but every now and then a violent storm breaks out with its flashing lightning, like a stage device. Bang! A stronghold falls. Now we may take this literally as a fortified city or take it metaphorically — the remez — as in 2 Corinthians 10:3-4, or as God as our stronghold, as in Psalm 18:2. So when our own strongholds fall, the Lord is our refuge and strength. Our strongholds must fall, because if they don't, they are a hindrance to

spiritual growth. Maybe they are fears or doubts or relationships that oppose God's will for us. Sometimes we perceive something new as a “blinding flash” of perception.

Then in Amos 5:10, we hear of people opposed to truth and justice. I've met many, and it always makes me sad. They approach a situation and seem to see it in a very perverse way. I won't name names, but I'm sure you can think of some, or one in particular. God proclaims Himself as a God of truth, and His Son said, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” Maybe because of the desire to avoid embarrassment or punishment, we tell lies. Many years ago, I told a lie in court to save someone from prison. I am not proud of it and have long ago repented. All kinds of lies persist, and President Putin spends his life spouting lies. Oh, I'm sorry — I mentioned a name, but there are many more.

In Amos 5:11, the term “straw tax” refers to a tax imposed on the poor. It symbolises oppressive economic practices where the wealthy exploit the vulnerable, leading to their own downfall. The verse warns that despite building luxurious stone mansions and planting lush vineyards, doubtless so that they may indulge in heavy drinking, the oppressors will not enjoy the fruits of their labours, highlighting the divine judgement against those who enrich themselves through the suffering of others. This verse calls for justice and fairness in

society. Here again Amos speaks as the true socialist. Inebriation reminds us of poor Noah. We may forgive him, but not these folk who should know better.

In Amos 5:12, we learn that they oppress the innocent. I can't help thinking of the poor Post Office sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses who, between 1999 and 2015, were wrongly convicted of fraud. So it's not always greedy landlords but institutions who “oppress the innocent”. We do hear also of those who take bribes. Do you recall the infamous brown envelopes, and cash-for-questions, and dishonesty in the Houses of Parliament? Neil and Christine Hamilton gave a new name for their activity — sleaze. Jeffrey Archer, Peter Mandelson, and Derek Draper joined in the frolic, and our dear friend Jonathan Aitken became involved; but, as we know, he fully repented and has since been known as a valiant warrior for Christ's Kingdom. Truth. The prudent keep quiet at such times. If there is a prevailing dishonesty around us, it behoves us to keep quiet, lest we too land in trouble. But should we?

Amos returns to his pleading in Amos 5:14: “Seek good, not evil, that you may live.” This is for the third time of asking! Like the publishing of banns. If you do this, Amos declares, then the Lord will be with you just as you say He is. How often can we claim divine leading, divine presence, divine inspiration, when it is but our own fantasy we hearken to, our

own minds and thoughts that lead us? “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us, but if we confess our sins He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Where have we heard this before? 1 John 1:8-9.

Then Amos reverses the recommendation in Amos 5:15: “Hate evil and love good.” It's pretty basic, isn't it! Maintain justice in the courts; and this was not the first time of asking. Back in Exodus 22:21, it was made quite clear, but it had to be repeated in Deuteronomy 24:17-22 and again in Leviticus 19:15. It's referred to in Proverbs 21:15 and Isaiah 1:17. So it's a constantly recurring theme. How about our society? Are our courts just? What would you say? We have thought about those who suffered miscarriage of justice, haven't we, and did it not make our blood boil? God's blood boils too!

Moving on then to Amos 5:16, there will be understandable weeping and wailing, but largely, as far as I can see, for lack of wine! Thus the talk of vineyards. They hired professional wailers; see, e.g., Jeremiah 9:17. Then there is that story in Mark 5:39, which we all know, where clearly those making the hubbub were not related to Jairus or his family.

Then that alarming statement we looked at last week, in Amos 5:18. Since I went through it in detail last week, I will pass on to Amos 5:19 unless anyone has something to add to our discussion of last week. Talk of fleeing a lion and meeting a

bear — we would use the quip of “going from the frying pan into the fire.” The next idiom is delightful. You put your hand to support yourself whilst you remove your walking shoes, and — ow! — what was that? But once again, look for the remez. What is being alluded to here? Let's bring this to a halt; I've covered four pages. I don't need a fifth!

Sing: O Lord the clouds are gathering.

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The Book of Amos: Chapter 5 - 6



> **Sing:**
> O Lord the clouds are gathering
> Purify my heart

We resume Amos 5:21. Read Amos 5:21-24. Then compare this with Isaiah 1:11-15. It is very interesting to read of the Lord being fed up with burnt offerings. In yet another place, He says the same. Look at Micah 6:6-8. Again, look at Hosea 6:6. And finally, David concludes the same in Psalm 51:16-17. From all these passages it is abundantly clear that the Lord

requires a heart change in His people. He looks for mercy, not sacrifice. He wants us to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God. Or, in Psalm 51, David realises that God is more concerned with the sacrifice of a broken spirit and contrite heart. Our God is not interested in outward ritual, in a multitude of words, of standard formulae, or the singing of favourite hymns, however sweetly. He is interested in our hearts and in an intimate relationship with Him. This is why I'm slightly nervous about liturgies, whether in the C of E, the Catholic Church, or the Orthodox Church. It is very easy to fall into a rut of repeating formulae without genuine intention (Hebrew: kavanah). But lest we imagine that the charismatic wing of the C of E, or the Independent Churches, have found the answer, it is just as easy to fall into a formulaic way of praying or thinking, which is no better than liturgical worship. And how often have we sung a hymn or a chorus and not even been aware of what we have sung? This is why it is often said of the Free Church that they may not speak lies, but they very often sing them. We do need to maintain a tender heart towards God, always open to His Holy Spirit's prompting and direction, lest the Lord say the same to us as He said to Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, and David. And in our actions and our desires, may we be careful to maintain justice and righteousness, for they are the foundation of God's throne. We sang that song again which we sang last week: “Let justice flow like rivers” and “O Lord, the clouds are gathering”. To repeat a song once is not unreasonable,

especially where it sums up our prayers. Maybe it would be good, before we sweep on, just to spend a moment in silent prayer for God to purify our desires and direct our actions towards mercy, justice, and righteousness.

Then, in Amos 5:25, God asks an interesting question: did they offer sacrifices in the wilderness? Moses told Pharaoh that he had been told by the Lord to go and sacrifice to Him in the desert (Exodus 8:25-27). But their sacrifices were not pure; see Acts 7:42-43, which also comments on Amos 5:26.

Amos 5:26 is not a helpful translation. The Hebrew says, “you have lifted up Sakkuth your king” — but this word “king” derives from Molech, a heathen god (see Strong No. 5522) — “and Kaiwan your star god” — or prince, Strong No. 3556 — “the idols you made for yourselves.” The whole passage is conflicted and hard to translate; for example, I cannot fathom how the NIV gets the word “pedestal”, but it is clear that Israel are falling for false gods. Sakkuth and Kaiwan are thought to be associated with the worship of Saturn and indicate that Israel had adopted a syncretistic form of worship, where they adopted foreign gods from Babylon, Assyria, and Arabia, and hedged their bets, as it were, as to the ideal form of worship. Now, if we look at our own liturgies, can we discern a syncretism? I hesitate to suggest areas of church worship which stray into New Age, pantheism, or universalism. I'm always nervous of “Churches Together” when they invite us to

come to a sing-song with those of faith and no faith. It's so hard to worship with integrity if the person next to us espouses liberal thinking and goes on Gay Pride marches. To give a specific example: I was speaking to a lovely, warm member of Churches Together years ago about Graham Kendrick's famous hymn “Meekness and Majesty”, and after a discussion I discovered that he did not believe in the Ascension of our Lord. Others don't accept the idea of Mary's virginity, or of Jesus being equally God and Man. Now, if we were in a discussion group debating such things, they might lead to some fascinating conclusions, but where worship is concerned, we need to know what is true — we must worship God in spirit and in truth — and be able to cling, and sing, to Him with integrity. Knowing that “something up there is looking after me” scarcely fits the bill, does it? Recently, “spiritual” friends of mine have been asking “the Universe” to help them and thanking “the Universe” for doing so. If this isn't looking to the stars which we have made gods for ourselves, what is?

So, because the Israelites have morphed into syncretism, God will send them into exile “beyond Damascus”, i.e. in the Assyrian Empire. “Whose Name is God Almighty” is better rendered as “the Lord of Hosts”, indicating that God has armies which rule over every nation and direct the course of history. Assyria's might did not operate outside God's authority and, indeed, had become the instrument of His

judgement, which makes me wonder to what extent God is working through Russia in Ukraine. I am passionately praying for Ukraine, but aware that there is corruption that needs cleaning out. We need to have a God's-eye view on what is happening in the world.

Now Amos 6. Take a deep breath. Amos has his two-edged sword out and is in a fighting spirit. He pronounces woe to those complacent in Zion. Now, as far as we can tell, Zion means Jerusalem. So is Amos including Jerusalem in his denunciation? It appears so. I am currently reading Isaiah and yesterday reached Isaiah 48. Isaiah 48:1 in the Hebrew has “Israel from the waters of Judah”, a very unexpected metaphor for the origin of Israel: i.e. although literally Judah sprang from the loins of Jacob, spiritually he was a separate nation, and came from the lineage of Judah! But Mount Samaria is Amos's main target! He aims strategically at the notable men, the ones who felt they had a privileged position by being part of a chosen nation. But being a chosen nation carried responsibility, and this they had not embraced. One of my close bookseller friends was very indignant at the notion of God choosing Israel, but I reminded him that this choice carried great responsibilities, and Israel was in danger — and still is — of being judged on this score. In Amos 6:2, Amos highlights Kalneh. Where was this city? It was in Shinar and was built by Nimrod (Genesis 10:10); see also Isaiah 10:9, where it is called Calno. Some have identified it as Babylon.

“Great Hamath” is to be distinguished from Hamath the Less. Hamath was a city on the Orontes River, known for its strength, wealth, and strategic influence, so its humiliation was all the more significant. Gath we know as the home of Goliath (1 Samuel 17:4). It had been weakened, e.g. by Uzziah (2 Chronicles 26:6). God raises up and puts down according to His righteous purpose. So, if God judged these mighty cities, His own people could not presume upon His favour whilst resisting His commandments and His ways. Anyone seeing the remains of these formerly great cities would tremble at the thought of ending up like them. We will recall that Amos was preaching in 760-750 BC, and sure enough, the prophesied judgement fell on Israel in 722 BC when it went into exile in Assyria.

And now, in Amos 6:4-6, we get a vivid picture of the social life of the “notable men” of Israel. They lived as we imagine the rich in our own land doubtless live. We no longer adorn our couches with ivory because it is not traded as it once was, but back in Amos 3:15 we learned that their houses were adorned with ivory, and in 1 Kings 22:39 we learn that Ahab's palace was “adorned with ivory”; and those of us who have seen artefacts from the tombs of the Pharaohs have seen that their couches and thrones were likewise adorned. They dined on the very best food, as the rich do today. I love the dismissive term “strum away” on harps. I'm sure David did not “strum”. Actually, the Hebrew for “strum” is

“happoreteem”, which really means “those singing foolishly” over the mouth of the harp (“al pee hannabel”). I object to Amos suggesting that King David “devised for himself all manner of song”. Jesus made it clear in Matthew 22:43 that David spoke or sang by inspiration. For once, I prefer the AV translation, which renders it “invent to themselves instruments of musick like David”. I will allow that David did “invent” different types of musical instruments (1 Chronicles 23:5 and 2 Chronicles 7:6), but the words he sang were from God; otherwise they cannot be called Scripture. And maybe he did sing a few love songs as well!

But in Amos 6:6 we are told they drank wine by the bowlful. Jeremiah 35:5 also indicates that this drinking was to excess and was pure luxury. Personally, I find more than half a glass of wine makes my head hurt! If you read Esther, you will read that the book commences where King Ahasuerus, or Xerxes, was inebriated when he called for Queen Vashti to appear before him to display her beauty! We don't need to be “Me Too” feminists to admit that this was disgraceful (Esther 1:10). Wine in moderation was provided by God to gladden the heart of man (Psalm 104:15), but Scripture everywhere despises over-indulgence, e.g. Proverbs 23:29-35. It reads as good humour, but we know the terrible discord it creates within a family. Thus the pledge signed by my grandfather and others of his day in the Band of Hope!

The finest lotions? Lotions in the biblical era were typically made from natural ingredients such as olive oil, myrrh, and other aromatic substances. These ingredients were often mixed with spices and herbs to create fragrant and soothing ointments. The preparation and application of lotions were considered an art, and they played a vital role in daily life, health practices, and religious ceremonies. See also Esther 2:12. In themselves, these were not a problem, but the "notable people" of Israel had occupied themselves with their toiletry rather than with grieving over the ruin of the tribes of Joseph. Where they will be heading, there will be no such luxury and lounging!

Now for Amos 6:8. It's worth, at this point, examining the various terms God appoints for Himself. "Sovereign Lord" in Hebrew reads "Adonai Eloheem". Adonai means Lord and is often employed when addressing a superior; Eloheem, as we will remember, is a plural noun but is translated as God. So Lord God would be an adequate rendering. But "the Lord God Almighty" is actually "Lord God of Hosts" (Adonai Elohe Tzvaot). In this case, "Adonai" is a rendering of the four-lettered Name of God, the Tetragrammaton YHVH, too holy to be pronounced — which is why I object to "Yahweh", which in any case is phonetically inaccurate! This wonderful ascription denotes God's power over all the heavenly forces. Sometimes El Shaddai is employed for "God Almighty". El = God. It denotes God's absolute power and all-sufficiency. We can

never fully comprehend the majesty and the glory of God, and never hope to perceive it until we meet Him face to face. So, in Amos 6:8, where God “swears by Himself” because there is no one higher than Him to swear by, we know that what is about to be stated has His absolute authority behind it. “I abhor the pride of Jacob” (Ta'avti geon ya'akov). The verb ta'av (Strong 8374) is a rare form and means “I loathe”. God just deplores pride and arrogance (Proverbs 6:16-17 and Proverbs 16:5, as if we needed a reference because we know it full well). He loves a humble spirit but is far from the proud, whether individual or national. What does this say to you, and to us as a nation?

To “deliver up” is to give to an enemy occupier permission to deport. But look at the expansion of this idea in Amos 6:9-10. I think of Gaza, of Ukraine, of Nigeria, of Nepal, of Syria, of Sudan, of Venezuela, and of countless other places that have suffered unimaginable destruction. “Burning the bodies of relatives” indicates the requisite funeral pyre in honour of the dead. But why is the one hiding in the house told not to mention the Name of the Lord? Perhaps the survivors are so overwhelmed by the sheer scale of God's wrath that they are terrified of drawing any further attention from Him, fearing that even uttering His holy name might invite complete annihilation. Amos 6:11 is clear enough. Amos 6:12 invites the answer, “No, of course not!” But the equally impossible has occurred: justice has become poison — ugh! — and

righteousness bitterness — yukh! We have seen how justice and righteousness are the foundation of God's throne, so to pervert these is past horrific. Let us look at our own nation and our own lives. We must pray that the Lord will open our eyes to see if we are speaking or acting unjustly or unrighteously. It's easy to excuse ourselves, isn't it?

Lo-debar in Amos 6:13 may have appeared in Joshua, but the place was certainly where Mephibosheth lived in 2 Samuel 9, and it is mentioned again in 2 Samuel 17:27. But Amos is punning on the name, for it means “no-thing”. Similarly, Karnaim appears in Genesis as a place of strategic importance, but again Amos wishes to draw a principle from it, for it translates as “horns”. Any military conquest, just as any conquest in our own lives over sin or stronghold, can only be attained by God's power alone. He gave victory to the Allies over a formidable foe in both World Wars. It's always good to give God the glory, even if it appears to us that we won by our own strength. “Horn” is very often used as a metaphor for strength; see, e.g., Psalm 75:5.

Finally, in Amos 6:14, God makes it clear that it is by a powerful nation — Assyria — that He will oppress them from Lebo-Hamath, meaning the entrance to Hamath, to the Valley of the Arabah, which is a section of the Great Rift Valley and

lies to the south of the country around the Dead Sea. The point is that Israel will be oppressed from north to south, from “Dan to Beersheva”. Top to toe, as it were.

Let's pray & sing

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The Book of Amos: Chapter 7



> **Sing:**
> **All my days I will sing this song of gladness**

I spent five days writing the proposed Study on 'Is Jesus a Christian?' and having completed it, feel that it is unsuitable as a Bible Study, because it would lead to too much discussion & wrangling, so I'm starting to continue with Amos with only half a day to go!!

So first verse one. The Lord shows Amos what He proposes to do; one of the plagues of Egypt. Whether this had actually taken place or not, or whether it was only completed in the Heavenly places, is not clear. Judging by Amos 1:3, it had not yet occurred. God does change His mind, contrary to Numbers 23:19. So is there a conflict between these verses and with the fact that the Lord relented in His intention to utterly destroy all in Sodom (Genesis 18:26–32)? No, I don't think so, because we would agree with Numbers 23:19; God does not lie. Also He is not (like) a human being, that He should change His Mind. One of the ladies I was doing Hebrew with some years ago, used this verse to 'prove' that Jesus could not have been God! Much misunderstanding enshrouds this verse. I believe what it is saying is that the Lord is not fickle. But don't forget that it is not the Lord speaking in these verses (in Numbers 23) but Balaam, in response to Balak. True, the Lord had put a Word in Balaam's mouth, but the Word was a Word of blessing to Israel. The prologue (ie that God is not human) was Balaam's interpolation. It was not part of the message. Clearly the Lord does change His mind, upon the intercession of a faithful servant, like Abraham (Genesis 18:16–33), like Moses (Exodus 32:9–14) and as here. There is no question about it, otherwise what are we doing on the first Friday (Jim, Chris, Catherine, Chris, Jen etc)? Intercession would be pointless if the Lord never relented (James 5:16). I prefer the word 'relent' rather than 'repent'; because God never sins so can't repent (see Joel 2:14). Any comments?

Next the Lord says He will judge Israel by fire. Again although the verbs are in the perfect tense, so that the great deep was dried up & the land devoured - when Amos cried out in anguish, the Lord again relented. So we assume that these catastrophes were enacted in Heaven but not on earth. What awaits us as a Nation in Heaven I wonder!! Isaiah 51:10 explains what God meant by 'the great deep'. Never pass these phrases by until you understand them fully. As far as 'devouring the land' is concerned just turn to Joel 1:19 for a description of this, and to the newspapers of earlier this month for a picture of this in our day! It's not impossible is it?

Then we are given a very clear view of how the Lord judges a Nation and our own lives. In Amos 7:7 we are told that the Lord is standing by a wall that had been built true to plumb, with a plumb-line in His hand. At the foot of the page it tells us that the meaning of the phrase is uncertain, also in Amos 7:8. But if we consult the Hebrew, there seems no obvious alternative. The word is anak, and **Strong No 594** gives this translation, or possibly a hook, though he concedes it is a word of uncertain derivation. Brown-Briggs-Driver also gives this translation. The NIV translates Isaiah 28:17 as 'I will make justice the measuring-line and righteousness the plumb-line', but don't get too excited because Hebrew for plumb-line here is lemishqalet and is translated as 'a levelling instrument' in **Strong 4949**. But we get the drift. God's standards are true and if anything deviates from His perfect Justice and

Righteousness, it will crumble & fall to ruin, whether by hail and water as in Isaiah or by His sword as in Amos. God's patience has finally run dry, and not even Amos' intercession can save Israel. The high places of Isaac in Amos 7:9, refers to Beersheva where, as we saw last week, Isaac had built altars, which had fallen into idolatry, and which were finally destroyed by good King Josiah. The house of Jereboam of course refers to Israel and to the two sites where that foolish man set up golden calves as we saw earlier. He was granted 10 tribes and, had he acted faithfully could have retained these and flourished.

Now we have a brief biographical account of the kind of opposition Amos faced. Read Amos 7:10-17 for a dramatic presentation. Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, is a significant biblical figure known for his opposition to the prophet Amos. He served during the reign of Jeroboam II and was part of the idolatrous cult established by Jeroboam I. Amaziah is depicted as a representative of the idolatrous practices in the northern kingdom of Israel. His confrontation with Amos is a pivotal moment in prophetic literature, highlighting the conflict between religious establishment and prophetic challenge. Amaziah's legacy serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of prioritising institutional stability over divine truth and the potential consequences of silencing uncomfortable truth rather than repenting before it. He quoted Amos' words, but added the name of Jereboam whom

Amos never specified. Doubtless Amos wished to avoid treason, which dogged poor Jeremiah, who was not so delicate and was thrown into a dry well for his pains by Zedekiah's men. So the priest of Bethel ordered Amos 'back to Judah' (Amos was from Tekoah 12 miles south of Jerusalem). So - 'back where you belong' he was told, rather as many people tell the illegal migrants coming here on inflatable rafts. Most interesting how Amaziah claims Bethel as a true sanctuary - the King's sanctuary moreover, so don't you be speaking against it Amos. But look at Amos' reply. He doesn't claim any prophetic status. He was a simple shepherd, as it says in Amos 1:1. He has no claim to a long family tree like Isaiah or Jeremiah or Micaiah or Zephaniah who has the longest family tree of them all. Normally we should be sure of the authenticity of any prophet who claims to speak in the Name of the Lord, but dear Amos has none, and holds up his hands to this fact. I wonder if his previous job as a tender of sycamore-fig trees is significant. I seem to remember that Zacchaeus climbed one in Luke 19:1-10. In the Old Testament, the sycamore tree is mentioned as a common and valuable tree in Israel, often associated with agriculture and sustenance. For example, 1 Kings 10:27 notes the abundance of sycamore-fig trees during King Solomon's reign, highlighting their economic and practical importance. Amos 7:14 describes the prophet Amos as a caretaker of sycamore trees, reflecting their role in daily life and cultivation. Psalm 78:47 references sycamore-figs in the context of divine

judgment, showing the tree's presence in the region and its value as food and resources. In the New Testament, the sycamore tree gains symbolic significance in the story of Zacchaeus. In Luke 19:4, Zacchaeus climbs a sycamore tree to see Jesus, demonstrating the tree's strong, wide-spreading branches that could support a person and provide concealment. This encounter leads to Zacchaeus' repentance and transformation, emphasising the tree as a setting for divine intervention and personal change. So we have various ascriptions to this tree. Basically it represents divine encounter amongst other things. And when we read that Amos was taken from 'tending the flock' in Amos 7:15 who do we immediately think of? Yes, David (1 Samuel 17:34). So this idea of being taken from a rural employment & being given a divine message is not unique to Amos.

So then Amos repeats what Amaziah says but tells him what the Lord was saying. Very specific to Amaziah note! We are not told if this came to pass but we may assume that it did. It was the prophetic word against the establishment as in Jesus day. The establishment could not bear His words and neither could the land bear Amos' words (Amos 7:10). The idea of the land being measured out reminds me of Daniel 5:25-28. Isn't it laughable that Daniel's prophecy, as he translated the writing in the wall, led to him being clothed in purple, and a gold chain was put around his neck. Come to think of it, wasn't Jesus clothed in purple by the Roman soldiers (John 19:2 &

John 19:5)? Don't you love these echoes and threads? (Yes I know it says scarlet in Matthew but let's hold on to the comparison). Any further comments on Chapter Seven?
So have we time to have a look at Chapter 8? Now in Amos 8:1 the Sovereign Lord, notice the constant ascription which we looked at last week, shows Amos a basket of fruit. A few of you, especially Chris, have been given visions in prayer meetings. It's great to be offered visions but here the Lord gives Amos an interpretation. A vision is good, but an interpretation is even better. So, it's not just fruit, it's ripe fruit. I remember Lexie & I had to learn the Hebrew for ripe fruit. Can we still remember it? The word we learned is Peree, (as in Peree hagafen - fruit of the vine) but the word in this context is bikkureem, and refers to the first fruits of the crop. There are various references to early fruit; in particular the early fig is deemed to be sweeter and a sign of a good harvest to come. But here, the message is not what we might expect (which is why it's always good to ask the Lord for an interpretation before one assumes an obvious one!). Here it's the ripeness that God is accentuating. The time is ripe for His people Israel. God will spare them no longer. And we get graphic, dramatic details! Songs of praise turn to wailing. Amos sees many many bodies flung everywhere! Silence! Reminds me of the wonderful ancient hymn 'Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and in fear & trembling stand'. From 'trampling His Courts' Israel has turned to trampling the needy! Because they have 'done away' with the poor of the

land, God will 'do away with them'. Hishleek means throw away, throw down or throw out, and this is what will happen to Israel.

But it is not only the trampling of the poor that the Lord objects to, it is also their attitude to Him. So read Amos 8:4–6. They were so anxious for the Sabbath to be over. Reminds me of Nehemiah 13:15–22. Read it, especially Nehemiah 13:21!! This impatience and utter disregard for one of the Lord's chief commands which He repeats so many times throughout the Old Testament. Don't get confused over Jesus healing on the Sabbath. That was a work of the Sovereign Lord, but these people were not interested in God and what He desired. They also cheated with dishonest scales when God had declared Himself angry at such behaviour. In Proverbs 11:1 for example it says 'dishonest scales are an abomination to the Lord but an accurate weight is His delight'. This is true literally but also metaphorically (the remez). Honesty & integrity in business and in daily life is so important to the Lord. Moral corruption, injustice & deceit were rife and we need to ask ourselves to what extent this applies to our Nation or even - God forbid - to us personally. Prioritising profit over compassion does not please the Lord, and we know this has happened in the higher echelons of our own Nation. The poor have become commodities, to be traded like silver & shoes. Did you by chance remember that Amos said this right early on in Amos 2:6-7? I wonder if his mention of dust in Amos 2:7 made Amos think of the way corn merchants were selling the

sweepings along with the good grain. Lexie won't go to one trader in the Market Hall because he sells the meat with large heavy bones in it and with overmuch fat. She is wise. I wonder what the Lord thinks of gangs who raid shops and take whatever they want to sell it again on the black market. The shops are so weak and the gangs are so strong... I get so indignant when I hear of exploitation of the weak and the timid, because they cannot stand up for themselves.

Should we leave it there & do the rest when we return? We can sing a little more & join in prayer for each other & for our Nation. It's Chris & Jan Roberts' Wedding Anniversary so we can send them our very best wishes & congratulations.

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The Book of Amos: Chapter 8 - 9

> **Sing:** God of Glory, we exalt Your Name (No. 137)
> **Sing**: Praise Him You heavens and all that's above No 1501

A big thank you to David for taking last week's study, which Dan has added to the portfolio. Thank you to Dan. Now we're back to Amos, continuing from Chapter 8 verse 7 following. In verse 7, the Lord swears by Himself, since there is no one higher by whom HE can swear. He calls Himself the 'Pride of Jacob'. Whereas in Chapter 6 verse 8 the 'Pride of Jacob' referred to the arrogance & self-reliance of the Israelites (which, as we saw, God detests); here it is intended to indicate a Divine oath and the Lord's unchanging nature and commitment to justice, contrasted with the seriousness of Israel's sins. In Psalm 47:4 the term is employed again, but this time it refers to the Land of Israel which God loves and is committed to.

It's tempting to compare this rising & falling of the land to Isaiah 24:19-20, but Keil & Delitzsch for some reason don't like this comparison. They prefer to compare it to **Amos 9:5**, where the judgement of God falls heavily upon the earth that it melts and all who live in it mourn. Barnes in his notes on

the Old Testament, seems to suggest that the whole earth is so indignant at the lawlessness of the children of Israel, that is shudders and heaves like the sea, in a bid to throw off their sins. The link between the land and the behaviour of its inhabitants is echoed in the famous prayer we read last time. 'If my people...' where God promises to heal the land if only the people would repent and turn from their sins.

But in verse 9 the Lord turns His attention to the Heavens. Ezekiel 32:7-8 prophesies the same thing. We are reminded how one of the great plagues that the Lord brought upon Egypt was such thick darkness that men could not even see each other, and of course we remember the darkness that covered the earth as Jesus hung on the cross for us (Matthew 27:45). Darkness during the hours of day is a judgement; it involves a Heavenly response to terrible wickedness.

In **Amos 8:10** the joy of their festivals turns to laments and their singing becomes a dirge. To wear sackcloth indicates an awareness of sin and a desire to repent, and shaving the head also suggests mourning and repentance as in Job 1:20. To mourn for an only son is very ironic because Father God 'lost' His only Son when He died on the cross. See Zechariah 12:10 which is in itself a remarkable prophecy concerning the death of Jesus. But Jeremiah too, in **Jeremiah 6:26** echoes the same idea of such intense grief.

But then in **Amos 8:11** we encounter a different kind of mourning - a different kind of famine. This prophecy speaks of a future time when people will long to receive divine revelation or instruction but will be unable to find it. While physical famines involve shortages of food, this prophetic "famine" is specifically the absence of communication from God. The Scripture emphasises that the true nourishment for the human soul comes from hearing God's Word (cf. Deuteronomy 8:3; Matthew 4:4).

See also Micah 3:6-7). Amos delivered his message to the northern kingdom of Israel at a time of outward prosperity. Despite economic and political success, the nation had drifted into spiritual and moral decay (Amos 2:6-8; 5:21-24). Archaeological evidence from Tel Dan and Samaria indicates material prosperity but also the infiltration of idolatrous practices. The people's prosperity and complacency led to spiritual neglect, and they no longer heeded God's warnings through His prophets.

Prophets in the Old Testament were raised up by God to correct His people's course and bring them back to covenant truths (2 Chronicles 24:19). When the population increasingly ignored such warnings, God allowed foreign powers, such as Assyria, to invade or dominate, often resulting in devastating consequences for the nation. This environment forms the

backdrop of the threat that there would be a time when God's voice would seemingly be withdrawn, creating a spiritual thirst that no amount of religious ceremony could satisfy.

Amos's prophecy implies that ignoring or silencing God's Word leads to a reciprocal withdrawal of that Word. As with any covenant relationship, if one party continually rejects the other, the communication inevitably breaks down. This underlying principle is consistent across Scripture: when the truth is consistently resisted, the Lord sometimes allows people to reap the results of their choices (Romans 1:21-24).

In this prophecy, God uses the intense imagery of hunger and thirst to show how dire the situation becomes when His guidance and revelation are absent. Just as physical starvation leads to desperation and death, spiritual starvation without God's Word results in moral and societal decay.

We are constantly told by doctors and fitness freaks that if we don't use a muscle it eventually wastes away. If we stop listening out for God He will cease to speak to us, and if we don't obey the thing He said most recently, He will say no more!! I know of someone who went to Australia to seek the Word of God but it was a futile journey and they returned unsatisfied, as in **Amos 8:12**.

Then we sense the sadness and regret of the prophet as he thinks of the beautiful girls and the fit young men, all of whom will faint for thirst, **Amos 8:14** addresses the sin of Samaria, referring to the worship of the golden calf, which was a significant sin in Israel. The verse highlights that those who swear by the guilt of Samaria will ultimately fall and not rise again, emphasising the consequences of idolatry and false worship. The "way of Beersheba" signifies the ritual practices associated with the worship of Baal, which was prevalent in the northern kingdom of Israel. This verse serves as a warning against the exploitation of the lower classes by the upper echelons, as well as a reminder of the impending judgment that awaits Israel for its sins.

We finished there as we ran out of time. It was so lovely to welcome not only Dipo, but Jonathan, Chee, Divine, Grace & Dominion, and Linda (or Naxasitua if I have that right!?).

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The Book of Amos Chapter 9

> **Sing**: You are beautiful beyond description No 621
> **Sing**: Who can know the mind of our Creator? No 2143

Now for the final chapter of Amos! This final warning from Amos 9:1-4 (read it) is very clearly a vision that Amos had, because he begins: 'I saw the Lord.' like Isaiah 6:1. Who then was the Lord talking to? Is Amos to strike a symbolic blow? In ancient architecture the load-bearing pillars held the roof. Hitting them at the “tops” (capitals) guarantees total collapse.

- The blow comes first, the shaking follows, and finally the falling stones crush the worshippers below—complete, inescapable ruin.
- By targeting the sanctuary, God shows He is not impressed by religious showmanship; He will dismantle counterfeit worship at its core.

Falling pillars and masonry that kills those beneath reminds me of Samson who, once his hair began to grow again, pushed on the pillars of the Philistine's Temple (Judges 16:29-30) and the whole structure collapsed on those within. What a catastrophe, what a judgement! Anyone who was not crushed

by the collapse of the structure in this case will find a sword ready for them.
Amos 9:2 delights me because I hear a fascinating contrast which is nevertheless a comparison. I'm at once led to Psalm 139:7-12. which reassures us of God's omnipresence, His omniscience too. I'm also reminded of Hosea 10:8 which Jesus quoted in Luke 23:30. Also strains of Judges 6:2, Obadiah 1:4, Isaiah 14:13-15, Jeremiah 49:16 and Job 20:6-7. We cannot get away from God's wrath! This is a lesson for us also, isn't it not?

Amos 9:5 repeats the message of Amos 8:8.

A key theological point is that Israel could not rely on God's past blessings as an assurance of his future benevolence. The only difference between Israel and the other nations was Israel's covenant relationship with God, and having broken the covenant, they faced the covenant curses.

Then in Amos 9:6 we have some words of uncertain meaning. I want to share Barnes' thoughts at this point. He uses the AV and writes in an antique style!

'He that buildeth His stories - The word commonly means "steps," nor is there any reason to alter it. We read of "the third heavens 2 Corinthians 12:2, the heavens of heavens Deuteronomy 10:14; 1 Kings 8:27; Psalm 148:4; that is, heavens to which this heaven is as earth. They are different

ways of expressing the vast unseen space which God has created, divided, as we know, through the distance of the fixed stars, into countless portions, of which the lower, or further removed, are but as "steps" to the presence of the Great King, where, "above all heavens" Ephesians 4:10, Christ sitteth at the Right Hand of God. It comes to the same, if we suppose the word to mean "upper chambers." The metaphor would still signify heavens above our heavens.

And hath founded His troop - (literally, band in the earth) Probably, "founded His arch upon the earth," that is, His visible heaven, which seems, like an arch, to span the earth. The whole then describes "all things visible and invisible;" all of this our solar system, and all beyond it, the many gradations to the Throne of God.: "He daily "buildeth His stories in the heavens," when He raised up His saints from things below to heavenly places, presiding over them, ascending in them. In devout wayfarers too, whose "conversation is in heaven Philippians 3:20, He ascendeth, sublimely and mercifully indwelling their hearts. In those who have the fruition of Himself in those heavens, He ascendeth by the glory of beatitude and the loftiest contemplation, as He walketh in those who walk, and resteth in those who rest in Him."

To this description of His power, Amos, as before Amos 5:8, adds that signal instance of its exercise on the ungodly, the flood, the pattern and type of judgments which no sinner escapes. God then hath the power to do this. Why should He not?'

I love Barnes & his lofty view of Scripture and his exalted language. The last half of Amos 9:6 reminds me of the tsunami, which troubled me greatly, because it seemed to contradict the words of Proverbs 8:29 and Job 38:8-11. But here we have an exception.

In Amos 9:7 Amos states, "Are you not as the sons of Ethiopia (The Cushites) to Me, O sons of Israel?" This verse emphasises that Israel, like the Ethiopians, is no longer favoured by God due to their idolatry and disobedience. The prophet Amos points out that God has brought other nations, such as the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir, into the Promised Land, indicating that Israel's special status is not a guarantee of divine favour. Instead, it serves as a reminder that God's judgment is just and impartial, applying to all nations without exception.
Caphtor was Crete as it tells us as a footnote. Or Cyprus or Cicilia perhaps. Maimonides suggests that they were Egyptians who lived in Dalmietta in the Eastern part of the Nile Delta, but their migration to Philistia is only recorded in Amos. The Arameans, also known as Syrians in some biblical

translations, are a Semitic people mentioned frequently in the Old Testament. They are traditionally associated with the region of Aram, which corresponds to parts of modern-day Syria. The Arameans from Kir are specifically referenced in the context of their origins and God's judgment upon them.

Arameans are first mentioned in the Table of Nations in Genesis 10:22, where Aram is listed as a son of Shem, indicating their Semitic lineage. The Arameans from Kir are specifically mentioned in Amos 9:7. This passage highlights s God's sovereign control over all nations, including the Arameans, whom He brought from Kir.

Kir is believed to be a region located in Mesopotamia, though its exact location remains uncertain. It is mentioned in 2 Kings 16:9, where the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III captures Damascus and exiles its inhabitants to Kir: "So the king of Assyria complied and attacked Damascus. He captured it and deported its people to Kir, and he put Rezin to death". This event marks a significant moment in the history of the Arameans, as it signifies the end of the Aramean kingdom of Damascus.

So, onto Amos 9:8. It is a great relief to hear that the Sovereign Lord does not intend to destroy the entire nation of Israel. So often we hear of a tenth remaining, or a stump from which new growth may appear. The idea of a sieve is very vivid. As one shakes a sieve, so pebbles remain whilst fine dust passes

through. In this case, the pebbles are unwonted debris from the field - it is the grain that is desired. So are we pebbles or grain? The pebbles are sinners who will die by the sword whilst the grain will be stored in God's granary. Note in Amos 9:10 it is those proud, confident, arrogant, luxurious ones who will be caught unawares.

Then at last we have some good news that we have waited for, dear Amos, ever since Amos 1:1! In Amos 9:11 we see some rebuilding going on. I think of Gaza, of Ukraine, of Sudan of all those places that have been devastated. We have seen smashed houses, scarcely recognisable property. with groups of previous owners creeping around disconsolate. Such house can and will be rebuilt. By God!! David's fallen shelter will possess the remnant of Edom, his great enemy! All the nations who bear God's Name will do the rebuilding. See also Isaiah 43:7.

In fact, and here Amos gets excited, the reaper will be overtaken by the ploughman and the planter by the one treading grapes. So this indicates that future harvests will be so plenteous that no sooner have the reapers begun to harvest the crops than it will be time to plough for the next sowing, and those treading the grapes will see those planting new crops. New wine dripping reminds me of that lovely psalm number 65; why don't we read Psalm 65:9-13 and we can sing

the triumphant harvest hymn 'To Thee O Lord our hearts we raise' (No 2595). I do love the idea that even the fields are singing.

May I read you a luxurious poem by Andrew Marvell called 'The Garden' with its memorable final line. See also Joel 3:18



Here it Goes:

> How vainly men themselves amaze
> To win the palm, the oak, or bays,
> And their uncessant labours see
> Crown’d from some single herb or tree,
> Whose short and narrow verged shade
> Does prudently their toils upbraid;
> While all flow’rs and all trees do close
> To weave the garlands of repose.

Fair Quiet, have I found thee here,
And Innocence, thy sister dear!
Mistaken long, I sought you then
In busy companies of men;
Your sacred plants, if here below,
Only among the plants will grow.
Society is all but rude,
To this delicious solitude.

No white nor red was ever seen
So am'rous as this lovely green.
Fond lovers, cruel as their flame,
Cut in these trees their mistress' name;
Little, alas, they know or heed
How far these beauties hers exceed!
Fair trees! wheres'e'er your barks I wound,
No name shall but your own be found.

When we have run our passion's heat,
Love hither makes his best retreat.
The gods, that mortal beauty chase,
Still in a tree did end their race:
Apollo hunted Daphne so,
Only that she might laurel grow;
And Pan did after Syrinx speed,
Not as a nymph, but for a reed.

> What wond'rous life in this I lead!
> Ripe apples drop about my head;
> The luscious clusters of the vine
> Upon my mouth do crush their wine;
> The nectarine and curious peach
> Into my hands themselves do reach;
> Stumbling on melons as I pass,
> Ensnar'd with flow'rs, I fall on grass.
>
> Meanwhile the mind, from pleasure less,
> Withdraws into its happiness;
> The mind, that ocean where each kind
> Does straight its own resemblance find,
> Yet it creates, transcending these,
> Far other worlds, and other seas;
> Annihilating all that's made
> To a green thought in a green shade.

And so we end with Amos 9:14-15. Israel returns chastened, from her long exile. Rebuilding ruined cities, planting vineyards, drinking wine, eating their own home-grown fruit, never to be uprooted again.

Well - not until AD 70.

Let's sing & pray!

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SECTION 3

Isaiah

2 studies

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Isaiah Chapter One

Now we launch into the most wonderful book in the Old Testament. Wonderful in the sense that it surpasses all others with the beauty of its language and the astounding nature of its prophecy. It blends warnings of judgement with promises of redemption, including some of the clearest Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament.

Historical Context

Isaiah, son of Amoz, prophesied in Judah during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, approximately from 740 to 681 BC, a period marked by political instability, Assyrian expansion, and social injustice. His messages addressed both immediate crises, such as the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and long-term spiritual concerns, calling the people to repentance and faithfulness to God.

Structure and Themes

The Book of Isaiah is traditionally divided into two main sections: First Isaiah (chapters 1–39), focusing on judgement and historical events, and Second Isaiah (chapters 40–66),

emphasising comfort, hope, and restoration. Some scholars identify a “Third Isaiah” (chapters 56–66), but conservative scholarship attributes the entire work to Isaiah himself. Central themes include:

- **Judgement and Salvation**: Isaiah warns of consequences for idolatry, injustice, and rebellion, yet offers hope for restoration and redemption.
- **Holiness of God**: The prophet emphasises God's sovereignty and moral perfection.
- **Social Justice**: Isaiah calls for defence of the oppressed, care for widows and orphans, and ethical living.

Messianic Prophecies

Isaiah contains some of the most significant Messianic prophecies, foretelling the coming of Jesus Christ:

Virgin Birth: Isaiah 7:14 predicts a virgin will conceive and bear a son named Immanuel, meaning “God with us”.

Divine Kingship: Isaiah 9:6–7 describes the Messiah as Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace, emphasising His eternal reign and justice.

Lineage and Anointing: Isaiah 11:1–2 speaks of a shoot from Jesse's line, endowed with the Spirit of the Lord, highlighting the Messiah's divine mission and wisdom.

Suffering and Redemption: Isaiah portrays the Messiah as a suffering servant who will bear the sins of many, offering salvation and establishing a future kingdom.

Purpose and Impact

Isaiah's prophecies are not merely predictions but serve to call people to repentance, strengthen faith, and inspire hope. They demonstrate God's control over history, His justice, and His plan for redemption, culminating in the revelation of the Saviour long before His incarnation. The book's poetic language, vivid imagery, and theological depth make it a cornerstone of both Jewish and Christian understanding of prophecy.

In summary, the prophecy of Isaiah addresses historical, ethical, and spiritual concerns while pointing forward to the coming Messiah, blending immediate warnings with enduring promises of hope and restoration.

Those introductory comments are taken largely from Bible Hub, which is an excellent source of dependable observations on the entire Bible. But let's look at some of the opening verses.

Isaiah 1:1 tells us who Isaiah was and when he was prophesying. We know nothing of Amoz except that he was the father of one of the most influential prophets of the Old

Testament. But for Isaiah's calling we need to see Isaiah 6. It is so well known that we scarcely need to recite it, but we will look at it closely when we reach it! Right at the start, Isaiah proclaims the Word of the Lord (YHVH) and demands that both heaven and earth should hear his prophecy. The Lord claims Judah and Jerusalem as His own children. He reared them, but they had turned rebellious. How many good fathers today have been dismayed by their rebellious children? How many times have we heard the consternation of the poor mother: “Where did we go wrong?” they ask. But they did go wrong, because Judah is termed a “brood” of evildoers. Where else do we hear this term? Yes, Jesus called the Pharisees a brood of vipers in Matthew 12:34 and again in Matthew 23:33. But the Lord did not go wrong. He was just and righteous. So what went wrong? Even the beasts of burden know how their bread is buttered. They know who is boss, who is their provider, and are readily obedient. The mention of “manger” in Isaiah 1:3 suggests that it is largely self-interest that drives the donkey. At the end of a tiring day he will know where his food and comfort lie. But also, to the trained eye of the Christian, we hear hints of a baby who will one day lie in a manger.

We now hear in Isaiah 1:4 of the sinful nation of Judah and the fact that they have turned their back to their Father, who is called the Holy One of Israel. In Isaiah 1:5 we learn that the nation has been well thrashed and is full of wounds and

bruises. Rebellion has led to heavy chastisement. This is no soft parent! The well-worn question is posed: “Why should you…?” We hear it most clearly in Ezekiel 33:10–11. This is a beautiful verse—please read it. Also in Ecclesiastes 7:17. Lexie and I well remember a previous pastor of the Shrewsbury Evangelical Church who, with great zeal for the unsaved, took a small group of us into the Quarry and called after some unsuspecting passer-by, “Why will you die?” The sentiment was exquisite, but the manner of executing it might be questioned. But here, the “Good Samaritan” Saviour God whom we know as Jesus longs to apply oil and bandages to wounded Judah and Jerusalem.

We then see the state of the country: desolate, burned, ravaged fields, so that “daughter Zion” is left like a hut in a cucumber field, which was essentially temporary, lonely, and unprotected, when she, that is Jerusalem, should have been overshadowed by the protective wings of YHVH. “Daughter of Zion” was a well-used and tender metaphor for the cherished and much-loved city of Jerusalem (see Zechariah 9:9). The contrast between the much-loved city and a temporary and abandoned shed would be obvious to any of Isaiah's hearers. It is not clear from our NIV precisely where the quotation mark ceases. Isaiah 1:9 would make more sense if it were an observation by the prophet. Sodom and Gomorrah were left totally desolate and burned up by the Lord (Genesis 19:24). We will observe that Genesis only speaks of Sodom as His

objective, but in the final judgement, all the cities of the plain were rained upon by fire and brimstone. This might be an object lesson for us. Incidentally, scholars believe the cities were located at the south end of the Dead Sea in the Jordan Valley.

Now this metaphor is extended in Isaiah 1:10, which would have aroused great indignation amongst the hearers of this prophecy. Imagine the UK being compared to Nazi Germany. Sodom was the last word in evil and was referenced by Jesus in Matthew 10:15, but only to say that the towns that refused the Gospel of the Kingdom would be worse off on Judgement Day. What a mighty curse that was! The Lord YHVH declares that He is fed up with sacrifices and burnt offerings, and the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. Yet He instituted these rituals in Leviticus. So what's happening here? Right from the start, in 1 Samuel 15:22, the Lord made it clear that it was not burnt offering alone that He delighted in, but obedience. David acknowledges this in Psalm 40:6 and Asaph likewise in Psalm 50:7–14, where he states that thank-offerings are what He delights in. In Psalm 51:16–17 David discovers that a broken spirit and a contrite heart are the best sacrifices he could offer. This is taken up by Amos, if you recall, in Amos 5:21–24. Here we have a very forceful declaration by the Lord ("I hate…I despise…the stench") that is surely sufficient to persuade Israel and ourselves that ritual is of no value to God. He looks for mercy, justice, and righteousness, which are the

“foundation of His Throne” (Psalm 89:14). Then in Hosea 6:6 we read that the Lord requires mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of God. Finally, in Micah 6:6–8 it is clear that to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God is the highest sacrifice. What do you glean from all these passages? That God looks on the heart. He longs for a relationship with His people and for right living, not ritual. How profound is this? A moment's silence might be appropriate at this point.

So after reflection, we may perceive the frustration of the Lord. He uses verbs like “trampling”, “I cannot bear”, “I hate with all my being” and adjectives like “detestable”. God is weary of bearing the weight of these meaningless rituals and is not even open to their prayers! He is hiding His eyes from them. Is He hiding His eyes from us? Lord, have mercy.

What then is the antidote? Wash! Stop doing wrong! Learn to do right—seek justice, defend the oppressed, or correct the oppressor! Take up the cause of the fatherless and plead the case of the widow. I'm reminded of the curious conclusion that James, the brother of Jesus, comes to in James 1:27. Read it…widows and orphans. In those days these people had no welfare state to apply to. They looked to the Lord. No husband to take care of them (think of Naomi in the Book of Ruth), no parents to look after them. Both looked to the Lord, and He in turn looked to His people. Today the Welfare State can come to the rescue of the disadvantaged. So what does the Lord

require of us today? Any suggestions? Clean hands and a pure heart, and care for those the State has left behind? Would this be a reasonable answer?

But look at Isaiah 1:19, where the Lord reasons gently with His beloved ones. Though their sins are scarlet like the woman and the beast of Babylon in Revelation 17, the Lord can wash them white as snow; even crimson sins, so bright and glaring, can become like sheep's wool. Obedience is what the Lord wants, not rebellion, which is as bad as witchcraft. Isaiah 1:21 reminds me of the beginning of Lamentations. In both passages there is a stark contrast between how things were and how they now are. In stating this, we might accuse the Lord of forgetting the advice of Ecclesiastes 7:10. “Fings aint wot they used to be” is not recommended, but here, as in Lamentations, we hear that Jerusalem was once full of justice. Really? When was this? The answer is that it was whilst King David and Solomon after him administered justice and righteousness with great wisdom. That phrase about wine being diluted with water rings in my ears. Jesus changed the water into wine in Cana and the Church has been busy watering it down ever since. Lord, have mercy on us, even if I have overstated the case. Widows and orphans are no longer the care of rulers; they are sometimes cared for by social services, but we all know social services are under great strain.

In Isaiah 1:24 we read of three titles for God: the Lord (ha Adon), the Lord Almighty (YHVH Tsavaot = hosts) and the Mighty One of Israel (’avir Yisrael). Hoy! says the Lord! But I have filled four pages, so will leave His declaration until next week.

Let's sing and pray.

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Isaiah Chapters 1 and 2

We cut last week's study short at a very dramatic point. The Lord Almighty, the Mighty One of Israel, declares—what does He declare? Surely something kind and loving, since He's such a loving, generous God, as is preached in every church in the country? Oh, what's that?! Ah! He says, "Hoy" in Hebrew. Hoy! Sounds a bit like "Oi!"—the cry of some lout in the street calling his mate. But this is the Lord Almighty, the Mighty One of Israel. Let's continue, then: "I will vent my wrath on my foes and avenge myself on all my enemies."

When I used to organise the Good Friday Walk of Witness on Good Friday, the Vicar of St Chad's and the ex-Bishop of Southwark complained that I had included a song which spoke of the wrath of God. I asked Bishop Ronnie to come for tea in the Tower (!) to discuss his curious conviction that one should not sing a superb song by Stuart Townend because it happened to include the phrase "the wrath of God was satisfied". If you take all the references to wrath out of the Old Testament, we would be left with Ruth and possibly the Song of Songs, so Scripture would be a bit impoverished. He did

agree, in fact, but said we should not sing of it in public, as if passers-by actually weighed every word of every song we sang!

Here God does not mince His words: “Vengeance is mine, says the Lord, and I will repay” (Romans 12:19). OK, so the Lord Almighty is saying He will repay His enemies—that’s Edom, Ammon, Philistia, Assyria, Tyre, Sidon. Oh! “I will turn my hand against you!” (And at the footnote it says, “that is, against Jerusalem”!) What? Jerusalem, the City of Peace, the City God loves so dearly? Yes, but His purpose was “to purge away your dross and remove all your impurities”.

Now then: I’ve been thinking a lot about illness, sickness, pain and distress—especially among those the Lord loves. How come? And what should we be praying for them? I wonder if, judging by this verse, we should pray that God would do what He wants to do, even “if he slay” (Job 13:15), because that, in the end, will “purge us from our dross”. Proverbs says, “Chastise your son and he will be yet wiser” (Proverbs 29:15, Proverbs 29:17). Translations differ, but the truth remains, and yet how many abide by it? Which is why we have ungovernable children who grow into feral young folk.

What did David say in Psalm 51:2? “Cleanse me from my sin.” If one googles “purge”, it translates it as “cleanse”. How does one cleanse except by purging? The old remedies for purging were very violent and generally included administering an

emetic to cause vomiting or an enema, which we will not describe. This cleansing or purging is very unpleasant and can only be done by God. The Catholic is advised to recite several hundred Hail Marys, but only the Lord can truly cleanse us within. Washing is external; purging is within.

However, the Lord makes a promise, as He so often does after judgement: “I will restore your leaders as in days of old; your rulers as at the beginning.” And then this astonishing promise: “Afterwards you will be called The City of Righteousness, the Faithful City.” When, I ask myself, was this ever fulfilled? God’s promises are like silver refined seven times, so we can depend upon them. But if we study the progress of the City of Jerusalem, it travels through further disobedience and decline towards its final destruction in AD 70. If we look at its subsequent progress, it is pretty disastrous. So where are we to look for the fulfilment of this prophecy? Because fulfilled it will be. I hope you will tell me: Revelation 21. You may choose which verse to read, but the whole chapter is sublime. We long for it. We long!

So Zion will be delivered with justice, her penitent ones with righteousness, both being the foundation of God’s throne. But even when New Jerusalem is lowered down from heaven, it will exclude rebels and sinners. We, when the Lord has cleansed our hearts, purged them of the dross and impurity, will look back on our addictions to sacred oaks and gardens

we chose. What were our sacred oaks? Money, alcohol, drugs, sex, indulgence, fame? You must fill in the gaps, tick the appropriate boxes. Some will have more selfishness to be ashamed of, more forbidden delights; others, like my lovely wife, may have very few. But either way, we have all been delivered, praise God, from all that angers our Creator.

There may be yet more to come. There may be a further cleansing needed, which is why we celebrate festivals like Advent, when we "cast away the works of darkness and put upon us the armour of light", and Lent, when we "worthily lament our sins and acknowledge our wretchedness". We need daily to "take up our cross and follow our Saviour", dying daily to sin. May we then become, like New Jerusalem, "a tree planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither" (Psalm 1:3)—not like "an oak with fading leaves, like a garden without water".

Right now it is autumn, and we see the leaves fade and fall with a mighty flourish of glorious colours, before they drop and are burned, or collected by Jim for his allotment. They have their uses. But as for the "mighty man" who thinks he is indispensable—the rich, the influential, the proud, the arrogant, the self-sufficient—they will be like the withered branch that Jesus spoke of in John 15:5. Read it, especially John 15:6, of which Isaiah speaks in Isaiah 1:31. I note this unquenchable fire. There is very little about the hell of the

New Testament in the Old, but this is as near as we get. Isaiah refers to it again in Isaiah 66:24, his final chapter and very last verse!

Of course, Jesus takes up the theme in Matthew 3:12 and Mark 9:43–48, the last verse of which quotes Isaiah 66:24. We don't preach hell nowadays, but Wesley did, and people trembled. Maybe we should preach it with sensitivity and sparingly, because it is a final judgement and the Lord is merciful. But we need to portray our Mighty God with due balance and respect. He is not an indulgent parent who says, "Never mind, I love you, so all will be well," and fails to rebuke, correct and train in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

God loves the humble, but the proud He views from afar, so we need to bow before Him in fear and trembling before we embrace Him in love (Deuteronomy 10:12–13, and the oft-repeated advice, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom"). And note, before we leave this chapter, that the "work" of the "mighty man" will be burned up along with him. Thus ends Isaiah 1, this mighty prophecy (see 1 Corinthians 3:12–15). Here Paul says that even if our work is burned up, we may survive by the "skin of our teeth" (Job 19:20).

Isaiah 2 opens with a vision, not a thought or an idea, but a vision. It looks forward to the "last days". So it's an eschatological vision. It is easy for some Christians to

conclude that we are in the “last days”, so that this prophecy is for our time. They are clearly not students of history. We have had “wars and rumours of wars ... famines and earthquakes in various places”, but the end—that is, the final end—“is yet to come” (Matthew 24:6).

I have a book entitled *1000 AD*, and it is clear that the people in that year were convinced that the end was upon them. Then, likewise, in the year 2000, many of us (including myself) concluded this was the end. We are now in 2026, and predictions are still being made to no effect. But we should always be ready and prepared, not so much physically but spiritually, for the end which will come “as a thief in the night”.

So what will happen at the end? “The mountain of the Lord’s Temple will be established as the highest of the mountains.” Again we encounter the problem of a literalist interpretation. Are we to imagine that Temple Mount (which at present lacks a Temple to YHVH) will suddenly rear up to the height of Mount Everest? Clearly not. We are speaking of a reputation being raised rather than feet, inches, metres or kilometres. “All nations will stream to it.”

If anyone watches the Christian TV channel called Revelation TV, we will find Barry Segal prancing around delightedly at the Feast of Tabernacles, excitedly indicating the multitudes from “all nations” streaming into Jerusalem to celebrate the

Feast. No, I am not mocking in any way, but to say this is a fulfilment of the "last days" prophecy is pushing the envelope a little. We also need the sun and moon darkened (not just as an eclipse, please—we've had tens of thousands of those through the ages), and also the Son of Man returning in power and great glory "as the lightning that comes from the east, visible even in the west" (Matthew 24:27). And, to be frank, I've not noticed this in my lifetime, though some would even say this has already happened.

There is much mystery enveloping the "last days", and speculation is fruitless and simply confusing. But I find this prophecy of the "Mountain of the Lord" very compelling, because it ties in with so many other similar prophecies. Look at Micah 4:1–2 and Jeremiah 26:18, which relates to Micah 3:12. Elliott, in his thoughtful commentary, translates the Hebrew *BeaHareet hayameem* as "in the latter days", so sees this as a prophecy relating to the days of the Messiah, i.e. Jesus. But, with great respect, however compelling this might seem, we can see that it is simply erroneous. For one thing, the Hebrew translates as "at the end of the days", but for another, the signs are clearly absent.

Although we love to recite Isaiah 2:4 at Remembrance Day (last Sunday), we must do so with our tongue in our cheek, if not our heart in our mouths. Some kind of bodily manipulation is necessary to believe that universal peace has

already happened or that it is just around the corner. And we have already seen that other signs, both celestial and terrestrial, are absent, despite what amateur astronomers might claim.

We live eternally in hope, as Alexander Pope, the archetypal sceptic, wrote: “Man never is, but always to be blessed” (in his *Essay on Man*). This is the idea that we live in hope of the pie in the sky. Most of my Saturday Crafts people lived like this; they came week after week and had no sales. I hadn’t the heart to charge them, for they always hoped one day that their ship would come in. Or shall we look at the infamous sketch in *Beyond the Fringe*, where the faithful believers sat on the mountain awaiting the end of the world and, since it failed to materialise, parted with the agreement to meet again the following day.

The reason I labour this point is that we need to make a personal application of this prophecy, or we will be blown around, as in Ephesians 4:14, “by every wind of teaching”. Scripture must be read in context and in a wide sense, comparing Scripture with Scripture. For example, how many of us realise that there is a precisely opposite prophecy, in a different context, of Isaiah 2:4? Look at Joel 3:10. “’Nuff said,” as one of our prayer warriors used to say.

But let's look at a few wider prophecies and see if we can sharpen our own swords, ready for battle on the streets. Let's look at this phrase, "the days to come", in different contexts. Start at Genesis 49:1. Then move to Numbers 24:14. Then Deuteronomy 4:30, then Deuteronomy 31:29, then Psalm 125:2, and finally Zechariah 14:10. We won't venture into the Book of Revelation because we may lose a foot or two from anti-personnel devices! Would we care to discuss this amongst yourselves? Off you go!

I think we might well conclude with the impeccable advice of Isaiah 2:5: "Come, descendants of Jacob (spiritually speaking, that is), let us walk in the light of the Lord." Amen.

A song or two might lighten our souls and lead to prayer for ourselves and our nation.

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SECTION 4

Matthew

1 study

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Where Your Treasure Is



> **Sing:**
> **Who is on the Lord's side?**
> **SoF 107 Fight the good fight**

Continuing with Matthew 6. Matthew 6:12: “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” There are various slight variations on this verse. Some use the word “sins” rather than “debts”, and of course the AV says, “forgive us our trespasses”. The problem is that one never knows how the particular pray-er intends to proceed: are they using the

AV or the new version? Will they say “debts” instead of “sins”? But in the end, what is this verse telling us? Is it saying that unless we forgive our debtors, or those who sin against us, we will not ourselves be forgiven? Well, the answer to this is given in Matthew 6:14; someone read it, please. It speaks for itself. And there’s even a little story, or a parable, in Matthew 18:23–35.. Would someone like to read it? It’s very clear, isn’t it? We simply MUST forgive others, since we ourselves have been forgiven so much. If we can’t forgive — and I know some who just couldn’t and died without assurance — then we can never have that close relationship with Jesus that He longs for. Now, let’s look at someone who had every reason to hate, but preferred to forgive. Our good friend Robin Oake, who is still part of our House Group at Bayston Hill, had every reason to hate the terrorist who murdered his son Stephen in 2003. Robin, who was Chief Constable of the Isle of Man and Deputy Chief Constable of Manchester, publicly forgave Kamel Bourgass, an illegal Algerian immigrant who was part of an Islamist cell plotting to produce ricin for terrorist attacks. Robin has subsequently written a booklet on forgiveness and has been asked to speak all over the country about the need to forgive. Some of us may have had reasons to hate or to hold a grudge against someone who has behaved wrongly towards us, but the question is the same: why should we forgive? Well, it’s interesting that the only ones who suffer in such instances are we ourselves. To hold a grudge is a very heavy burden. Lexie and I will never forget a sermon by a Welsh preacher in

the little chapel at Worthen on the importance of letting go of our resentment, hatred or unforgiveness. “It’s like a hot brick,” he told us. “Drop it!”

Then in Matthew 6:13 we encounter the strangest of all the prayers: “Lead us not into temptation.” If we think for one moment: is it likely that Jesus would lead us into temptation? After all, in James — Jesus’ brother’s letter — James 1:13; could someone please read it? James comes on p. 1213, just after Hebrews. It couldn’t be clearer, could it? “God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.” So was James deliberately contradicting his brother’s prayer? What is going on here? What do you make of it? I happen to have an extremely rare book dated 1551 which gives the original Hebrew of Matthew’s Gospel, for he wrote it originally in his own tongue. Here the Hebrew is very slightly different from the Greek as we have it. I know some of you find it tough if I quote the original text, so suffice it to say that what Jesus is inviting us to do is to beg Him not to lead us into situations where we will be tested or tempted — the words are the same — beyond our power to resist. In Numbers 23:19, Balaam says, “God is not human, that He should lie, not a human being, that He should change His mind”; and in Habakkuk 1:13, the prophet complains that God’s eyes are too pure to look on evil: “You cannot tolerate wrongdoing,” so why does He remain silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves? So what we are praying for God to

do is to keep us from those situations where we might fall. Matthew's original text translates, "Keep us from the power of temptation", and some modern translations say, "Keep us from the time of trial", as making more sense to the modern mind. But it's all very conflicted because surely Job was led into a situation where most people would "curse God and die", which was what his wife recommended to him (Job 2:9). But he retained his integrity throughout his trial. I'm sure if you think hard enough you could bring up any number of extremely testing situations some people have been led into: extreme pain, extreme despair, extreme anger, extreme weakness, extreme perplexity. I think what we are asking the Lord is, "Please don't lead us into situations where we might be tempted to give up our faith in You." I have known several people who, under a test like this, decided they could no longer believe in a merciful God, and so abandoned their faith. What a dreadful, fearful thing this is. Dear Lord, please don't lead us into a place where we might give up on You and lose our Salvation. And to those like David Hands who say, "It is impossible, if we once believe, to lose our Salvation," I reply that Paul would not agree. In 1 Corinthians 10:12–13 he says, "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall." Do please read the next verse. And then there is the word peirasmos — sorry to use the Greek — but it means "the hour of trial", as in Revelation 3:10. Read it. Peirasmon is "a time of trial, of testing", which, without God's help, we would stumble at. Thus the need to pray this prayer again and again;

from the Didache, c. 50-70 AD, onwards, churches recited this prayer three times daily. We need God's constant protection — He knows our weakness. Then finally, "but deliver us from the Evil One." Not all manuscripts read this way; most leave it as "evil". The Greek apo tou ponerou could actually be taken either way: either as "the evil", covering all kinds of evil from sickness and disaster, as well as hostility from a variety of sources, or as "the Evil One", meaning Satan. I am going to put my head above the parapet and prefer the latter, by looking at John 17:15. Do read it, please: "protect them from the Evil One." After all, it would be unrealistic to ask God to protect us from everything harmful. I think of one wonderful Christian who suffered a terrible climbing accident and was bed-bound, yet immensely evangelistic, for the rest of his life. No — we need protection, or rather deliverance — the very word is immensely significant — from Satan. He is a terrible foe, not the comic villain with horns and a tail. He is a shapeshifter, a malign influence on the lives of so many who have fallen from grace through his machinations, and after all he is in charge of the whole world system (cf. Matthew 4:9). He couldn't offer Jesus what was not his. Yes, Lord, defend us, we pray, from his terrible power. We have been taken out of his domain into Yours, out of the Kingdom of Darkness into the Kingdom of Light. From death to Life. We have dealt with Matthew 6:14-15. Now on to Matthew 6:16, in a change of mood. So the question remains: do we fast? Or perhaps do we consider it an extreme practice, only for zealots, monks and

nuns, and body-conscious females? But note: it says “when”, not “if”. It was the custom in Jesus’ day to cast ash upon the head. Look at Daniel 9:3, for example. “Sackcloth and ashes” has become a common byword for repentance. Sackcloth as underwear causes continual irritation and thus reminds the body that it is contrite, and ashes were, after all, what we came from and what we are heading for. Think of Ash Wednesday. This outward sign was ubiquitous; Esther 4:1 and Jonah 3:5-6 are other examples. It was customary and quite acceptable. But Jesus, pursuing the theme of inner intention rather than outward display, as with almsgiving and prayer, suggests that this is not what His Father really wants. “Fast inwardly,” says Jesus, and if you “afflict your soul,” as on the Day of Atonement, then do it unostentatiously. Jesus suggests that hypocrites want to make a fuss, like the Pharisee in Luke 18:9-14. They receive their reward. Pious followers will be in awe of their zealous rabbis. But, no, says Jesus — do it secretly. Indeed, anoint your head and wash your face, i.e. do the very opposite so that no one would guess that you were afflicting your soul. However, there is an exception to this. If, for any reason, a church today feels the need to make a public sign of repentance; if it’s announced from the front, “Look, we really need to repent before the Lord, so let’s encourage each other to do this.” Normally we would not admit to fasting, so that we adhere to this remonstrance, but I believe there are times when it is encouraging to admit to it for the sake of unity of purpose. You may wish to disagree. But I wouldn’t

recommend pouring cooking oil, or olive oil, over our heads to prove anything; apart from being very sticky, it's a problem getting rid of it. Just smile — that's enough.

Now then, a really sticky one — to continue the metaphor. I need to state quite publicly that I have repented long ago of having disobeyed this commandment. I really admire folk like one of my craftspeople who still trades halfway down the Wyle Cop, who used to discard anything that was no longer useful. I confess that I used to go through his bin and retrieve anything that I felt could prove remotely useful, like sheets of coloured cardboard. I am a notorious magpie and it is ridiculous. Many of my indulgent friends say, "Oh no; books are always worth keeping," but when one has amassed 22,500 it has clearly become a problem and can be termed a grievous sin. Fortunately moths, caterpillars and rodents rarely take an interest in books — though bookworms still do — and thieves also very rarely consider books to be a readily exchangeable commodity. But that's missing the point. We can't take anything with us, can we? I keep telling myself this, so maybe you should pray for me and others like me — no names, no pack drill — that we will not suffer damnation for our foolish habit. Massive wardrobes, hundreds of shoes, caskets of jewellery, heavy bank balances — all will turn to dust. The point is that "where our treasure is, there will our heart be also." I don't remember much of what people preach, but one sermon the Headmaster of my Prep School preached on many

occasions was on this very subject. At that stage I had collected nothing but gobstoppers, Refreshers, or dirty handkerchiefs. But the habit began at Oundle, when I found a discarded copy of Boswell's Johnson and kept it close and caressed it down my bed at night. It had some contemporary annotations in it, and oh, how I dreamed about the person who had written them and added my own infantile notes. But those are far-off days. It got worse, but you do not need to hear the story. How about you? May I ask if this is something you struggle with, or are you like my erstwhile card-shop friend, who discards all that is unnecessary? But the real question, I think, is: where do our hearts lie? I suppose it's possible to have great riches — Solomon, the wisest man in the Old Testament, was phenomenally rich; read about it in 1 Kings 10 — but if we hold it lightly, and don't concern ourselves when, as in Hebrews 10:34, we suffer the plundering of our goods, then we're okay with God, and nothing holds us back from entering into Life. I guess in the end, it's what we spend most of our time thinking about. Do you agree? Now then, Matthew 6:22–23. The old version, the AV, spoke of your eye being single, and I always used to wonder what this meant. Would you like to suggest what you think "healthy" means in this translation? It surely does not allude to astigmatism or myopia. I quote from Bible Hub: the phrase comes from Matthew 6:22-23, where Jesus says: "The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy

whole body shall be full of darkness" (KJV). Here, the "eye" is metaphorical, representing the conscience, moral vision, or spiritual focus of a person. A "single" eye indicates clarity, purity and devotion to God, while an "evil" eye suggests distraction, selfishness or moral corruption. I quite like this interpretation; do you? So would you go for "healthy and unhealthy", or "single and evil", or "good and bad"? Without wanting to be overtly grammatical, I would like to note that the Greek for "bad" is poneros, the same as that which we ask to be delivered from in the Lord's Prayer. I think that's very significant. Evil is evil is evil! If your eyes are, not so much unhealthy I think, but bad — evil — then our whole body will be full of darkness. Oh my, and how great is that darkness. So, Lord Jesus, please free us from that darkness. You are Light and all that pertains to light. Now, as I pondered this — I really want to hear what you feel — I think of jealousy, envy, mistrust, coveting and so on. In the Middle East they speak of the Evil Eye. Wikipedia is interesting regarding the Evil Eye. Apparently it goes back 5,000 years, and usually refers to an envious look or one that wishes harm. An evil eye was considered harmful for the one looked upon, and a large eye often hung outside their door to ward it off. Even to say "What a beautiful baby" could invoke the most terrible disasters upon the unfortunate child. My next-door neighbour but one doesn't think that evil thoughts can affect anyone. I have to disagree with him. Have you ever entered a room and sensed a "bad atmosphere"? May our look be just a fleeting

glance and never a lustful, hostile or envious glare. May we look upon others with delight, with joy, with hearts full of love and delight. May we wish them well and not harm. May we disseminate joy. Mmm. Yes, Lord. You may need to change some hearts. I remember one dear Christian called Alfred Robey, who ran a shop near St Julian's called Ducane Gallery. Chris, you worked for him. He always walked around, didn't he, with a permanent smile, and I don't think it was false. Some smiles can be flashed on and off like a traffic light or a Belisha beacon. But others can be genuine, like dear Stephen Coonan, a previous Canon from the nearby Catholic Cathedral, who always wore a sweet, gentle smile which mirrored his sweet, gentle nature. Bless the Lord for him. So may our eyes be single, desiring nothing but the good of all we meet. Then a wonderful summary of all the previous thoughts in Matthew 6:24. Shall we read it together? It assumes we are serving a master. Is it God, with all He requires, or is it the world — Satan's Kingdom and the love of money? We can't serve both. I think the word "Mammon" was confusing to earlier generations. It left them unmoved. But the real meaning should challenge every listener. Which do we serve? Can we finish this chapter in fifty words? Let's read Matthew 6:25-34. Oh dear, I often quote these words to my darling wife when she is so worried about what to wear that day. But I personally have no problem about food because it's so low on my priority list that, along with what I wear, I never think about it. But I bear in mind that some people do worry

about these things because they have so very little in the world. Can I leave you people to share your thoughts on these verses so I can shut up? I just love the last line. It's straight from Ecclesiastes!

I have half a page left. Can I read you the translation of Matthew's words from his Hebrew original text? Compare it with the Greek translation.

Here are some comparisons:

Matthew 6:13

The **Greek** reads: …and lead us not into temptation…

The **Hebrew** Reads: …and keep us from the power of trial…

Matthew 6:12

The **Greek** reads: "Forgive us our debts… as we have forgiven our debtors."

The **Hebrew** Reads: "Forgive us our trespassing… as we have let go of those who trespassed against us."

Matthew 6:24

The **Greek** reads: "No one can serve two masters… You cannot serve God and Mammon."

The **Hebrew** Reads: "No one can serve two masters… You cannot serve God and that in which you trust."

Matthew 6:25

The **Greek** reads: "Therefore I say to you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink."

The **Hebrew** Reads: "Therefore I say to you, do not be afraid for your life, or for what your mouth will eat, or for your body what it will wear."

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SECTION 5

Psalms

1 study

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Psalm 29: Thunder!



> **Sing:**
>
> - **O worship the Lord in the Beauty of Holiness (457 SoF)**

This week's Study is based on Psalm 29, which struck me, as I was reading it, to beg a number of questions. It is a psalm, or poem, full of grandeur and majesty, and should be read aloud with impressive accents. Pity we're not together to do it

justice. But how do we understand it? The question I want to explore is: do we today consider thunder to be the Voice of God?

First, who are the 'heavenly beings' (RSV & NIV) or 'mighty ones' (NKJ) or beney Eloheem 'sons of gods' (Hebrew literal) in verse one? Who are these beings? Jesus has an answer to this. When the Jews questioned His claim to be the Son of God (John 10:33), Jesus reminded them of Psalm 82:6, where Asaph refers to 'gods' 3 times and boldly states in verse 6: 'I said, "You are gods"'. From the context, it is God Himself who states this. But it goes on to say that 'you will die like mere mortals' and 'will fall like every other ruler'. What are we to conclude from this? These 'gods' are not immortal, but humans, probably judges, if we understand verse 3 & 4 aright. There are other references to 'gods' in Psalm 89:6: 'who is like the Lord among the heavenly beings?' And in Job we hear of the extraordinary idea that the angels (NIV) or the 'sons of God' (NKJ) came to present themselves before the Lord and 'Satan also came with them'! The Hebrew gives the word 'adversary' which sets him apart from the obedient ones. Goodness knows what he was doing in the assembly; that would be a Bible study on its own. But apart from this, we get the idea that these particular 'sons of god' are divine beings. And in Genesis 6:2 & 4 we again are faced with the idea that these 'sons of god' are immortal (the Greek and Roman myths detail their progeny). So what are we to make of this

reference in Psalm 29? I think (& you may wish to disagree) that we are probably talking of heavenly beings who surround the throne of God as in Job. But it would be perfectly legitimate to regard them as earthly rulers as in the Psalms. I love it when Scripture leaves us wondering. It's only the obdurate who want everything tied with a neat bow.

At any rate these beings are being invited to 'ascribe' or 'give' to the Lord the glory and strength which are due to His Name, i.e. they are not able to actually 'give' God anything because He was, is & will always be infinitely great so that nothing can be added to His Wisdom, Understanding, Knowledge, Power, Glory or Strength. No; they are to 'acknowledge' His attributes and as a result of acknowledging them, to worship Him – in the beauty (NJK) or 'splendour' (NIV) of holiness. Do you find holiness beautiful? If you don't, then you have an incomplete or false notion of what holiness is. The song we started with invites us to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness and 'bow down before Him, His Glory proclaim'. 'May you be glorified, O Lord', we say. 'Glory to God in the Highest'. These great beings, whether divine or human, must recognise that God is greater than they, and that they must bow before Him and acknowledge His supremacy in submission and subordination of both mind and will. For the 'beauty of holiness' see also 1 Chronicles 16:28-29, where 'sons of god' has been changed into 'all you families of nations' because it is quoting from Psalm 96:7-9. See how closely this Psalm

mirrors Psalm 29. In both of them we read of 'gods', who are dismissed in Psalm 96 as 'idols'. In 2 Chronicles 20:21 Jehoshaphat proclaims the 'splendour of God's holiness' (NIV) through the (male-voice) choir who preceded the march.

So let's move on. The rest of this marvellous Psalm 29 delineates this 'glory and strength' largely through the passage of a thunderstorm across the land. Starting from the sea in verse 3. Or is it the sea? My theme for today is to look behind the apparent, the obvious, and in the true tradition of Pardes (Jewish 4-level interpretation) to see what underlies the literal. It is well known, for example, that 'seas' represent the peoples (compare Psalm 93, and, very clearly, Psalm 65:7 'the roaring of the seas; the tumult of the peoples'). So right from the start, I feel, we are led to look for an underlying theme in this Psalm. On the surface we have David, impressed by the majesty of a storm as it passes over the land. This is, on face value, a meditation upon the power of a storm and likening it to the voice of God. If we were to hear God speak, could anything be more impressive than thunder? Actually, this idea persisted right up to NT times. God spoke 3 times in the NT. First at Jesus' baptism (Luke 3:22), next at the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:5) and then, notably, which is the point I want to make, in John 12:27-30. Here it clearly says 'a voice came from heaven; "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." The crowd that was there and heard it, said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to Him.' Now

this verse could so easily be passed over without comment, but look! This is the crux of the matter. In John 5:37, Jesus remarked 'you have never heard His Voice....' to the Jewish leaders. How cutting! But Jesus also said 'My sheep hear/listen to my voice' (John 10:27). So at once we see a clear distinction between those who can recognise God's Voice & basically those who can't. So where do we fit in on this scale?

This hearing of God's voice is quite subtle. I would hate anyone reading this to think 'Oh dear! I've never heard God speak!' I can almost hear several of you saying this right now. But don't get the wrong idea. We're speaking on a deeper, almost metaphorical level. My dear wife twice actually heard a voice which she knew was God. I have not, but from time to time I've sensed a very clear leading and when I've followed it, it turns out to be very much of God. It might be 'I should ring so & so' or 'I should email someone particular', or 'I should visit, or send a card to a friend or pray for them', and it was exactly what was needed. Sometimes the voice can be a still, small voice as in 1 Kings 19:11-13. And 'if today you will hear His Voice, harden not your hearts!' (Hebrews 3:15, after Psalm 95:7-8). But I stray. The point is, not whether we can discern the voice of God or not, but as to whether thunder is His Voice. Now this is quite a different question and I want to link it to sundry other matters of discernment, many of them quite awkward and controversial. Are hurricanes simply meteorological phenomena, or a message from God? Is He

displaying His wrath against ungodly peoples? Likewise with the terrible Boxing Day tsunami: are we to see this as a Word from God against unrighteousness? This latter question caused me so much distress and questioning that I called a town-wide meeting on the issue at St Julian's, and along with the vicar of the Abbey, gave a Scriptural view of the event. But it still troubles me deeply, because it appears to contradict Scripture quite directly (read Jeremiah 5:22). Are we under a new dispensation? Again – a matter of discernment. So is thunder the voice of God? Is it a matter of faith, or is it a metaphor, along with the divine fury of hurricanes & tsunamis? Get my point? If we were together we could discuss this. In the book of Revelation there are many accounts of St John hearing the voice of God as thunder. See Rev. 4:5, 8:5 & chapter 10:1-7. Believe me there are many thunderings and lightning in heaven, as there were on Sinai, and maybe that is the allusion. What can be more sobering and awe-inspiring than thunder and lightning! In Rev 4:5 & 8:5 there is no suggestion that God is actually speaking through this display of power and awe, except to say 'Don't mess with me!'. But in chapter 10 the seven thunders 'spoke' but John was not permitted to tell us what they said. I guess God is both awe-inspiring and fearful, as well as loving and generous.

So, back to Psalm 29. We have the voice of God over the waters, as I mentioned earlier, in verse 3. A similar idea appears in Psalm 46:6–11. The Nations are in uproar and so

God lifts His Voice. He thunders, and makes wars to cease. You might respond 'I wish He'd do that today, in so many areas of the world.' 'The earth melts', is an indication that He doesn't make a habit of it! verse 4 says His Voice is powerful and majestic, but then what does it do? It breaks cedars in verse 5. Is that right? Bit of a comedown! But do you not remember what cedars indicate? We dealt with this in the bible study before last I think. It refers to those who are proud and think themselves mighty. But God is mightier! Verse 6! What? A country leaping like a calf and a mountain (Sirion = Mt Hermon in Israel) jumping around like a wild ox! Ever seen bullocks doing this? When they are released after winter lockdown, they jump around like little children. But Mountains?! See Psalm 114:6–8. How can mountains jump? Well it's poetry of course, but the Hebrews were notoriously anthropomorphic in their poetry. They loved to say that trees clap their hands with joy (Isaiah 55:12). It indicates great excitement when God acts dynamically. The context of Psalm 114 is the Exodus, when various seismological manifestations occurred if we are to believe the narrative. And why not? It was a remarkable act on the part of God, when the sea was driven back & Sinai smoked like a beacon. A fiery cloudy pillar led the Children of Israel. It was all very special. Why not get carried away? Earthquakes in Psalm 29:8 shake the desert. The Voice of God 'twists the oaks' in verse 9, or 'makes hinds deliver their young' (the other perfectly accredited translation). I had to go back to the Hebrew to work this one

out; the Hebrew favours the latter translation, the context favours the former. But the final two verses gloriously sum up the whole theme; the Lord sits enthroned over the chaos (the flood) and He strengthens His people and blesses them with peace – amidst the raging of the world & the chaos that surrounds us. Bless His name; just thank Him for that.

Sing: ‘Be still and know that I am God’ (no 41 SoF).

Amen

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SECTION 6

Titus

2 studies

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The Book of Titus: Chapter 1

> **Sing:** Jesus shall reign where're the sun.
> **Sing:** God of all power and truth and grace

Having finished Amos, it seemed fitting to embark on a New Testament book, and Titus was suggested as being very applicable to our lives today. However, fear not, we hope to be approaching, with great trepidation, the magnificent Book of Isaiah, upon which I cannot hope to improve upon those eminent commentators such as Alec Motyer and Keil & Delitzsch, etc. [Grammar fiends may object to the repeated word ‘upon’, but if they analyse it, it is essential. Discuss!]

Titus (on page 1198 of our NIV) is only three short chapters long (which is good Irish).

The Epistle (letter) to Titus was one of three pastoral epistles written by St Paul. Titus is not mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles, but in Galatians 2:1, Paul mentions that he, along with Titus and Barnabas, returned to Jerusalem, and in Galatians 2:3 adds that Titus was not compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. I’m sure this was a great relief to him, but the whole controversy over

circumcision is a topic in itself that might be worth exploring one day. Titus was then dispatched to Corinth, where he successfully reconciled the Christian community there, under the leadership of Paul. Later he was left on the island of Crete to help to organise the church there, and later met back with Paul in Nicopolis. He then went to Dalmatia (now Croatia) and, finally, we believe, on the authority of Eusebius of Caesarea, that he was appointed the first Bishop of Crete.

Just to confuse the issue, some scholars insist that this letter, along with those to Timothy, were later forgeries written after Paul's death. On the basis of the language and content of the letters, they are deemed to be what is known as pseudoepigraphical. These scholars insist that the vocabulary and style of the letters are inconsistent with the available information we have, but not only this: the views expressed in these three epistles reflect those of the emerging church rather than those of Paul himself. They would, most of them, date the letters from between 80 and 100 AD. The Church of England's Common Worship Lectionary Scripture Commentary concurs with this view, which also sees a great affinity between the letter to Titus and the first letter to Timothy; both written by one they call 'The Pastor'. But, to be perfectly honest, I'm somewhat irritated by these modernist statements, which would also divide Isaiah into two distinct books and would say that even the Gospels in some places have been interpolated. My response is: be this as it may, and

I am not sufficiently learned to dispute it, I am content to read these letters and all Scripture as ‘God-breathed’—meaning that, whatever the origin and whoever the author(s) may be, what we have is the breath of Almighty God. I have never been a literalist, or one who believes that every single word was inerrantly written by the very Hand of God. They were men who wrote and we are men who read, but the vital thing is that we perceive the purpose of the Holy Spirit in all we read, and that, having read it, we may ourselves purpose to obey it and to trust the Lord who died for us to reconcile us to His Father. Purpose to obey what we read, upon which we shall be judged on that Great Day when the Lord shall descend with the sound of the Trumpet!!!

What I think we can be pretty certain of is that Paul used an amanuensis to write his letters. This is confirmed by the occasions upon which he added his own signature (e.g. 1 Corinthians 16:21, Galatians 6:11–18, Colossians 4:18, 2 Thessalonians 3:17), which latter reference makes it clear that Paul wanted his readers to know what his handwriting looked like, so they would be assured of the letter’s authenticity. Note from the Galatians reference that Paul writes ‘in a large hand’, which has led me to believe that the ‘thorn in the flesh’ of which Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 12:7–10 was his poor sight. Two further reasons for my claiming this are: his comment in Galatians 4:13–15. The word ‘illness’ in Galatians 4:13 should better be translated as ‘affliction’.

The Greek is peirasmon, which really means ‘test’. But clearly it was his eyes that were troubling him, which is why he wrote his additions in a ‘large hand’. I also used to have very short sight and, without glasses, would have needed to write in a ‘large hand’ to be able to see what I had written. Also, it would be fitting for God to have afflicted him in his eyes so that he would never forget his encounter with the Lord Jesus on the Road to Damascus, when he was deprived entirely of his sight. It was restored through Ananias, but he was left with this infirmity, rather as Jacob, after his struggle with the angel, was left with a shrivelled hip and a consequent limp, which served as a constant reminder of that struggle. (Note also Numbers 33:55.)

Back to Titus. Some think Paul might have used Luke as an amanuensis for this letter, which might possibly have led to the idiosyncrasies of style.

Starting then at Titus 1:1. Letter-writing customs of the day led to the author of the letter putting his name first (see Romans 1:1, 1 Corinthians 1:1, 2 Corinthians 1:1, Galatians 1:1, Ephesians 1:1, Philippians 1:1, Colossians 1:1, 1 Thessalonians 1:1, 2 Thessalonians 1:1, 1 Timothy 1:1, 2 Timothy 1:1, and now Titus 1:1). No doubt about that, so why all these sceptics!! If we checked all those letters, we will see that sometimes Paul calls himself an apostle, at other times a servant. He was both! His purpose? To further the faith of God’s elect and to

further their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness, in the hope of eternal life.... So it's clear that in his letters he is not writing as an evangelist so much as an encourager (parakaleo), with all the meaning that this word involves (e.g. to call alongside, to comfort, to urge, to implore, entreat, counsel or admonish, etc.).

When he speaks in Titus 1:4 to Titus as his true son, he was adopting the same title as he gave Timothy (1 Timothy 1:2), and we know, of course, that Paul, who was not married (fortunately) and thus had no blood children, considered these two, at least, to have been his spiritual offspring, because he will have nurtured them and encouraged them even if he himself had not led them to Jesus. He considered himself a spiritual father to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 4:15.

Now in Titus 1:5 we get the prime reason for writing the letter. Paul and Titus had been working together in Crete, but Paul left him to appoint elders in every town. He then goes on to describe the remit of elders. To be blameless! Who amongst us is blameless? Anenkletos means free from accusation, and that is hard enough. Faithful to his wife? Now this is much clearer and indisputable, but I know so many Christians who have left their wives and married again. A man whose children believe? Again I know many wonderful, faithful Christians whose children do not believe. Pista can simply

mean trustworthy, so there's a little wiggle room here. Wild and disobedient? Asotias means debauchery and anipotatka means insubordinate. To whom? To his overseer or bishop? There are some Christians who reject authority and constantly argue with their superiors. They are the archetypal pain in the derriere and we must have met some on our way. Oh dear, but there's more—much more. Again we have the word blameless (anankleton), but now it's expanded to include 'overbearing'. Ow! Overbearing can be painful, because it belittles people and makes them feel stupid. Please let me know if ever I transgress this attribute. Not quick-tempered. Again, rising to a situation with impatience is so easy. Lord preserve us all from this. There are always two ways of replying to a challenge; one is gentle and sweet, the other is fiery and brittle. Drunkenness is such an obvious charge that I'm surprised Paul includes it. Violence again is already included in blamelessness. Pursuing dishonest gain would be a real bar from any Christian employment, but we know that corruption is rife in some Orthodox countries like Greece and, sad to say, even Ukraine. Years ago I used to correspond with Christians from abroad who thought nothing of deceitfulness or theft.

Then we hear what the elder should be. He should be hospitable (philoxenon), and much is written about the need for Christians to open their doors to strangers in need and especially to fellow Christians. 'Loves what is good' seems so

obvious (philagathon); self-controlled (sophrona) is one of the fruits of the Spirit. Upright (dikaion) is a strange term, but I always think of my wonderful Grandpa Wright as being essentially upright, both physically and morally. I think it includes honesty, integrity—maybe you would like to add to this list. Holy and disciplined (hosion and enkrate). What do we mean by holy? 'Be ye therefore holy, even as I am holy,' says the Lord. Set apart? Different from the world's values? Different also from 'Holy Joes' who walk around with their noses in the air. Jesus mixed with prostitutes and tax-gatherers but remained pure and uncontaminated. Finally, Paul wants those appointed to eldership to hold firmly to the trustworthy message as he had taught them, both in order to encourage (that word again) others by sound doctrine and be able to refute those who oppose it. So it should be with us. If I stray from 'sound doctrine', please put me right, and if you hear false doctrine from the pulpit wherever you may worship, don't be afraid of refuting it, of challenging anyone perpetrating it.

Paul now goes on, in Titus 1:10, to denigrate those around him who are both rebellious and full of meaningless talk and deception. He points particularly to the 'circumcision party', those who insisted a convert should be circumcised. Paul spends most of Galatians chapter 5 and rises to a crescendo of indignation in Galatians 5:12: 'As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves'

(and in case we falter at the word emasculate, Paul means castrate). Paul continues in Galatians 5:11 by saying that such people are upsetting whole households and doing so for dishonest gain. He then quotes Epimenides and enters what is known as the Epimenides Paradox. Why is it so? If Epimenides, himself a Cretan, says 'All Cretans are liars', he has posed a circular paradigm. If he is a Cretan and all Cretans are liars, then he must also be a liar and so the statement is invalid. But Paul ignores this paradox and continues... 'Evil brutes, lazy gluttons'. And concludes, 'This saying is true!!' Now if we were to say 'All Arabs are untrustworthy' or 'All Pakistanis are rapists' or 'All Kurds are running vice dens under the guise of vape shops or barbers', we would rightly be arrested for 'hate crime'. In any case, judging an entire race in this way is wrong; surely there must have been many godly and honest Cretans. Paul uses no niceties, but wades straight in to his defamatory condemnation. The antidote? Rebuke them, so they will pay no attention to Jewish myths or merely human regulations. Can we extrapolate to our present circumstances? Much nonsense is reported in the media, about the Lord and about our faith and doctrine. Would you care to think of some? Such nonsense can so easily put seekers off from ever investigating Christianity, and we must refute it. 'To the pure all things are pure' has been ripped from its context and is dangerously applied to even the most venal sin. The thought being that if we see something as pure then that makes it OK. A paedophile

(that is more correctly a pederast) might think to himself, 'What I am doing is beautiful, is innocent, is in fact pure, because I bring to the action a pure heart and mind'. But that does not stand up in a court of law. It may not be violent, may not incur horror on the part of the victim, may not be resisted, but is nevertheless a terrible crime that can damage a child's heart and mind right through to middle age. But what Paul is saying is that the pure in mind and heart see things rightly, whereas the corrupt see impurity everywhere. I have highlighted child molesting deliberately, because I feel that quite innocent actions can, by an unruly press and thus by young people themselves, be misinterpreted. 'Give a dog a bad name and hang him' is a well-known saying. Simply to call someone a paedophile is to tar them with a sticky clinging stain that may take decades to rinse away. Lord preserve us all from leaping to conclusions incorrectly; we may need to repent on Judgement Day. But Paul concludes his onslaught by saying that corrupt consciences claim to know God but deny Him by their actions. The Pharisees, from whom Paul derived his upbringing, were especially in Paul's sights. They upheld the Law but were fearsomely judgemental when Jesus healed on the Sabbath. They held to the letter but denied the Spirit of God's Holy Law. 'Detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good'.

Now I have only looked at one chapter and have taken you to very few other Scriptures today, but I feel we might all cogitate upon these last ideas. Paul has castigated these Cretans to such a degree that, should one of their race read his letter, they would be highly indignant. It would be as if we were to condemn all Irish as untrustworthy, deceitful and unreliable. We don't need to go back fifty years to read notices like 'No Irish, no blacks' on landladies' doors. Thankfully we have left all that behind (or have we?). Let's take great care lest we condemn entire people groups in any way. God will judge us if we do. I remember before I entered Syria I hesitated on the border, with warnings ringing in my ears that I would be in great danger in that country. I felt I should make a quick Will, leaving all my worldly goods to my parents, since I seriously thought I might never return. In the event I found all the Syrians that I spoke to the most hospitable, generous, friendly and loving of all the countries I visited. They were slightly worried about authorities and were anxious I did not draw attention to myself by writing my journal in public, but overall my impression of that country was very favourable.

So let's now sing some more and pray together about what we have been studying.

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The Book of Titus: Chapters 2 & 3

Lets continue with Titus:

Chapter 2 verse 1 addresses the need to teach ‘sound doctrine’. Paul, or whoever wrote this letter, is repeating what he said in Chapter 1 verse 9, and what he says also in 2 Timothy 3:16–17. The Greek is ‘healthy teaching’ (Greek didaskalia, allied to the Didache, which is the earliest treatise on the Apostolic teaching). The linking of 2 Timothy and Titus convinced Biblical scholars that these two letters were certainly written by the same person. So ‘sound doctrine’ includes Biblically faithful teaching, healthy reliable doctrine, Christ-centred and reflecting God’s revealed Truth.

Then in verse 2 we get some lessons for us older men. If you consider yourself an older man, then this is for you! We should be temperate, ie self-controlled and moderate in our behaviour. Worthy of respect? Respect is very quickly lost by foolish behaviour, but takes sustained application to maintain. It involves continual love and wisdom. It is something earned and cannot be forced. In the old days the

Rastafarians would say ‘respec’ man!’ But one cannot respect anyone who has behaved foolishly. Self-control is really a re-statement of temperance, and is one of the fruits of the Spirit. It must stem from God, not our own futile efforts. If we put Him first we will attain it. Sound in faith is akin to sound doctrine. It is surely a matter of knowing what we believe and living it out. Deeds not words is the rule. If we are asked the reason we believe we must without hesitation reply: ‘I believe in Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected, ascended and glorified, and I seek to follow Him by dying to sin and living in righteousness.’ This is our faith and we need to know and live it, demonstrating love and endurance. Endurance is one of the favourite themes in the New Testament. It is normally used in connection with persecution. In the country we have very little real persecution. Sometimes those preaching the good news on the street may experience opposition, but in places like North Korea, Eritrea, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, etc., people may lose their lives or be imprisoned for speaking up for Jesus in a public place. We really need to pray for them that they may be strengthened in their faith.

Now we see that older women are not let off the hook. You should be reverent in the way you live. This is very much linked to the idea of respect in verse 2. Respectful might be one synonym. To revere, which is the verb, suggests awe and admiration. It always amuses me that a certain class of clergy are addressed as the Reverend or even Very Reverend. It

places a great expectation upon them and so often they fail to live up to those expectations, but here Paul insists the older women should. Not to be slanderers. So they are not to go around gossiping and repeating unfounded criticism of their leader or their peers. That must surely apply to us men also. It is so easy to repeat an allegation without checking its accuracy. What Paul says in 1 Timothy 5:13 could equally apply here. Once again there is this link between the letters to Timothy and Titus. Addicted to much wine? Most of us here are not only not addicted but even prefer not to drink at all, but it is a fact that too much drink can loosen the tongue to talk foolishly, and in a way we may regret. So if we were invited, say, to a wedding where the drink flows freely, we should all avoid drinking too much with consequent embarrassment. To teach what is good – presumably to their children, because elsewhere Paul counsels women not even to speak in church, let alone teach (1 Corinthians 14:34–35). We won't go down that rabbit hole today, please. We all know many excellent women preachers.

Older women can also urge the younger ones to love their husbands and children in verse 4. To be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind and to be subject to their husbands. As we read these words we cannot help but reflect that this is diametrically opposite to the present mind-set of women. If we were to read this to the majority of women today they would scream at us. It sounds so right-wing,

traditional and out-dated, but it's the Word of God, if we take Scripture as our touchstone. So what are we to make of this? Any comments, and don't all speak at once. Loving husbands and children is, I would have thought, pretty basic and should surely be the default state of any married woman. But with today's average woman, so many work away from home and very few would think in terms of being 'subject' to their husbands. Whilst cogitating upon such advice one must remember that husbands are in turn to love their wives as they love their own bodies. With that balance we can understand the injunction to be subject, ultimately, to a loving, caring husband who also needs wisdom, that they may be respected. Do you see how all these teachings tie together? If a man is 'worthy of respect' then it is easy to be 'subject' to such a person. If these things are in place, then no one will be able to malign (or speak ill of) the Word of God.

Titus also, as a young man, needs to encourage the young men. Self-control comes up again. When I see young men in our town after a night out, I feel that this injunction is well placed and much needed. Titus is to set a good example both in his life and in his teaching. Integrity is a wonderful virtue. How would you describe it? The idea of honesty comes uppermost, but there is much more. The idea of being whole and undivided is also essential. So many of us, myself included, find ourselves divided within us. It involves firm principles, which however may be open to revision. Avoiding

dogmatism or bigotry, obdurate pig-headedness, a man or woman of integrity is someone, I feel, who lives out their moral beliefs. Seriousness and soundness of speech does not, I feel, indicate boring or a kill-joy. I think of Kevin Roberts whom I heard on Sunday evening at Meole Brace. He is a good example of someone who is serious-minded but has a wonderful sense of humour. You must know of such people, who whilst speaking seriously still do so with a generous smile.

Now verse 9 raises a problem, in that we no longer tolerate slavery. But the principle remains: many of us either are, or have been, in a business where there is a boss. We are not slaves to that boss, but we can still seek to please them as long as their intentions are worthy. 'Talking back' suggests a cheekiness. Banter can so easily lead to unkind behaviour which can easily hurt. Stealing from masters can very easily be transposed to nicking stationery, pens or even the occasional piece of software. We need to show we can be people who are fully trustworthy. In this way we can advance in the organisation and please the Lord at the same time. By 'practising what we preach' the Christian message becomes meaningful.

Verse 11 states what we know already: that the grace or gospel of God is a call to everyone, though not all will hear it. This is why some of our number go into the main street of

Shrewsbury with the offer of Good News so that some might hear and respond. Thank you to them. The gospel says we are to refuse ungodliness and worldly passions (like love of money, pride, lust, envy, jealousy, hatred, etc.) and we must live self-controlled lives, upright and godly lives in this present age. I referred to 'uprightness' in the last study (Chapter 1 verse 8) and self-control has appeared three times already in this letter. It suggests to me that there was much ungodliness and lack of self-control amongst the Cretans. If they were in general 'evil brutes and lazy gluttons' then they possibly need a sharp rebuke of this kind.

Now verse 13 opens the heavens, when the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ will be apparent to all on earth (Matthew 24:30–31). Paul reminds Titus that Jesus gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for Himself a people that are His very own, eager to do what is good. So much is packed into this revelation it's hard to know where to begin. The theme is one with which we are very familiar, but it is presented in a slightly different way. First, Christ's appearing will be manifested in great glory because He is a great God. Imagine a glorious sunset, except this is more of a sunrise. His coming will be far more dazzling and stupendous. Every knee will bow and some will seek protection from rocks, hills and mountains – maybe in the tunnels hewn by Hamas! But there will be no hiding on that day! Because Jesus Christ will come

with His glorious angels to sort the wicked from the righteous – those He has made righteous through His Death. Jesus has paid a huge price for us (to whom I wonder – God His Father or Satan? Now there's an interesting rabbit hole, but not now, please). Either way we have been bought and are now His. The very thought fills my soul with unutterable joy. Bless You, Lord. He is going to purify us (see Malachi 3:2–3). What this will entail I tremble to contemplate. Where we have gone astray and insisted on our own way – where we have deliberately transgressed God's Law – where we have been ungracious, unkind, judgemental, superior, critical instead of building up, where we have not been obedient to the Lord's clear instruction and thus have grown deaf to His appeal – ah! Lord Jesus – You will purify us and it may not be sweet. It may be painful, for He chastises those whom He loves (Hebrews 12:6). But we long for this powerful appearing and meanwhile trust Him that He is preparing us in whatever way He knows best.

Verse 15: Don't let anyone despise you. Paul said the same thing to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:12.

Then in Chapter 3 verse 1, Paul insists Titus should teach people to be subject to rulers and authorities. He said the same in Romans 13:1, and at once a problem arises in our minds – or at least it should do. The emperor in Paul's day was Nero, possibly the most vicious and hateful of all

emperors, who used Christians as torches to light the paths in his gardens as a night-time spectacle. Were they to be obedient to this monster? Discuss. But of course they were to be good, not to slander anyone (so no whisperings about corrupt authorities?). Peaceable – not the kind of neighbour who keeps others awake with loud commotion or always picking an argument. Being considerate; this is surely the Golden Rule. 'Do to others as you would want them to do to you'. Gentle. Is this then weakness? Being gentle is so sweet, but sometimes I think it is necessary to speak the truth in love, which is not always a gentle process. But we are dealing with the fruits of the Spirit, are we not?

Paul then goes on to remind Titus that we all were foolish, disobedient and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. And because we have been there and sport the tee-shirt, we can identify with those who are still enslaved. The Jews contradicted Jesus when He said they were slaves to sin (John 8:34). We all are, until we are born again by the Holy Spirit and no longer want to be enslaved by 'all kinds of passions and pleasures'. It is notable that if we are still 'in the flesh', however much we seek to satisfy our basic instincts, we can never do so. A rich man desires to be yet richer. A drunkard thinks 'Just one more drink' and drops to bed oblivious of the problems that await him. A thief becomes bolder but never satisfies his lust, and the fornicator, like James Boswell, like Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, like Henry

VIII or Casanova, always seeks yet another beautiful woman to ravish, thereby plunging both of them into hell, as in Proverbs 2:18–19.

We lived, says Paul, in malice and envy, because if we see someone who has something we do not, then we harbour hate for them and envy their success. I do praise God that I have no desire for anything I do not already have, and that is by pure grace. Mutual hatred reigned unfettered. Is Paul perhaps overstating his case? At any rate when the Glorious Saviour appeared He washed us clean and removed those venal desires, simply through grace. We did not deserve His kindness and that is the wonder of it, for which we give thanks every day of our reborn lives. God's Holy Spirit renews us – glory to God. Verse 5. And then this extraordinary notion that we are justified by God's grace, ie made righteous, as if we had never sinned! This is so amazing, is it not, so that we are made fit for eternal life with Him, when in reality we had been totally lost. But He gives us new clothes so that the Father sees us as worthy of Him. This is a trustworthy saying, verse 8. What is? Well, see 1 Timothy 1:15–16. 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.' So if we have been saved by grace, let's devote ourselves to doing what is good – not because we can gain God's favour by so doing, but because He gave Himself for us and we can never pay Him back; just do our best to please Him.

Avoid foolish controversies like whether the earth was created in 6 days or 6 billion, whether pre-millennialism trumps post-millennialism, the nature of the Trinity, etc. You will add more, I'm sure. Jews to this day adore disputes over Torah and the Talmud. We are not to be divisive, creating problems where there were none. Warn such folk, Titus, once, then twice, then shun them; they are warped and sinful. The letter ends with some useful practical advice and so we will end also with a song and some prayer.

Grace be with you all.

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SECTION 7

Standalone studies

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Clothing



I'm very aware that I've not been doing any Bible studies since we started the film on Acts. But some thoughts have crowded in on me, so I'll write them down in the event that anyone might be missing a study...

There's a lot about clothing in both the Old and New Testaments.

Starting in the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve recognised that they were naked: at first they felt no shame (Genesis 2:25), but after eating from the Tree of the

Knowledge of Good and Evil, their eyes were opened, as the serpent promised them. What he didn't tell them was that it spelled their doom and final death. They tried to cover their nakedness by sewing fig leaves together to make coverings or, as the "Breeches Bible" puts it, to make "breeches". I have an original "Breeches Bible". It pre-dates the King James Version.

The Lord God made garments of skin for them (and we ask ourselves: were they made from lambs as a prefiguring of the Lamb of God?). Clad in these, they entered a fallen world. Ever since then, God has insisted on appropriate clothing. Many religions sport peculiar — that is, particular — clothing. Some wrap themselves in flowing robes, others in smart suits like the Mormons. Every age has had a different motive for its dress, but St Paul advocated simple, unadorned clothing for the believing ladies.

But it's the metaphorical use of the word that I feel led to consider today. "Clothe yourselves," says St Paul, "with humility" (Colossians 3:12 and 1 Peter 5:5). Now I find this intriguing — do you? Clothing is something we put on and can take off again. Why don't Paul and Peter advocate a change of heart, so that instead of "wearing" humility, we actually become "humble of heart"? Howbeit, Paul has so much to say about spiritual clothing, so let's look at some. As well as the above, he says in the passage in Colossians: "Put on then compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience,

forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint, forgiving each other." Do you see how very "yielding" all these virtues are? They are gentle, feminine qualities. They are quite distinct, if not opposed, to "courage, steadfastness, strength, confidence, perseverance, endurance", etc. Now surely all these virtues are of equal importance; we need to "be strong and of good courage", as Joshua was told by Moses in Joshua 1:9. This encouragement was given to so many in the OT. But these virtues, which the world would see as weak and spineless, if not effeminate, are considered to be the clothing we should wear in the world. So why clothing? Is it because these things are not, for most people, natural? There are, praise God, some who seem to be naturally humble and unpretentious, but it is a rare commodity. Now the question arises: how does one put these clothes on? I want to propose a possibly controversial suggestion. Should we not ask the Lord Himself to do the dressing, as He did in Eden? What do you think? I have biblical precedent. Look at, for example, Exodus 28:41, but there are so many other examples. Aaron's clothing was very symbolic, and we may look at each part and ascribe a spiritual truth to each. This might remind us of Paul's well-known metaphor in Ephesians 6:11-17. Armour and clothing have quite different purposes, of course, and I am not suggesting that they can be compared, but each must be "put on".

One way of seeing all these metaphors relating to clothing is to see them as dealing with our standing before God. Right from the Genesis story onwards, we see that man unclad is not in the right relationship with God. In Exodus 19:10-14, the people needed to be consecrated and they needed to wash their garments ready to meet with the Lord on Sinai. In Exodus 29:21, Aaron's garments, already washed, needed to be sprinkled with blood from the altar and with anointing oil, that they might be holy. (I often wonder how their wives managed with the washing!) In Numbers 19:7, the priest had to wash his clothes and bathe his body in water after burning the red heifer. This cleansing of clothes and bodies after touching anything impure was basic to the OT law.

Then there is a very significant vision in Zechariah 3:3-5, in which Joshua the High Priest was standing before the angel with Satan, the accuser, at his right hand. He was clothed in filthy garments, and the angel commanded the garments be removed and replaced with rich apparel and a clean turban. He was thus made able to stand before the Lord.

In the NT, and in Matthew 22:1-14, we have the memorable story of the marriage feast of the King's Son — and we know who this is. Many were invited but excused themselves upon rather flippant grounds, so the servants brought in anyone they could find, both good and bad — notice. Then the King came in to view His guests and saw a man with no wedding

garment. At first sight, we might think, “Well, considering who had been gathered in and from where they were gathered” — the thoroughfares, it says here, but elsewhere, in Luke 14:16-24, it says streets, lanes, highways and hedges — “it’s not surprising the fellow couldn’t afford a wedding garment, or maybe hadn’t even time to borrow one from an affluent neighbour.” But the point is, he doesn’t offer this excuse, does he? He is dumbstruck, and look what a terrible punishment follows. So if we consider this, we realise that the wedding garment must have been provided free at the door, or in the vestibule, literally. So he has no excuse. And what is this wedding garment? Bless the Lord; it is the “robe of righteousness” which Jesus offers us. If we think, as some do, that we can do without it, we simply won’t get in! Outer darkness may not be fiery, but it’s jolly dark and lonely and a place of eternal regret.

So here again we have clothing without which we cannot stand before the King, but which is offered — and maybe even arrayed upon us — free of charge by the grace of Jesus Christ through His sacrifice on the Cross.

Look now at 2 Corinthians 5:1-5, and especially 2 Corinthians 5:4. Paul talks about putting on a heavenly dwelling without which we would be naked. But clearly he’s talking about

clothing again — not that we would be unclothed, but rather "further clothed". This clothing exercise is very obviously one that is done to us or for us, so that we might stand.

Then in Galatians 3:27, we find that as many as were baptised into Christ have "put on" Christ. Now baptism is essentially something that others do to us. Have you ever heard of anyone baptising themselves? We are putting on Christ! How wonderful, because by putting on the Lord of Glory we are clothed with everything He represents: righteousness, truth, peace, joy, and yes, humility, meekness, gentleness, patience, and all the virtues we looked at earlier. "Come to me," says Jesus, "for I am meek and gentle, humble of heart" (Matthew 11:29). And in Isaiah 61:10 we learn that the anointed One has been clothed "with the garments of salvation and covered with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland and as a bride adorns herself with jewels."

There's not much more to say, but have a peep at Jude 23, because he reminds us that garments can be spotted by the flesh, although the Greek at this point is uncertain. The important thing throughout Scripture is that our garments should be white and clean. So let's look finally at the Revelation to St John, in Revelation 3:4-5. These folk have not soiled their garments and so will walk with Jesus in white, for they are worthy. Then it says, "he who conquers shall be clad thus in white garments", and Jesus will then not blot his name

out of the Book of Life. This is serious stuff. So let's continue to Revelation 3:18. There we are counselled to "buy... white garments to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen..." There's the remedy then. The five foolish virgins popped to the shops to buy oil; now we are advised to buy white garments. These metaphors are a little disingenuous; how can one buy the Holy Spirit or buy the covering that we have seen only Jesus can supply? We must ponder these things and not gloss over them. Let's continue. Revelation 6:11 reassures us that those who had been slain for the Word of God were each given a white robe and told to wait for vengeance to be wreaked upon their persecutors. Yes, the robe is a gift, but it was earned through martyrdom. Now, in Revelation 7, we are grateful to hear of "a great multitude, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the Lamb, clothed in white robes." So perhaps it's not essential to undergo martyrdom, praise God! But the observer, St John, was interrogated by the elder: "Who are these, clothed in white garments, and whence have they come?" John didn't know. The answer came: "These are the ones who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes" — in what? — "in the blood of the Lamb." Lord, have mercy. Do we then need to go through the Great Tribulation? Well, there's another clue in Revelation 16:15, and my reference to the five foolish virgins turns out to be very apposite... "Blessed is he" — or she, I assume — "who is awake, keeping his garments that he may not go naked and be seen exposed."

There is a clear injunction, then, to stay spiritually awake. If we slumber on duty, the Lord may catch us unclothed. Don't go away with the idea that we cannot sleep at night. No; the wise virgins slept, didn't they? But when the bridegroom came, they were ready and prepared.

Finally, in Revelation 19:6-9, the great multitude cries, "Alleluia... let us rejoice... for the marriage of the Lamb has come." Have they put on the wedding garment? It seems they have, for it goes on: "His Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure, for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints." So now it's becoming very clear and unambiguous. Faith on its own, as James says, is insufficient; it needs to be demonstrated through righteous deeds. Revelation 19:14 affirms this. Then, right in the final chapter of the Bible, Revelation 22:14, we conclude that they are blessed who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the Tree of Life. Isn't it truly wonderful and so satisfying that we have been reminded of the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve were forbidden that same tree because they were found to be naked. But now, through the blood of the Lamb and through their faithfulness, they have been granted what Adam had been forbidden to taste: that glorious Tree of Life with its "twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations."

My prayer is that we may be found, on that Day, clothed in fine linen, washed and bright, that we may eat of the glorious Tree of Life and reign with our Lord Jesus throughout eternity. Is that your prayer too?

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Courage in Remembrance



> **Sing:** O God, Our Help in Ages Past

This reflection is a little different from our usual Bible studies. It is something more personal, offered as an act of remembrance and not written by Andrew, but instead Dan, a member of the study group.

My family has a long history of military service, from my great-grandfathers and grandfather to my uncle and father, and now even some of my closest friends.

With my father serving in the military, I grew up in and around military life and have seen first-hand something of the sacrifices made, not only by those who serve, but also by the families who stand alongside them.

For these reasons, this time of year has always carried a particular weight for me.

As we gather in remembrance, we honour those who gave their lives in war, those who went away and never returned, and the families who waited for news that never came. We also remember those who returned bearing wounds seen and unseen, those who served beside them, and the many people whose lives were permanently changed by conflict.

We remember long periods of separation, exhausting labour, difficult decisions and acts of courage that may never have been recorded. We remember those who placed duty and the safety of others before their own comfort and, in many cases, before their own lives.

There are times when peace, freedom and the lives of the innocent must be defended. In such times, men and women have answered the call to serve, not because they desired conflict, but because they understood that some things are worth protecting. They left their homes, their families and the security of ordinary life to stand against aggression and to defend those who could not defend themselves.

For us as Christians, this sits alongside our calling to seek peace. We are called to be peacemakers. Jesus Himself tells us this in Matthew 5:9. Yet what are we to do when others have no desire for peace?

In Psalm 120:6-7, the psalmist describes living among those who hate peace. He desires peace, but those around him are determined upon war. It is a tragic picture of the tension between longing for peace and facing hostility.

We may long for peace, pray for peace and do everything within our power to preserve it. Yet there are those who would choose aggression over reconciliation, oppression over justice, and violence over peace.

Alongside our longing for peace stands our responsibility towards those who suffer. In Psalm 82:3–4, we are instructed to defend the weak and the fatherless, to uphold the cause of the poor and oppressed, and to rescue the weak and needy.

That responsibility asks more of us than good wishes alone. There are occasions when care for our neighbour requires practical action, even at considerable cost to ourselves.

These responsibilities are not simple, and we should not pretend that they are. War brings terrible suffering, and Scripture gives us no reason to celebrate bloodshed. Yet neither does it permit us to be indifferent to injustice or the suffering of the innocent.

And this brings us to those whom we remember today.

We remember them not merely as victims of war, but as people who accepted a grave responsibility. Many endured fear, exhaustion, separation and hardship. Some gave years of their lives; some returned bearing wounds seen and unseen; and some gave everything.

Their service calls for more than sympathy. It calls for gratitude, respect and remembrance.

I often wonder what it must have been like for those facing the possibility that they might never see their homes or loved ones again. Their fear must have been real. No amount of training could entirely remove it. Yet courage is not the absence of fear. It is the willingness to continue in the face of fear, to remain faithful to others and to do what duty requires.

It is within that tension between danger and confidence that we hear the words of David in Psalm 27:1-3. What is remarkable about these verses is the confidence David expresses in the face of danger.

David speaks of enemies, armies and war. Enemies seek to devour him in Psalm 27:2, and an army threatens to besiege him in Psalm 27:3. These are not imaginary dangers. David knew what it was to be threatened, to be pursued, and to face the possibility of death.

Yet his response is extraordinary. He says that he will remain confident. The source of that confidence matters.

His confidence rests not in his own strength, the strength of his men or the power of his army, but in the Lord. This trust is echoed elsewhere in Scripture. In Joshua 1:9, Isaiah 12:2, Exodus 15:2.
Notice how David describes Him. He calls the Lord his light, his salvation and his stronghold. (Psalm 27:1) I wonder whether we sometimes read words like these without giving them the thought they deserve.

Light allows us to see when everything around us is dark. It gives us direction when we cannot see the way ahead. That is often our difficulty when we face uncertainty: we simply do not know what tomorrow will bring. David looks to the Lord as his light amid that uncertainty.

Then David calls the Lord his salvation. Not merely someone who might rescue him from his enemies, but the One in whom his ultimate hope rests. And finally, his stronghold. A place of refuge, of protection, somewhere to turn when danger threatens.

Yet these descriptions are not a promise of a life without danger. David doesn't say that because he trusts God, no army will ever march against him. Quite the opposite! He acknowledges that war may break out against him.

The distinction is important. His confidence does not depend upon the absence of danger, but upon the presence and faithfulness of God. And I think that's a distinction we sometimes overlook in our Christian lives.

We may pray for God's protection, and rightly so. But trusting God does not mean that we shall never suffer or experience fear, loss or grief. Indeed, as we gather to remember those who lost their lives in war, we are reminded all too painfully that life in this world is fragile.

Yet David's words point us towards something that circumstances cannot ultimately take away: the faithfulness of God.

Courage, after all, is not simply the absence of fear. It is the willingness to do what is right even when we are terribly afraid or uncertain. And surely we recognise something of that courage in the lives of so many whom we remember today.

For us as Christians, Psalm 27:1-3 also asks a deeply personal question.

When everything around us is uncertain, where does our confidence truly lie?

Is it in our own abilities, our security, our possessions, or the things we believe we can control? Or can we, like David, say that the Lord Himself is our light, our salvation and our stronghold?

Ultimately, that is what makes David's declaration so powerful. He is not simply telling us to be brave. He is showing us what it means to place our trust in God, even when the future is unknown.

That trust does not remove our responsibility to remember. Rather, it shapes the way in which we remember.

And perhaps that leaves us with one final question: how shall we live in the light of what we remember?

We cannot undo the suffering of the past, nor can we take away the grief carried by so many families. But we can refuse to let remembrance become merely a moment that passes. We can remember with gratitude, make room for sorrow, and seek peace in our own relationships and communities.

Again, in Matthew 5:9, Jesus calls peacemakers blessed. As we honour those whose lives were lost in war, may we also renew our commitment to peace, not forgetting the cost of conflict, nor overlooking those who still bear its wounds.

Psalm 27:1-3 does not ask us to pretend that darkness is unreal. It directs our hope towards the Lord, our light and our salvation. So we bring him our remembrance, our unanswered questions and our longing for peace.

As we close, let it be our prayer: that God would remain with those who mourn, sustain those who live with the consequences of war, and guide us to live with compassion.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, our help in ages past and our hope for years to come, we give thanks for those who served and bore the burden of duty. We remember those who endured hardship, those who returned bearing wounds, and those who gave their lives. Comfort those who mourn, sustain all who live with the consequences of war, and help us to remember with gratitude and compassion. Be our light, our salvation and our stronghold, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Let us now read the act of remembrance:

> ***Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.***
> ***At the going down of the sun and in the morning***
> ***We will remember them.***

> **Sing:** Abide With Me

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Fire!



When anyone shouts ‘Fire’ it’s normal to feel afraid and look for smoke. There’s plenty of smoke in Scripture, notably when Peter addresses the curious and sceptical crowd on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. He’s quoting Joel (Acts 2:19). It might be good to read the whole quote because tomorrow, as you will know, is Whit Sunday or Pentecost. Whit Sunday so called because it was a day for baptisms, when those being baptised were dressed in white. Pentecost so called because we borrow

the name from the Jewish Festival, being the 50th day after the Passover (Ascension Day was 40 days after). (Pente means fifty in Greek - pentecoste). So let's read.

We might be led to enquire as to when exactly all this will happen? When are these 'last days'? Peter clearly thinks they were experiencing them right there and then, in that Upper Room in Jerusalem. I question this with humble apologies. If these were the 'last days' then 'all people' has to be understood as a hyperbole. Actually hyperbole is common in Scripture. When the wise men visited Herod 'all Jerusalem was troubled' (Matthew 2:3). But most of the city was probably totally ignorant of these events. There are countless other examples. So if we let that go; where were the blood, fire and billows of smoke? OK - so those gathered in the Upper Room were visited by tongues of fire – wonderful. They prophesied – glorious. But blood? Smoke? There's no smoke without fire.

Various suggestions have been made as to what these phenomena relate to. Some say the blood referred to the blood of Jesus, the fire to the Holy Spirit and the smoke to the pillar of smoke which signified God's presence. So we have the Trinity. I find that a bit stretched. Others see them as referring to the destruction of the Temple and of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Possibly. But I read onto verse 20 and am led to what Jesus prophesied in **Matthew 24:29** and Mark 13:24 and what

is said in the Revelation to St John 6:12. Now if you have read these prophesies, you will have been a little perplexed, because there seems to be a dovetailing of AD 70 with some end-time event, and it is hard, if not impossible, to draw them apart. I feel it's the same here. Peter was getting 'carried away' by the Holy Spirit and felt that the extraordinary events of that wonderful day was the culmination of all that Jesus and Joel had prophesied. But then we must remember that St Paul as well as Peter thought the end of the world was upon them. See **1 Corinthians 7:29-31** and 1 Peter 4:7. Fortunately the sober voice of Peter also warns that a thousand years are but an evening gone (2 Peter 3:8) and they shouldn't imagine that the Lord was slow in implementing his Final plan. In fact He's being generous, that all men might be saved. (2 Peter 3:9) I think we should hang loose on these alarming words and not try to put too specific a date on them.

The point is that in verse 21, whenever these sort of cataclysmic events occur, 'everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved'. Remember Psalm 46:2: 'therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way and the mountains fall in the heart of the sea'. Really? I think I would tremble at such cataclysms. The psalms are full of such hyperbole. God descends to earth and the mountains quake, melt and flee away. It's POETRY! If you are still in doubt look at Psalm 18, where David is having a spot of bother and calls on God and 'the earth trembled and quaked, and the foundations of the

mountains shook; they trembled because He was angry. Smoke rose from His nostrils, consuming fire came from His mouth, burning coals blazed out of it.' and so it goes on getting more and more dramatic and preposterous as it does, God has turned into a dragon! A bit like Leviathan in Job 41:20: 'smoke pours from his nostrils as from a boiling pot… his breath sets coals ablaze'. I've seen no creature on earth or in the sea that emits 'firebrands and sparks of fire' (Job 41:19). In all these instances we must allow poetic imagination to run riot. It makes for good reading and would doubtless make a good horror film. But to take all this as strictly descriptive would be to do an injustice to the authors. If I were to say 'so and so has a heart of stone or of gold, or eyes of steel, or had an iron grip, you would not be tempted to ask a metallurgist for confirmation. Metaphor is a well known device to set fire to the imagination, so let's say all these hyperboles are intended to drive home important truths. In these days of laconic lethargy it's good to be woken up by hyperbole, unless of course we still persist in yawning our way through it.

At the Open Air worship on Sunday 16th one young participant prayed we would be liberated from our 'little boxes' to perceive the grandeur of God's Creation. I don't feel boxed in but I get her point. When we sing (if we do) 'How great is our God' it's not a bad idea to rehearse all the reasons He is Great. With a Word He created all that is; how astounding is that! He raised the dead whilst on His brief visit

to earth, and opened the eyes of a man born blind. Boring? I don't think so. Unbelievable? No – the details are far too precise for it to be mere wives' tales. We have an amazing God and let's remember why. One of the Psalms says 'let us sing with understanding' (Psalm 47:7; also 1 Corinthians 14:15).

So back to Fire! The immortal General Booth of the Salvation Army wrote a jolly hymn 'Send the Fire!' and asked God to 'send the fire today' (SoF 955). Fire does what, would you say? It burns up yes, and warms us, but it also transforms doesn't it. St Francis calls it 'brother fire' because it is very beneficial as well as destructive. If we call upon the fire of God's Holy Spirit to enter our hearts we may experience a consuming activity, which burns up rubbish inside us and leaves us with what is incombustible. It may rid us of selfishness, impure passions, greed, hatred, you name it. St Paul talks about 'putting on and taking off' (**Ephesians 4:22-24**) but would we not rather have our rubbish burned up? Because what we take off we can put on again. What is burned up is gone for good. I visit the Recycling Centre in Harlescott several times a year and I know that all the paper, wood and combustible rubbish is burned, leaving only the metal and glass. Fire can also illuminate and warm us. We all need illuminating. 'Come down O love divine.....within my heart appear and kindle it

they holy flame bestowing. O let it freely burn, till earthly passion burn to dust and ashes in it heat consuming' SoF 1202. It's worth singing this inspired song.

But over the two millennium since Pentecost, the Holy Spirit has been seen in various forms. Probably the most well known form is water. Whenever we read (eg in Isaiah 41:18) of pools of water, living water, rivers of water etc we may suspect a reference to the Holy Spirit. This is clearly stated by St John in ch 7:38 & 39. Incidentally you will not find the reference that Jesus quotes in the OT. The Holy Spirit has also been seen as a breeze or wind. You may know that wind and spirit in Hebrew are the same word (ruaH). Thus it was the wind or breath of God which Filled the lungs of those in the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37:1-14 and which set them on their feet. One might think of Mary Shelley and her story of the creature created by Frankenstein. This wind accompanied the tongues of fire in the Upper Room at Pentecost (Acts 2:1.2). Right at the outset of things, God (YHVH Elohim) put breath into the lungs of Adam. It may be that there were other hominids at the time of Adam (these e.g who assisted Cain to build the city of Enoch in Nod (**Genesis 4:17**) but what is very clear from Scripture is that only Adam and his offspring had the spirit of God in their souls (**Genesis 2:7**). Today we may observe that those around us are breathing, but only those whom God has breathed into by His Holy Spirit can be said to be fully alive spiritually. There is a dimension of life which

can only come into being when we invite the Holy Spirit of Jesus into our hearts. Only then can we be living the Life of Eternity. So at this very special time of Pentecost can we not invite the Fire of God, the Wind of God and the Living Water of God to inspire, enliven and refresh us, so that like those in the Upper Room at Jerusalem, we may go forth into the world to live and speak of Him who gives us life and breath and the grace to serve Him.

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From Hatred to Hope: A Story of Identity, Forgiveness and Redemption

This week's Bible study, we watched this video on YouTube



Click here to see the video:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Xiy-JyqAo0

It focused on the powerful testimony of Elias Maron, a man who grew up in a Ramallah orphanage believing that Jews were his enemies, only to later discover that his own mother

was Jewish and that he was Jewish himself.

His story is one of broken identity, abandonment, trauma, addiction, forgiveness and restoration. After years of pain, military service, PTSD and a decades-long heroin addiction, Elias reached a point of complete desperation and cried out to God. His recovery was not immediate, but through faith, rehabilitation and perseverance, his life began to change.

Today, Elias uses his experiences to help homeless people and those struggling with addiction. His testimony reminded us that God can meet people in the darkest places of their lives and bring healing, purpose and transformation.

One of the strongest themes from Elias' story was the power of truth to challenge what we have always believed. As a child, he had been taught to hate Jews and to view them as the enemy. However, when he moved to Haifa and began living among both Jews and Arabs, his personal experiences did not match what he had been taught. His perspective began to change.

This connects with the importance of seeking truth rather than simply accepting everything we hear. Jesus says in John 8:32, "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Elias' journey shows how encountering truth can completely reshape a person's understanding of themselves, other people and the world around them.

Another major theme was identity. Elias spent much of his childhood believing one thing about who he was, before discovering that part of his identity had been hidden from him. This can remind us that our deepest identity is not ultimately defined by our upbringing, our mistakes, our trauma or what other people have said about us. For Christians, our identity is found in God.

His story also highlighted forgiveness. After discovering that his parents were alive and confronting the pain of being abandoned, Elias eventually chose to forgive them. Forgiveness does not mean pretending that the hurt never happened, but it can mean refusing to allow that hurt to control the rest of our lives. Ephesians 4:32 teaches us to be compassionate and forgiving toward one another, just as God has forgiven us.

Perhaps the most moving part of his testimony was his battle with PTSD and addiction. For many years, heroin became a way of escaping the pain he carried from his past and from military service. Eventually, however, addiction took almost everything from him. When he became homeless and desperate, he cried out to God.

His transformation reminds us that God often meets people when they feel they have nowhere else to turn. Psalm 34:18 says, “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those

who are crushed in spirit." Elias' recovery was not instant or easy, but his story shows that faith can become the beginning of a long process of healing and restoration.

Another important lesson is that restoration can lead to purpose. Elias and his wife now help people facing homelessness and addiction in Tel Aviv. The experiences that once brought him so much pain have become part of the reason he is able to understand and serve others.
This reflects 2 Corinthians 1:3–4, which describes God as the Father of compassion who comforts us in our troubles so that we can comfort others with the comfort we ourselves have received.

Overall, this study reminded us that no life is beyond transformation. A person's past does not have to determine their future. Hatred can be replaced by understanding, abandonment by belonging, addiction by recovery, and pain can eventually become a source of compassion for others.

The challenge for us is to consider what beliefs, wounds or experiences may be shaping our own lives. Are we willing to allow God to challenge what we believe, help us forgive, heal the broken parts of our lives and use our experiences to help others?

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Grace

Some of you may feel we have been here before. If so, can you give me a definition of grace?

Before you do so, remember that there are two quite distinct meanings. What would your average “man-in-the-street” answer? I think he would say “the elegance or beauty of form, manner, motion or action, or a pleasing or attractive quality or endowment”. Most men would apply the term to a woman, and most women, I would think, would apply it either to another woman or maybe to a cat! A non-royal duke, a duchess or the Archbishop has the distinction of being called “Your Grace” in the UK. Elsewhere, it is used for a wider sphere of persons. However, I know that you will be bursting to tell me and the others what grace means in a Christian context. This concept does not appear in Islam. Mercy — in Qur’anic Arabic, ar-Rahman — is not the same as grace. This is one of the “selling points” of Christianity, so if you are speaking to a non-believer, please remember this vital ingredient.

So, are we agreed that grace in the Christian context refers to the unmerited favour of God to mankind? J. Gresham Machen states that “the very centre and core of the whole Bible is the doctrine of the grace of God”. It is the one gift of God which never fails to bring me to tears — that’s me saying it, not him. What would you say is the prime example of God’s grace towards mankind? Can you give us a scriptural quote for this? It’s one we all know. Yes: John 3:16. Shall we say it together from the NIV? “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.” So is there a cost? Is there a charge for this? Do we even need to pay the post and package, or shipping costs? Or is this just one of those “free gifts” we have been taught to suspect?

Well, I hope you will tell me that there is a phenomenal cost! But who paid it? Yes, Jesus. The best reference for this is Romans 5:8. The NIV reads, “But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Because most of us will have heard this countless times, it often fails to register fully. Like the Lord’s Prayer, we can recite it with dry eyes. Read Romans 5:6-11. Many of you will have watched “Les Misérables” and will have been staggered at the generosity of Bishop Myriel when Jean Valjean was brought before him with the Bishop’s silver candlesticks in his hot hand. Far from asking for his immediate punishment as the law required, the Bishop says, “But my dear friend, you

forgot to take these other things", and he proceeds to give him all his silverware, much to his housekeeper's disgust. "Use these things to make yourself an honest man," he advises. He dies soon after this, and Valjean mourns him, but his whole life is turned around. I know many who cannot swallow this. But they can happily swallow Jesus, God's own precious Son, dying in agony on a cross after a vicious flogging, in order to rescue them and all of us from eternal damnation and darkness. Strange logic, don't you think? But it's quite understandable, because we find it hard to believe, as St Paul says in Romans 5:7, that anyone would die for anyone else. Perhaps through great and perfect love a man might die for his precious wife, for example. Throughout history, people have been prepared to die for a great cause, for a high ideal. IRA prisoners have gone on an extended hunger strike to achieve their idea of justice. But in Jesus we see God in Christ dying so cruelly, condemned unjustly, not because He was obliged to do so, but because He willingly consented to do so. Some have thought that Jesus had no escape from His fate. But look at Matthew 26:53-54. At any point Jesus could have slipped away, as He does earlier in John 10:39 and even earlier in Luke 4:30. Read the context. No; His death was a deliberate act on His part and had a monstrous purpose. If you think that adjective is out of place, then look at Godfrey Birtill's famous song "Outrageous Grace". So I'm using the word "monstrous" in the sense of its alternative meaning of "gigantic, immense beyond description", not, of course, in the

sense of “ugly or revolting”. Although I have to say that if anyone saw “The Passion of the Christ” by Mel Gibson, you may have felt as I did that the scene of Jesus’ scourging was indeed ghastly and virtually unwatchable. I found it awful beyond description and very probably grossly exaggerated. However that might be, God’s act through His precious Son — and just think how Father God felt to see Him suffer! — was monstrous in this sense.

But now, as we look through the NT, we see countless references to grace: God’s grace towards us, and the need for us to show the same grace to others. Shall we first look at examples of God’s grace to us? Top of the list is the grace in which we stand (Romans 5:1-2). It stems from Jesus’ sacrifice. The whole idea of being “justified by faith” is a momentous one: hard to take in at first. The universal fact is that we “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Thus we deserve death, because “the wages of sin are death” (Romans 6:23). Romans is a wonderful letter to read, even though it’s hard going in parts, because it gives such a clear and relentlessly logical exposition of the state we’re in and the rich grace of God which is there to redeem us and “buy us back from Satan”. It is the reason so many delight to praise, bless and thank God for His incredible mercies. And even as we do bless Him, we ourselves are likewise blessed. So back to Romans 5:1. The idea of being “justified” is difficult to absorb, yes, but very important. When we come to stand before God’s

judgement seat, we will be standing before an utterly holy, righteous and altogether powerful God. We looked recently at whether Heaven was a democracy and concluded that it most certainly was not! This autocrat, this all-powerful Monarch, if He were like King Ahasuerus, or Nebuchadnezzar, or any of the ancient monarchs, would be fearsome indeed. Unless He held out His sceptre (Esther 5:2), we would be "put to death" (Esther 4:11). This statement — that we are "justified" — means, believe it or not, that we who are guilty and thus deserve death — and I mean spiritual, eternal death and torment — are made righteous, not by anything we have done or indeed could do, but by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Most of you will know this, but it's so worth repeating because simply to contemplate it gives rise to praise and thanksgiving in our hearts. The extraordinary teaching is that, as a result of the Cross, Jesus exchanges our sinfulness and guilt for His righteousness. He takes our sin and gives us His righteousness! See Isaiah 53:5 and Isaiah 53:10, where Isaiah actually uses the word "justify" 700 years before Jesus came to earth. That's why the Book of Isaiah was the most widely read book in Jesus' day and why a complete original has been preserved in the caves of Qumran for us to see today in the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem. Then look at Isaiah 61:10. That's what Jesus gives us. Finally, just to confirm the whole concept, look at 2 Corinthians 5:21. What more can we say? It says it all.

But apart from this incredible underlying fact of our salvation, there are countless daily examples of God's grace. It has been said that grace is the opposite of karma. The principle of karma, a major Eastern teaching, is that we reap what we sow. The English equivalent is "what goes around comes around". "Cast your bread upon the waters," says Ecclesiastes, "and it will return to you" (Ecclesiastes 11:1). What you sow, you will reap (Galatians 6:7). This, of course, is true and scriptural. If we are generous, then our own cup will overflow (Luke 6:38). But if that were to be the final word, then we would be in the position of having to earn our salvation, which we know we cannot do. Our salvation must be unmerited, but our position in Heaven is, as we saw recently, linked to our behaviour on earth. The old Victorian idea — which came from the East — of a balance, where our good deeds are weighed against our evil deeds and, if the balance tips in favour of the good deeds, we're in, is false. Islam has an angel on each shoulder weighing our deeds. On the right is the one who weighs our good deeds — his name is Raqib — and on the left the one who weighs our evil deeds — his name is Atid. If that were the case, I would most definitely be doomed. But thanks be to God there is room for repentance, justification and redemption. Again, I am close to tears. Maybe you, like my darling wife, have lived a virtuous and exemplary life and have little to regret. Bless the Lord if that is so, but you still fall short of His glory, so take care! Elaine Heath recommends five means of grace: prayer,

searching the Scriptures, the Lord's Supper, fasting and fellowship. That's dangerously close to earning it, but it's hard to fault it, as long as fasting isn't trying to twist God's arm but seeking His face, which is what Lexie and I were asked to do by the Lord years ago. Just one final observation concerning God's grace to us. In 2 Corinthians 12:9, Paul is recorded as praying for relief from his "thorn in the side", which clearly troubled him and seemed to impede his witness. But look at God's gracious reply and bear it in mind when we're praying about our infirmities or those of others. What then about our need to show grace to others? See Colossians 4:6 relating to our speech. We dealt with words recently, do you remember? An important one for me and many of you, as you told me. Then see 1 Peter 4:10, about serving one another. Then, in Acts 11:23, we are encouraged to serve as agents of grace. And in Acts 13:43, to testify to that grace. And in Acts 20:24, we see that, inasmuch as God has sent Jesus, so He sends us. It's probably summed up in 2 Corinthians 9:8, where, due to the grace God gives us in abundance, we ourselves may "abound" in every good work. We have seen in earlier studies that we can do "no good thing" unless Christ dwells in our hearts. We can do meals on wheels and hospital and prison visiting, and work for a hundred charities and undertake all voluntary work, but unless Christ dwells in our hearts and we are driven by His Spirit, it will not accomplish His purposes. It might be good, but if it is not proceeding from Him it is "filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6) in terms of "gaining salvation". I can hear

some of you saying to yourselves, “Hang on; do you mean that all ‘good work’ is pointless?” Of course not, and in any case I’m not saying anything; just pointing to Scripture. But in terms of accomplishing God’s purposes, we need to be operating under His leadership. If you find this uncomfortable or even wrong, then look at Matthew 7:21-23. What do you make of this? Or Acts 19:15. We need to take care. Charity work gains great headlines. But God looks at our hearts and sifts our motives.

I think we might spend some time thanking God for His grace don’t you? Try:

- **‘The price is paid’ SoF 540.**
- **Amazing love Sof 1703.**
- **Outrageous Grace SoF 2060.**

If we don’t know these we can just listen to them and rejoice inwardly.

Amen

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Here I am

> **Sing:**
>
> - **Speak O Lord as we come to you SoF 2032.**

The title of this study is taken from a response which appears many times in Scripture, and it should be fun to look at each one separately. Where do we begin? One might expect that Adam would have been the first to utter these words, for he and God were on the best of terms — until, that is, he decided to rebel, and then he didn't want to betray his hiding place. So we must pass on to Cain then; but no, he likewise was not wanting to respond to God's voice. In fact, he positively rejected the summons. "Am I my brother's keeper?" he complained. The next in line would be Noah, who was very compliant to God's voice but, strangely, God does not call him by name, but simply gives him his instructions.

The first man who answered God in this way was — yes, you guessed it — Abraham! But God spoke with Abraham many times before calling him by name. This happens in Genesis 22:1. Why do you think God needed to call him by name at this point? Personally, I would say it is because He was about

to test him very severely. Just think of it: his only son by Sarah, the one through whom the nations of the world would be blessed, and the one whose seed would be more numerous than the stars or the sand on the seashore. To be asked to sacrifice him must have appeared utterly stunning to Abraham. But, as we learn from Hebrews 11:17-19, he believed that God could raise him from the dead. He had seen God do incredible things — especially giving him and Sarah a son at their very advanced age — so he knew that God could do anything. When does Abraham have cause to repeat his three-word response? Yes, in Genesis 22:11. This time God repeats His name. Why do you think? It's pretty obvious He was anxious to prevent him doing a terrible thing, having seen that he was prepared to be absolutely obedient. Read Genesis 22:9-19. Who else was provided on that mountain? I don't need to tell you. The passage is so prophetic. The next one to be called by name is Isaac, and it was his father who called him in Genesis 27:1. Why was he called, do you think? The next to be called was Jacob. The first time was in Genesis 31:11. Read from Genesis 31:10. Why does God call him by name at this point? Don't forget it was a dream. Then again in Genesis 46:2 God speaks to Jacob, again in a vision. "Here I am," he replies. Again, why this personal approach when they had met many times before, many times in a dream? Read from Genesis 46:1-4. Why does God call him twice, and why at this late stage? Any comparisons with earlier calls, and any contrasts? Probably the most famous of all the calls is in

Exodus 3:4, when Moses was called. Read from Exodus 3:1-6. It's pretty obvious why God calls him twice. Any thoughts? Moses is called by I AM. From then on, the relationship between the two of them grew, so that God never needed to alert Moses in the same way.

The next very famous call was of Samuel in 1 Samuel 3:4. Let's read from 1 Samuel 3:1-18. Notice that Samuel was replying to Eli when he used these words, but when he knew who had actually been calling him he said, "Speak, for Your servant is listening." Discuss.

The next equally famous call comes in Isaiah 6:8. It's worth reading from Isaiah 6:1-13. It's a very terrible message, and we've looked at it twice before in terms of seeing and hearing. It's Isaiah's call to speak to Judah. Any comments on this? Finally, I would like us to take note that God also said, "Here I am." He even said it twice. Look at Isaiah 65:1. Read up to Isaiah 65:3a. It's a reversal of roles. God wanted Israel to call out to Him, but they wouldn't, and yet, as we see, He revealed Himself to them.

Let's just summarise this theme, shall we? In the OT, though not in the New, God appears to certain significant people and calls them, often in a dream, or at night, as in the song we shall sing in a moment. I doubt many of us have actually heard God call to us, although He very definitely calls to some. In the NT God speaks through His Holy Spirit, as a rule. His

dramatic appearance to Saul, later Paul, evoked a question rather than a response. “Who are you?” he asks in bewilderment. But there’s no doubt that if God wants to say something to us, He will. I personally just long to hear God speak to me. It’s the uncertainty or perplexity of this life which can often cause us to despair, but if we listen hard we may hear Him in the recesses of our hearts and, if and when we do, we, like Samuel, can reply: “Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening.” Then, of course, it’s a question of being obedient to what He seems to be saying. He doesn’t mind us asking for confirmation that we’ve heard aright, as Gideon does. As the Psalmist says: “once I have heard, twice God has spoken” (Psalm 62:11). But once we are sure we hear Him aright, then obedience is essential; otherwise He won’t continue with further requests. He may repeat His original request, but won’t go on to a new one until we do what He is asking. And if we take the call to Isaiah as our example, then, like him, we may wish to say, “Here am I; send me.” But if we do say that, will we be ready to hear something we did not want to hear? Samuel was not over-anxious to tell Eli what God had said to him. Do you remember what it was? And Isaiah was horrified to hear what he had to announce. “How long must this curse be on us?” he asked. And look at God’s answer. Are we called to be as brutal as that? I feel God wants me to tell it “as it is”, but I do so with great misgiving because I know full well that I myself fall so far short of God’s ideal and purpose for me. Sometimes I feel I have no right to be

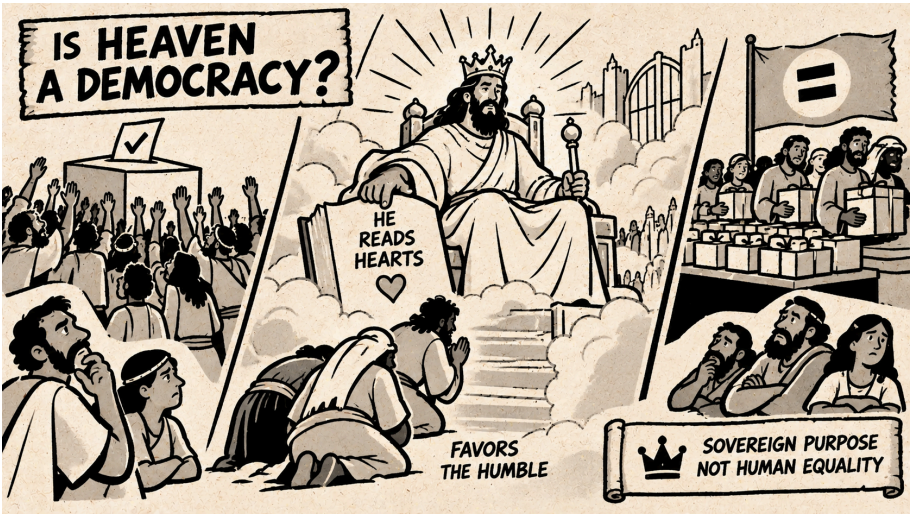
telling anyone but my own soul what I should do. That's why I always make it clear in my Bible studies that each one speaks above all to me, and if it happens to speak to you too, then that's great. But please, never think I'm lecturing you in any way. Do you think we might sing a hymn I have never really liked because it is such a personal hymn and sits uncomfortably unless we have experienced this call as the writer had? But it so much fits our subject, we just have to sing it, just in case it might speak to any of us this afternoon, and then perhaps one or two of us might feel led to pray.

Sing: 'I the Lord of sea and sky'. SoF 830

Amen

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Is Heaven a democracy?



> **Sing:**
> **The God of Abraham praise 530 SoF**

Other questions I have pondered are: does God have favourites, i.e. does He treat everyone alike? An alternative title might be, “Is Heaven socialist?” Does everyone get a vote? I don’t intend to answer such questions directly, though I will suggest some thoughts; but I hope you will draw your own conclusions after looking at various references.

First then: is Heaven a democracy? In a democracy, everyone's views are theoretically consulted and the majority view is generally implemented. Of course, this cannot ever really work because the only genuine democracy was that practised in Athens in the days of Ancient Greece. There, around the 5th century BC, the Greeks were encouraged to take an active part in the government of their nation. Each year, 500 free men were obliged to vote upon any new law proposed and had to attend an assembly, or else they were fined and daubed with red paint. Is this how Heaven is run? I can see you shaking your heads. So what kind of government is there in Heaven? Obviously, the Lord is the supreme ruler, as is made clear in many of the Psalms, e.g. Psalm 2 and Psalm 82. God presides. We know this, so we don't need much persuading. But is Heaven a socialist state? This is more difficult. Psalm 113:7 reminds us that God favours the poor. That's very socialist, isn't it? And 1 Samuel 2:8 says very much the same. Blessed are the poor, says Jesus in His mountaintop sermon, the Beatitudes. God loves the humble, and it's very clear that Jesus always ministers to the poor and needy and asks us to do the same, as do the writers of the epistles. The idea of sharing is basic in the whole Bible. There are hundreds of examples in both the Old and New Testaments. Should we remind ourselves of some of them?

Proverbs 19:17; Proverbs 14:31; Deuteronomy 15:11; Luke 14:13; Luke 4:18; Isaiah 61:1, etc.

So in this sense, Heaven is most definitely socialist. But is it? Socialists would have us treat everyone equally. So does God do this? Now then, this is where you will need to reflect carefully and make up your own minds. Look at the following references: James 4:6. God hates the proud. Proverbs 16:5 says the same. Psalm 5:5 and Psalm 11:5 seem to suggest that God hates the sinner. Read these two psalms. Do you still say the Lord loves the sinner but hates the sin? In Proverbs 6:16-19, which we looked at last week, we see that God hates seven things at least. He hates lies, wickedness and evil. Elsewhere, we see that He hates injustice, unfaithfulness, slander, gossip and deceit. So God is not an Old King Cole. Do you remember the rhyme? He was a merry old soul who spent his time smoking and listening to his fiddlers three. God is holy, and His anger is quickly aroused. So this seems to depart from the idea of equality.

But there is more. Surely you may say, “God loves everyone”; isn’t that what we tell people? “God loves you” is the first promise we want to give whoever we are speaking to. “We are all His children.” Oh really? So what do we make of His statement to the Pharisees in John 8:44? Read the whole passage from John 8:42-44 to reassure yourselves. But people have objected that these words are taken out of context. Then look at Matthew 13:28. Again, read it in context. Who is the enemy and who are the tares? You tell me. Read Romans 8:18-21; best read from Romans 8:12ff. “Those who are led by the

Spirit of God are sons of God." Are all the inhabitants of your street, our town, our nation, led by the Spirit of God? For one thing, do all our neighbours acknowledge God the Father and Jesus Christ His Son? Mine don't. So in what sense are they God's children? God's creation, yes, of course. Made in His image, yes. But to be His child we need to be born again of the Holy Spirit, as Jesus told Nicodemus.

So unless we are reading different scriptures, we are not all equal. "Jacob I have loved, Esau I have hated" (Romans 9:13). Again, read the context, maybe starting at Romans 9:6. But surely, when we have accepted Christ as our Saviour, we are all loved equally. Are we? Why, then, does Jesus favour Peter, James and John, taking them apart on so many occasions? Not just for the Mount Tabor experience and the Garden of Gethsemane, but other occasions also. And what does He say about John the Baptist in Matthew 11:11? It's hard to accept these things, but what do you think? Also, the whole business of predestination. Some are chosen — so others are not. Look at Romans 8:29-30, Galatians 1:15-16, 1 Corinthians 1:27, and, of course, 1 Peter 2:9. God specifically chose Jeremiah to be a prophet in Jeremiah 1:4-5. But he squirms and wriggles. Jonah actually resisted it and tried to flee, but you know what happened to him! No, God surely is not democratic, nor is He totally fair. Look around you: are all attractive, intelligent and healthy? It has been said that if 100 people were all given £10, after six months some would be in debt and others would be

rich. Not all are wise. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29, “not many of you were wise, influential, of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise — the weak to shame the strong — the lowly” to shame the proud. Now here is a new kind of socialism, where God, who knows all things, deliberately chooses those the world might reject. I love that.

So may I suggest: Heaven is not a democracy; it is an autocracy, but the ruler is absolutely wise. Not fair, but just. Otherwise, everyone would be rich and successful. Some are lazy, it’s true, and the servant who was given one talent hid it, whilst the other two worked and doubled their gift. But their gifts were not equal in the first place, were they? One had five talents, another two (Matthew 25:15). Some are born into a wealthy family and some into a slum. The East would say this was karma and the result of past lives. Christianity doesn’t teach this, but God looks upon the heart. If someone is determined to serve God, even if it does not appear that he is very successful, God will reward him appropriately. Give in secret; God will reward us openly (Matthew 6:4). He is above all just and righteous. He reads the heart (Romans 8:27; Psalm 139 in many verses). It may look as if God is unfair, but look what He said to the workers in Matthew 20:2; and when the ones who had worked the whole day only got a penny, they complained — and look at His reply in Matthew 20:15. God is absolutely just. Deathbed repentances seem so unfair, but no

one would be able to repent unless God had softened their heart, and are we not so very grateful that He does this? I can think of many whom I should perhaps not name publicly who, at the very end, having refused the Lord all their lives, pleaded His grace and received it. God is just, but He's not a democrat. I'm sure you will have a lot to say about this and may wish to disagree, and that would be great if you can provide scriptural evidence to support your case. This is another short study, but profound, I hope you'll agree.

Sing: **'O God, You've searched and You know me'.** Not in SoF but YouTube will supply

Amen

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Lift-off!



> **Sing:**
> Hail the Day That Sees Him Rise

When we visited the Mount of Olives in 1981, we went to see the traditional site of Jesus' ascension. We were bemused to discover that the key to this little chapel was held by the Islamic Waqf of Jerusalem. I wondered just what the Muslims would make of Jesus' ascension, but then I reminded myself that they are fully expecting Him to return in due course, so maybe they have no problem with His ascension. Their

theology is curious. But what are we told about Jesus' ascension? I personally find it quite hard to take this scene literally. It may just be my warped sense of humour, but to imagine Jesus taking off like a hot-air balloon leaves me somewhat bemused. And then to be told that He will return in the same way leaves me even more confused.

Shall we look at the various stories & try to make sense of them. Matthew first. Ch 28:16 to the end. So – judging by this report, the lift-off took place in Galilee on a mountain where the disciples had been told to meet Him (in Matthew 28:7 and 10) – read. This confirms what Jesus told them in Matthew 26:32. Now let's be sure about this; Matthew doesn't actually state that Jesus ascended on the Mount (was it Tabor?); he just tells us what Jesus said 'when He came to them'. It's what He says that's important, not where He left them. What strikes me as utterly incredible is that we hear that 'some doubted' in Matthew 28:17. He has risen from the dead; He was in front of them, flesh and blood, speaking words of truth & yet some doubted. Doubted what? Doubted their own eyes? Well that wasn't the only time some doubted. All the disciples, not just Thomas, doubted that Jesus was flesh & blood when he appeared in the Upper room. And even today people doubt the evidence of wonderful miracles, so I suppose we shouldn't be surprised.

So what did Jesus say? First He had been given ‘all Authority in heaven & earth’. Let’s just absorb that astounding fact. Do you think that authority still persists today? Do you believe that He only has to speak and it will happen; that whatever He wills shall be done? This is why when we pray to the Father we pray in Jesus’ Name. Then He issues various commands. First: ‘Baptise all nations, in the Name of the Father, Son & Holy Ghost’. This is the Trinity. Any doubt as to the veracity & importance of the Trinity is at once resolved. Any sect or group which denies the Trinity needs to be reminded of this verse. They are to make disciples, not just converts, notice. What is a disciple? One who follows, learns from and stays close to. If I were able to help anyone here to do any of those things I would be a happy man. How should one do this then? After baptising them (in a river or in a baptism tank such as we have at Christ Church) the disciples are to be taught everything Jesus had commanded them. I suppose that is what I’m endeavouring to do, however imperfectly. So first someone needs to believe that Jesus died, was buried, then rose again and has ascended to heaven; then they need to be baptised as an outward demonstration of their change of heart, then they need to learn what it means to follow Jesus throughout their lives. Finally Jesus promises that He will (or rather IS) with them always, to the very end of the age. See Deuteronomy 31:6. Which age? I’ll leave that one hanging, although it’s very important.

Let's look at Mark now. In Mark 16:15, it would seem that these commands were given as the disciples are eating (in the Upper Room?). Here the command is very black & white. If people believe & are baptised then they will be saved. If they don't they will be condemned. Tough but clear. But then follow three signs which have caused problems ever since. First those who believe will drive out demons. Now this brings us into a whole arena of controversy. First; are there still demons around? Secondly, does this promise still pertain today? Or, as some believe, was it only for that generation? The text does not suggest that it was limited to that generation or that period. It says 'those who believe'. It's very tempting to take bits and leave bits of Scripture according to one's mindset. But it gets more complex. Second 'they will speak in new tongues'. Oh dear! That at once divides charismatics from non (or anti-) charismatics. Tongues! What a can of worms we have here. I received the gift of tongues one day at Christ Church & am very grateful for it, because it has liberated me to praise God in a new way and also to pray when I don't know how to pray (see Romans 8:26-27). But then the next two promises throw us all into complete confusion. Picking up snakes? There is a strange cult called the Dolly Pond church of God in Tennessee, part of the Church of God Holiness Movement, founded by George Went Hensley, who practices this bizarre rite, but somehow I feel they've missed the point. Then what about drinking deadly poison? If the experience of the 900 of disciples of Jim Jones at

Jamestown, Guyana, is anything to go by, it's not a very good experiment. They drank cyanide as ordered and they all dropped dead. Finally there is a promise that if they lay hands on sick people they will get well. Again this divides charismatic from non charismatic folk.

It is a very controversial passage but is illuminated when we read that many early manuscripts do not include this whole passage from Mark 16:9 to Mark 16:20. But if we miss it out, as I'm sure many might wish to, then Mark says nothing about the various appearances of the risen Jesus. But it does say that after Jesus had spoken He was taken up into heaven. Now this, if we were right in assuming that the conversation took place in the Upper Room, or somewhere the disciples were eating (and that surely was not on the Mount of Olives) then the ascension took place from that same room. However in Mark 16:7 we see a confirmation that Jesus was 'going ahead of them into Galilee'. We believe that Matthew followed Mark the earliest gospel. So that corroboration should not be surprising.

Right; now onto Luke. Here the promises were declared in the Upper Room, where the disciples were indeed eating. To prove that He was no ghost or spirit Jesus asked for something to eat (Luke 24:41) and they gave him a piece of broiled fish and a piece of honeycomb. Both these foods feature throughout Scripture, though the NIV doesn't include

honeycomb. Jesus tells His disciples they will preach the Word of repentance and forgiveness to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem (Luke 24:47). They are told to remain in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit is sent to them. Then in Luke 24:50 they were led to a place 'in the vicinity of Bethany' where Jesus blessed them and was taken up. I find this account much more dignified don't you? But it does indicate that we are on the Mount of Olives, not on Mount Tabor or anywhere in Galilee.

So what does St John say? Nothing! But if we go to Acts, which as we know, was written by St Luke: he reiterates what he said in his gospel (fortunately!). In particular they were to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit. He then goes on to say (Acts 1:9) that 'when they met together (we are not told where), Jesus was 'taken up before their very eyes and a cloud hid Him from their sight'. This, I think we would agree, had to be an open space. As they were looking up (Acts 1:10) two men dressed in white stood beside them and sang 'why stand there gazing into heaven' (lalalalala) according to Roger Jones in his musical 'Power to be witnesses'. Sorry - this is a standing joke between Lexie and myself and Ray will recognise the allusion since he too sang in the Ecumenical choir along with John Price all those years ago! No; in fact the angels said: 'this same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven will come back in the same way you have seen Him go into heaven'. Does this remind you of the very gentle

rebuke the two angels, also dressed in white, gave to Mary Magdalene in John, & the various women in Luke. I.e. you're looking in the wrong place.

So now I think we can get an overall view of what God wants to say to us today when we consider this slightly bizarre event which could so easily confuse us or amaze us and thus lead us astray. What is the message of the Ascension and why do most Protestant churches overlook it?

Let's look at the hymn by Charles Wesley that we sang to start with. No 2311. It's also in the small blue hymn book that they used in this church 60 years ago but both versions have an extra (different verse). (The tune is the same as Charles' famous Easter hymn 'Christ the Lord is risen today' No 61 SoF). Verse one invites us to Hail Him who is returning to His throne in Heaven after a gruelling ordeal on our behalf. Note that it is His Throne He returns to. He left it willingly for us and now He returned in triumph. The second verse tells of the roar of welcome He receives, and calls upon the eternal gates to lift their heads. I'm sure you know Psalm 24 which we can read antiphonally right now. Half the room can read Psalm 24:7 the other half Psalm 24:8a then the first half Psalm 24:8b &c. Then the first half can read Psalm 24:9 and the other half Psalm 24:10a and we can all join in reading Psalm 24:10b

& c. And do you know the song that echoes this ‘It’s no 337 SoF. It’s a glorious song of triumph. We should sing it with conviction.

Then verse 3 reminds us that though Jesus now receives the triumphant accolade of heaven, He does not forget us. Even whilst seated in victory, far from the agony of the baying crowd, the Pharisees, priests and rulers, He nevertheless loves those He has left and ‘calls mankind His own’. Verse 4 of the little blue book version reminds us that Jesus lifts His hands, revealing His nail scarred hands, and blesses His Church below. Verse 4 of the SoF version reminds us that Jesus is interceding for us at His Father’s right hand, pleading His ‘prevailing death’ (meaning that by His death He has conquered death & sin), and He prepares place for us ‘near Himself’ (see John 14:2-3 and John 17:24).

Verse 5 assures us that though Jesus is parted from us ‘far beyond the starry height’ we may ‘lift our hearts that we may rise’ ‘one with (Him) beyond the skies’. See the collect for Ascension Day, which Charles as a good Anglican before being dubbed a Methodist, would have known well. ‘Grant we beseech Thee almighty God, that like as we do believe Thy only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into the Heavens, so we may also in heart and mind thither ascend, and with Him continually dwell...’ So whether

through the prayers of the church or through Scripture we may rise with Jesus and dwell in those Heavenly places. Read Colossians 3:1 and Ephesians 2:6-7.

If you forget everything else we have read or thought about today please don't forget this. This is no longer just history, confused as it may appear, nor is it just theology, it is the essence of spiritual LIFE. Think about it for a moment. Earth, as St Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 4:18, is temporary and passing; Heaven is permanent, durable and everlasting. Do we not sing that little song 'Turn your eyes upon Jesus; look full, in His wonderful Face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His Glory and grace'. But it's hard isn't it? The one we can see, and it mesmerises us, whereas the other is invisible and we cannot grasp it. Our last verse of 2311 tells us we will remain 'beyond the skies' and share the glory of (His) reign' and see the King in His beauty; see His 'Face unclouded' and 'find our heaven of heavens in (Him).

Alleluia.

That's it folks!

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Patience

> **Sing:**
>
> - **If faith can move the mountains No 2343 Songs of Fellowship**

The same person who asked for a study on penitence asked for one on patience, so here goes.

As you will know, patience is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness... (Galatians 5:22). And how much we need patience! Some seem to have a natural gift of patience, and some need to pray for it. But as my dear wife observes, it's not such a good idea to pray for patience because, if God were to take us seriously, we would doubtless be tested, and the testing might prove onerous! There are so many situations in life that demand patience. Some have problems with traffic jams, especially if they have to get to an important meeting or catch a flight or train and look as if they are going to be late. Or waiting in a queue — for the bank, maybe, or Post Office. The little Post

Office in Abbey Foregate has two notices as one approaches the entrance: “Sigh heavily here” and later “Tut loudly here”.

But more seriously, there are things we long for but do not see. One of my favourite songs is “Waiting here for You, with our hands lifted high in praise”. If we wait with praise, then we are waiting with confidence and not with anxiety. I remember one of my distant relatives, whom we met many years ago in a residential home, confessed that she was just “waiting for release” (i.e. death). If people are content to leave this life, but the longed-for release is delayed, it can be very hard. Little children are notorious for asking, “Are we nearly there?” on a journey to the sea. In childhood, time can often seem to drag so slowly, and then as we grow older we wonder where the time has gone. Waiting rooms at either the dentist or doctor’s can prove frustrating. And for people waiting for the result of a biopsy, it can be quite frightening. Will they need the dreaded therapy or not? As I said, some take these things in their stride; others become very agitated, impatient, anxious and irritable. So what is the remedy for such as these?

It seems that the only remedy, as with all our natural human weaknesses, is for us to implore our Heavenly Father to grant us the full measure of His Holy Spirit, and to discover in so doing how His lovely Spirit works in our natural nature to

bring forth supernatural fruits. So we might perhaps look at Scriptural examples of men and women who have received such a gift and see what the writers of the New Testament, in particular, have said about patience.
Job is the man who immediately comes to mind. “You have heard of the patience of Job,” says James in James 5:11. In fact, the whole passage from James 5:7-11 is worth reading for our encouragement. The farmer is patient as he waits for his crop to ripen, and in the same way we should be patient as we await the coming of the Lord. Job did complain vociferously but he never gave up trusting God, and was rewarded in the end with twice as much as he had had before.

Then Abraham demonstrated immense patience in that he was promised many times that he would be the father of a great nation (Genesis 12:2; Genesis 15:5; Genesis 17:4-8), but he had to wait until he was a hundred years old for God’s Word to be fulfilled (Genesis 21:5). Joseph also was taught patience as he languished in prison through no fault of his own (Genesis 40:23), but eventually became ruler of all Egypt, second only to Pharaoh (Genesis 45:8). Simeon had been promised that he would see the Lord’s Messiah (Luke 2:26), but he was an old man before the promise was fulfilled, and likewise old Anna, who had been widowed for most of her life, was rewarded with the sight of the baby Jesus. Finally, of course, our Lord Himself showed great patience, as it says in Hebrews 12:2-3. Patience with so many who failed to

understand His message, including His own disciples. Isaiah 53:11 says: “He shall see the fruit of the travail of His soul and be satisfied.”

These are only examples of those who through patience achieved what God had planned for them, but which had been hidden from their eyes. Faith and hope are cousins to patience and all three work together. Romans 5:3 and James 1:3 both affirm that suffering produces endurance or steadfastness. Endurance and patience are close relatives also.

But there are many warnings about impatience in Scripture, and one is to be found in 1 Samuel 13:8–14. It is a hard story to read because one can readily understand why King Saul was so impatient. But the outcome was devastating, and God abandoned him and chose another king in his stead. Is the Lord so ruthless with us today that, if we make one error, we will be abandoned? If you go on to read 1 Samuel 15, it is terrible! It reveals another disobedience of Saul; again, a very understandable one, with which we might well sympathise, since it seems to demonstrate mercy and a desire to sacrifice. You really need to read this to understand. But Samuel told Saul that “to obey is better than sacrifice” and “rebellion is as the sin of divination” (1 Samuel 15:22–23). Then, although Saul appears to repent, God knew that his repentance was not sincere (look back at last week’s study) and rejects him from his kingship for the second time (1 Samuel 15:24–29).

I have strayed from my main point, which is patience and the sin of impatience. I could also point to Moses, God's appointed leader for the Children of Israel — the most humble and obedient man that walked the earth in his day. Yet for one sin of impatience he was not permitted to enter the Promised Land. At such stories I tremble! We are led to understand that God is merciful and forgiving, but these stories show Him as hard and unforgiving. What, then, is the truth? The truth is that Jesus came to make a new covenant through the blood of His cross. Now, although God has not changed, there is mercy for those who transgress. Transgression is none the less serious, but Jesus has paid the price. We deserve to die (I very especially), but if we turn to Him who took our sin on His shoulders, we are saved. This should make us grateful beyond measure. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13:4, includes patience as one of the aspects of agape love. This would seem to refer to patience with other people, rather than with our circumstances. The same message comes in Ephesians 4:2, if you read the whole verse; forbearance is closely allied to meekness and patience in this context. Those of us with the inability to "bear fools gladly", which the world seems to admire, are not pleasing to God. This attitude is rooted in pride, and God is far from the proud. We need to repent of such an attitude and ask God for humility and gentleness. I might just mention that Paul from time to time found this hard (Acts 15:38, e.g.). Whereas in Philippians 4:6, "anxiety" refers to our reaction to circumstances. What is the remedy

for this? Answer: prayer, supplication with thanksgiving. Remember the ostrich?
Romans 12:12 urges us to be “patient in tribulation”. Paul himself was content in all circumstances (Philippians 4:11-13). That is a great gift. But before you answer, “Oh, I couldn’t say that,” remember that Paul was full of the Holy Spirit, and again we need to point out that God’s Spirit is the answer to all our needs, patience included, and above all agape love, which can only come from God Himself.

Patience includes avoiding an angry response. Quick temper does not fulfil the law of love. Proverbs 15:18 is similar to Proverbs 15:1. There are so many verses in both the OT and NT which give colour to the business of patience, but it seems to me — and I hope you agree — that we can really divide the gift of patience between that which is needed in life’s ups and downs, in our experiences day by day, and very especially at present during this lockdown. Some find themselves very distressed, anxious, frustrated, even angry — yes, I know at least two who say they are angry — whilst others sail through unaffected. I am grateful to be amongst the latter, with plenty to do and a conviction that God wants to use it to bring us to a global repentance. So then, we need patience in the course of our lives on earth because it will be tested again and again, as we observed at the start of this study.

Then there is the kind of patience which we need in relation to each other, which is more akin to gentleness, understanding, sympathy and kindness. You might care to look through Scripture, seeing where reference is made to the one and where to the other. I won't burden you with too many references, knowing how they are very time-consuming to follow up; but if you bear this in mind both in life — and I want to do this in mine too — and as you read the Word, then this study will have borne fruit. May the Lord bless you abundantly as you ponder His Word, especially as you work through the stresses and strains, the opportunities and new doors, which this present lockdown opens to us.

If we can share Paul's ability to be content with all situations and forbearing to all, we will be very pleasing to our Heavenly King!

Amen

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Penitence

I'm writing on Shrove Tuesday! When you receive this, we will be in Lent. Not my favourite festival! One of our followers asked that we might look at the subject of Penitence.

My reaction was 'that is a Roman Catholic term and Protestants don't use it. Maybe you mean 'Repentance''. But out of obedience & respect, I will look at Penitence, Repentance & contrition, confession & all other terms generally associated with Lent.

First of all, do you remember what 'Lent' means & when it was established as part of the church's year? It comes from an Old English word lencten meaning 'to lengthen' because we can see that the Spring days are getting longer, and what a relief that is to return to Shrove Tuesday. We associate it with pancakes. Why? I expect some of you will know; if we were together I can imagine lots of hands up at this point. Pancakes were a way of using up milk and eggs and flour & fatty things that were forbidden during Lent in early days & still are amongst the Orthodox community. My Orthodox friends live on peanut butter, tahini & pulses, rice etc during Lent. No meat or fish or eggs or even milk. This is not Scriptural but

traditional, & is associated with a desire to remember Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness & with our need to be cleansed from our deep rooted sins. But pancakes apart (& there are many jolly traditions associated with pancake making) the title Shrove Tuesday derives from the early custom of going to a priest to be 'shriven' or forgiven from ones sins. This requires confession, penitence & repentance. If one looks up the various interpretations of these words, there is a profound disagreement. They come from different roots. Fernauld in 1914 clearly sees repentance (first used in 1230) as sorrow for sin and a complete turning away from the sinful behaviour, whereas penitence (first used in 1341), he thinks, is a more transitory affair which may not lead to a permanent shift in behaviour. But the OED sees little difference between the two. In both there is a sincere desire to change and to amend one's life. If I may add my own personal interpretation: I tend to see penitence as being more a Roman Catholic Term and repentance as being more Bible-based, or Evangelical. And mention of 'Evangelical' leads us to remember that this is intended as a Bible Study not a lecture by yours truly! So Repent is such a vital word. In the Greek it is metanoia and literally means after/thought. It was the first word used by John the Baptist (Matthew 3:2, Mark 1:4, Luke 3:8) by Jesus (Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:14) and by Peter in his first sermon (Acts 2:38). Is there a message here for us?! Repent means to reconsider, to turn around, (not: 'to feel sorry for', or 'lament',

or even ‘to be contrite’, which means to regret or be remorseful for). I imagine hell is a state of burning remorse & I tremble at the thought. ‘If only...’.

So on Shrove Tuesday we are invited to go to a priest who will hear our confession and ‘shrive’ or absolve us of our sins. It came from the Latin scriber which actually means to write. We’re into murky waters here for it may be that the priest wrote an absolution (or an indulgence) for a fee. Chaucer was scathing about such activity as was Luther. But we as Evangelicals may not feel the need to confess to a priest, but maybe come to God who alone knows the secrets of our hearts and will be content, I believe, with a true intention of turning around and changing our bad behaviour, words or even thoughts. True repentance, I think, is only possible through the power and help of God’s Holy Spirit, otherwise it becomes rather like a New Year’s Resolution, which one can maintain for a day or two, or even a week or two but then forgets and lapses. If we commit our intentions to God the Father, through Jesus the Son in the power and conviction of the Holy Spirit, we will not go back on our commitment. James has something cogent to say about this in James 1:22-25. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us, but if we confess our sins He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness’. I typed those words without reference to the text because they are etched on my heart, as perhaps on

yours. 1 John 1:9 is the actual reference & may read differently to the above, which comes from my heart and long-term memory. The cleansing is, for me, so important, because it's one thing to be forgiven, another to be made clean & I long for the latter. When He makes us clean we are clean indeed. And look at John 15:3. As an Evangelical (ie Bible-believing) Christian, I believe this text. We are clean through what Jesus has spoken to us. And how will we know what Jesus is saying to us, except by reading His Word and by obeying it. How we long to be clean in His sight. How dirty we feel until He cleans us, and how wonderful that He came to earth to do that very thing by shedding His blood on the Cross!

And then the day after Shrove Tuesday is of course Ash Wednesday; the beginning of the 40 day period of Lent in which many spend time praying and fasting. Not so much that their sins will be forgiven, if we did that on Shrove Tuesday, but that we will grow closer to Our Lord Jesus as we identify with His 40 days in the wilderness fasting and praying. Fasting may mean avoiding alcohol, or meat, or any number of dietary abstinences, or it may mean giving up TV, or a bad habit, or talking flippantly or judging others, or forgiving people we have a grudge against, if there are any. Coming close to Jesus, putting our head in His lap and talking intimately with Him, singing psalms, hymns and spiritual

songs or, if we can't sing (!), listening to CDs or tapes or Premier Radio or UCB. Spending time in His Word. All these things cleanse the soul and draw us ever closer to Him.

Ash Wednesday is so called from the tradition of the 'imposition of ashes' on the forehead of believers to remind them that they are (created from) dust and to dust they will return, so they should 'turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ'. There is nothing mandatory about the imposition of ashes (this will not be done at present in those churches who are observing lock down) but many find it a helpful reminder. Some like to retain the mark throughout the day, others, bearing in mind that they are not to parade their piety, prefer to remove them before going out in public. The ashes are made from the burning of the Palm Sunday crosses from the previous year, and are generally mixed with olive oil, partly to render them more adhesive to the forehead and partly as a reminder that many were anointed at their confirmation with oil in the sign of the cross. This is a kind of renewal of our intention to turn from evil and follow Christ. It is not a superstitious practice and is not considered to be a sacrament in the way that Baptism, Holy Communion and Marriage are. But many of these symbols are helpful in that they remind us of our mortality. None of us know when we will be called hence to the eternal sphere, so it's best to keep a short account with our Creator.

To conclude our Study on Penitence, it might be well to look at OT calls to prayer & fasting. One is in Ezra 8:21ff where Ezra proclaimed a fast so that as they humbled themselves, the Jews returning from Babylon might arrive safely, without the need for an armed guard to accompany them. It was a fast with a purpose, and the purpose was achieved because they all arrived safely. Another fast was called for by Jehoshaphat because Jerusalem was being threatened by a huge army from Edom. All Judah was asked to join him in fasting & seeking the Lord for protection from this army. The King prayed a memorable prayer which is preserved in 2 Chron 20: 6-12, concluding 'We do not know what to do but our eyes are upon You'. The prayer was wonderfully answered and you may read about in the rest of Chapter 20.

Then there was the well known call to fast in Joel 1:13,14 and 2: 15-17. The purpose of this fast was quite different and it was quite clearly a holy fast, a solemn assembly for the purpose of asking mercy from the Lord. There was a severe famine and the call was to repentance. His is so much more like the fast we are to undertake on Ash Wednesday and throughout Lent. Isaiah explains in Chapter 58: 3ff what kind of fasting for mercy God requires. It has to be both practical & a heart-repentance. In Jeremiah 36:9 we see another call to fast for forgiveness of corporate sins in view of God's intention to execute His Wrath on the Nation, and in Jonah 3:5ff there is a very clear intention that the whole city should

fast, including the animals ! This was deep repentance which was wonderfully answered, to Jonah's disgust! So in all these occasions the fast was for a purpose. Similarly our own fasting should be for a purpose. Sometimes we may fast for intercessory purposes (eg on the first Friday Prayer for the Nation) but in the case of Ash Wednesday it is for our own sins and for the Lord to know that we mean business in our desire to renounce them. It's all too easy to say 'Sorry Lord' but to deprive ourselves of food indicates we are in earnest. But along with prayer & fasting we are encouraged to 'give alms' Since most people in normal times are covered by State handouts, many Christians prefer to send their tithes and offerings abroad to those countries where people are literally starving or in need of support of various kinds. But more recently, hunger has stalked our own streets, as evinced by the growth of food banks, so many have felt it good to assist food distribution in our own country.

Penitence then, or repentance, is a many faceted undertaking, and is made more real by prayer, fasting and giving to those in need. There is a wonderful promise in Malachi 3:8-12. I won't tell you what it says, because I would really like you to read it; it's beautiful and is a firm promise by God. It is so far reaching that I wonder that people don't test it. God is faithful and will perform his promises. We have much to repent of; all of us, for none is righteous, as we read in Psalms 14 & 53 vv 1-

3, and in Romans 3:10-12. But God ‘desireth not the death of a sinner.....’ as I quoted above. So let’s be on our knees during Lent and seek God’s favour, lest we perish in the way!!

And finally; why 40 days? I guess you will remember that the Children of Israel wandered round the desert for 40 years, Moses was up Mount Sinai twice for 40 days, fasting and receiving directions from God, which is surely the greatest of miracles in the OT. Then Elijah went 40 days on the food the ravens brought him in 1 Kings 19:8, and of course Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness seeking directions from His Father and confronting the devil and some very exacting temptations. The desert has always been associated with testing, and has also been associated with wild animals and demons, personified in scripture by owls, jackals and ravens, amongst others.

There was a TV series two or three years ago where a rather publicity-seeking vicar decided to go & live in the desert awhile. He was haunted by a variety of demons, as were St Anthony & other desert dwellers, and recorded his experiences. It is not a place to go for peace, but for conflict. Many of the men of faith in the past spent time in the desert (see Hebrews 11: 37,38). Any deprivation we might endure is nothing to what they went through.

May the Lord encourage each one of us as we seek to humble ourselves before Him during this Lent.....

Amen

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Predestination?



The question I would like us to look at today is a vexed one, to which I believe there is a very simple answer. John Milton in his epic poem ‘Paradise Lost’, which so many have had to read for their English A level, says of Adam and Eve that God’s foreknowledge (of their fall) did not overrule their will. In stating this he was following Martin Luther, who in turn was following St Augustine. It would be attractive and fascinating to follow the philosophical and literary trail right through to recent articles by Kimberley Batchelor and David Martineu, but that would be to haul a massive red herring over the trail

of our endeavours this afternoon. I want to see what Scripture says to confirm or substantiate either of these views. Do we – does mankind – have free will, or is everything determined by the foreknowledge of God? I hope in the end you will not think that this is purely an academic exploration, but that actually it is of vital importance for us to see that we need not fight over this issue (in case we had ever thought of doing so!) but that actually Scripture enigmatically holds both views simultaneously. That is my thesis, so let's see if you agree with me.

I suppose one of the main planks of Calvinism or predestination (so called because the great John Calvin espoused it) is the statement by Paul in Ephesians 1:3-4, where Paul makes a very bold confident statement. Please read it. For those who never follow up my references, you can never rejoice that you have been chosen. Don't ever take my word for it, for who am I but a humble opener of God's Word. Some of you reading this might doubt Paul's word. I don't. But I do need to read it again and again to reassure myself. It is unequivocal. Do you want some verification for this statement? Then read Romans 8:28-30. Do you still doubt? That chapter is surely the most glorious and penetrating chapter in the NT, and it clearly states that we – you and I – have been chosen by God to be like His Son. Other contributory statements can be found in 2 Peter 1:10, 1 Corinthians 1:27-30, Romans 8:33 and James 2:5. We can look

at all these. But having done so we are still left with a conundrum. It is one that has exercised me for most of my life. If God has predetermined our salvation, then why strive to please Him? If He has long ago decided that we should be saved, then what's all the fuss about church-going, reading Scripture, singing praises to Him, trying to do the right thing, being unselfish, putting the flesh to death, etc.?

On the other hand, what about those who have NOT been chosen? That has worried me even more. What is the point in praying for your family members who have not accepted Jesus, or our neighbours either, or anybody at all? How do we know whether our choice is God's choice? Is all intercession pointless? Oh, this has really troubled me for so long. Some people seem impervious to the gospel, and even though I have wrestled in prayer and even spent hours reasoning with them, they seem perversely stubbornly adamant that there is no God, or that if there is, He is not interested in them. I have been in anguish over this. Virtually the whole of our street and those around us in the centre of town are unbelievers. Was this God's intention? After all, Scripture says, '(God) has also put eternity in the hearts of men' (Ecclesiastes 3:11). And then think of what St John says in 1 John 5:12: 'He who does not have the Son of God does not have life'. Unequivocal! Terrifying! It means that everyone, anyone who does not have Christ living in their heart, will perish everlastingly, and instead of living with God in His Kingdom will be cast into

outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 13:42; Luke 13:28). I don't know about you, but this could drive me to distraction and despair. I have wrestled with God for many years over predestination.

So is there an alternative statement in Scripture to bring about a much needed balance? Ah, yes, I'm glad to say there is. And above all it's to be found in the world famous statement in John 3:16. You will, I hope, recite it for me. Start, 'For God so loved the world…' The word 'whosoever' is the key word. And it is gloriously confirmed in Romans 10:13. Now this is the same Paul who spoke of predestination! It's not another gospel. It's the same Word of God. I read this and breathe a sigh of relief. But, and there's a big 'but': what if people refuse to cry out to God for salvation? What if they refuse to say the sinner's prayer? What if their pride convinces them that they do not need God; that they are sufficient in themselves? I have a lovely friend who is very generous, thoughtful, unselfish, always concerned for the handicapped, a lover of animals, spending himself to bring pleasure and excitement to those whom life seems to have treated badly. But he does not think he needs God. I have pleaded with him, but no; he is fine as he is. The fact that he's really struggling in so many ways and is always up against it financially, time-wise, personnel-wise, does not encourage him to seek the Lord. He believes he can win if he works seven days a week and every waking hour. In vain do I tell

him God wants us to have one day of rest. But the point is – he may well win through by sheer grit and determination, but what of the afterlife? When he meets with the one who put breath in his lungs, what will he say? 'Oh, I never realised'. So I anguish.

This ancient controversy is summed by saying it is Calvinism versus Arminianism. My great, great, great, great grandfather published a poem (and I managed to secure an excessively rare first edition), which was in essence a conversation between a Calvinist and an Arminian. Wesley was an Arminian. He preached the 'whosoever', but people fell down under conviction of sin because they saw hell open its mouth to them and they felt the flames and cried out, 'Lord, save me', and thus he saw several thousands converted as on the Day of Pentecost. 'Brethren, what must we do to be saved?' they cried (Acts 2:37).

There are many scriptures that point us to a seeking of the Lord being a way through to salvation. It is hinted at in Joel 2:32 (read) and Paul takes it up in Romans 10:13 as we saw. But beware that we should not imagine words alone to be sufficient! Look at Matthew 7:22-23 and tremble. Oh, that is a hard rebuke. They seemed so successful – healing, casting out demons and doing all the things we long to do today but can't seem to – and yet Jesus says, 'Depart, you evil doers'! Goodness me; what a rebuke. So words alone are insufficient.

There's a lot more that could be said about that rebuke, but it does make us think carefully before we assume too much. God does say in Jeremiah 29:13 that we will find Him if we seek Him with all our heart. In this he's reiterating what God says of Himself, 'Love the Lord your God with ALL your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength' (Deuteronomy 6:5).

So here's my thesis: if we do this – if we love Him with every part of us – we will find Him and He will grant us His salvation, but at the same time He knows who will seek Him and whom He will grant His salvation to. I remember the Lord said to us in our little weekly prayer group, 'Seek my Face'. He did not say, 'Seek my Hand'. It's not what He gives or offers that we should be seeking, but He Himself. He wants our hearts, not our cupboard love. Least of all is He interested in our intellectual assent or philosophical acknowledgement. People believe in fairies, or ghosts, or little green men, maybe, but these will not save us in the time of trial. They may believe in love, but love notoriously grows stale, love falters, love can depend upon reciprocation, love can wither. God never changes. So let's devote the rest of our lives (and we have no idea how long they will be) to His service, but also to a devotion, an adoration, a longing, a yearning for Him.

Then, whether our salvation is predetermined, predestined or not, we will find Him and dwell with Him for ever and ever.

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Road to Emmaus

> Read together 1 Chronicles 16:23-27 & 29:10-13 & **Sing**:
>
> - **Great is the Lord & most worthy of praise 145 SoF**

The question is ‘What did Jesus say to the two travelling to Emmaus? What was it that caused their hearts to burn within them? Let’s just read the dramatic passage in Luke 24:13-35. Isn’t it fun! It reminds me of those true stories of an Emperor who dressed down as a poor man just to go amongst his people to hear what they were saying about him. Or the TV series where a big CEO went incognito onto the shop floor & worked as a lowly assistant for the same purpose. Here was the King of Kings acting as an uninformed stranger. But He can’t contain Himself and in typical Jesus fashion bursts out ‘O how foolish you are’ and proceeds to tell them what they ought to have known. How it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and then enter His Glory. And in Luke 24:27 He explained what was said in the Scriptures concerning Himself – beginning with Moses and all the prophets. Oh I wish I wish I had been there with a tape recorder or with a first century James Boswell (Biographer of Sam Johnson) to record

everything Jesus said, because the couple (Cleopas & ?his wife?) said their hearts 'burned with (them)' as he spoke (Luke 24:32).

Then a little later in Luke 24:44 Jesus appeared to the eleven as they sat together in astonishment and said: (read it). Do you see He includes the Psalms: Law, Prophets & the Psalms, in the order they come in the Hebrew Scriptures. Now what, I wonder, did He say? Shall we hazard a guess, starting as He did with Moses. What does Moses say about the Messiah? Don't forget it was assumed that Moses wrote the Pentateuch or the Torah, so we may begin in Genesis. Right at the start in Gen 3:15, God states that Eve's offspring and the offspring of the serpent (snake in NIV) will be at enmity. He (ie the Son of David) will crush Satan's head whilst he will strike His heel. So although it's slightly obscure & easily missed, we have here a prophecy that Jesus will crush the Devil's head whilst Himself would suffer greatly in the process. Death is the Devil's great weapon and as we saw last week, Jesus has overcome death through His own death on the Cross, but in doing so, His suffering was beyond our understanding, for which He is to be thanked & praised eternally. Worthy is the Lamb!

Then Jacob in Genesis 49 utters some very opaque words concerning his sons. Translations vary tremendously (& I have endeavoured to make a personal translation of the

Hebrew) but in Genesis 49:10 speaking of Judah, Jacob says (Read it). 'He to whom it belongs' is 'Shiloh' in the Hebrew (& in the NKJ version). Forget the song: 'Johnny comes down to Shiloh' which refers to a place. This word is a little mysterious but the rabbis clearly see this as referring to the Messiah. The word appears again in Ezekiel 21:27 (read it). In this passage we see that God is bringing an end to the unrighteous kings of Israel and saying that the Kingship will only be restored when Shiloh – to whom it rightfully belongs – shall come. In Genesis Judah of course is the tribe from which Jesus came and in Ezekiel it is clear that God's hand is against Jerusalem which is in Judea but under the title of Israel. And you will remember that over the head of Jesus on the cross were the words 'King of the Jews' because Pilate wished it so. I'm sure Jesus would have reminded them of Shiloh.

The next person I would think Jesus would remind them of would be Abraham. Can you guess what particular story He might mention? Yes; his journey to Horeb or Moriah to sacrifice his only son, who was destined to be the father of Jacob & thus of the Messiah. You know what happened in Genesis 22, because we dealt with it last week. The Lord (Jehovah Jireh) saw and provided a ram which was sufficient a sacrifice. But the idea of one's only son, destined to rule the nations, being sacrificed was something Jesus would surely

have alluded to. There were of course many aspects of the Passover which Jesus would have spoken of, and they are well known.

Then again in the desert under Moses we have at least two clear references to the Messiah. Can you think what they might be? I hope you will point me to Exodus 17 where the Israelites were so thirsty that they were ready to stone Moses. He cried out to God & He told him to take his staff and smite the rock at Horeb so that water would come out for the people to drink. Without the assistance of Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:4 we might not have realised that this Rock was Christ. Although of course the Psalms are full of references to 'God my Rock'. Try & count them one day. Note what Paul says (read it). The Rock accompanied them! So this wasn't your normal lump of stone was it? And the water that issued from Him was no ordinary water. I long for that Living Water don't you? My notice at the foot of the front steps quotes Isaiah 'Ho everyone that is thirsty; come & drink'. I want to see Living Water flowing from St Julian's to the thirsty in our town.

Then I'm sure Jesus would have reminded them of the serpent Moses was told to put on a pole in Numbers 21:8 to cure all those who had been bitten by the seraphim (fiery serpents), because of their moaning & complaining in Numbers 21:5. Jesus Himself made reference to this bronze

serpent when He spoke with Nicodemus who came by night to acknowledge his belief in Him and was told some things that amazed and confused him. One of them was that in John 3:14: 'the son of man must be lifted up...just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness'. Paul also alludes to this grumbling & complaining in 1 Corinthians 10:9. So we must not test the Lord by murmuring. And how prone we are to murmuring! Lord have mercy. So Jesus likens Himself to the serpent in that He was lifted up on the Cross that whosoever should look on Him should be saved from the poisonous bite of the evil ones, Satan's offspring. Jesus took the bite Himself so that we need not. Let's remember these things. I'm sure that Jesus would have reminded them about these signs on the way to Emmaus & in the Upper Room.

But of course the most memorable allusions to Himself as the suffering servant were in – where? – yes; Isaiah. We dealt with the servant songs in an earlier study but I think it would be apposite to read the final one which is full of such potent prophecies of the sufferings of the Messiah. So shall we read Isaiah 53 in its entirety and let it speak for itself. I'm sure you have heard that the Orthodox Jews will not allow this chapter to be read because they know it points so clearly to Jesus that that they fear it might cause some to turn to Him & be saved. Pray that some will read it and believe.

There are so many references to the promised one in the prophets but let's just take one more because time is limited. Look at Jeremiah 33 and verses 14-16. The context however is slightly perplexing in that Ezekiel clearly says the Lord has rejected the kings of faithless Israel & Judah yet in Jeremiah 33:17 He says that David will never fail to have a man to sit on the throne of Israel. I love it when Scripture provides us with such conundrums.

Then to turn to the Psalms, which are crammed full of Messianic references. Since Jesus was referring on the road to Emmaus particularly to His predicted suffering which they found hard to swallow, we must turn first to Psalm 22. Again I think to read this through would be to let it speak for itself. And how powerfully it speaks. We can gather that Jesus was praying this psalm as He hung on the cross in such agony. He begins it in Matthew 27:46. But look at the end of it and rejoice. There are so many references to Jesus in the Psalms, notably in Psalm 2. We can read that too and let it speak for itself.

You will doubtless think of other signs that Jesus would have reminded the travellers of and the penny would be dropping again & again, for they were steeped in Scripture (Old Testament) which nowadays we are not. Matthew in particular says that Jesus fulfilled this or that prophecy. '...that it might be fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet' is

Matthews favourite turn of phrase. The donkey ride into Jerusalem (Matt 21:4), the casting out of the traders from the temple (John 2:17), the betraying of Him for 30 pieces of silver (Matt 27:9,10), the forsaking of Him by the disciples (Matt 26:31), the dividing of his clothing (John 19:24). It's all there in the OT, and books – so many books – have been written to bear this out. It's a subject too vast for an hour's study but I hope you have an idea what Jesus, risen and as tangible as you & I, related to His amazed disciples after His Resurrection.

I want to thank you dear Lord that, although we were not with You on the way to Emmaus, we can read of all the prophecies that pointed to You as if You were speaking to us today.

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Shame!

A chance remark in the Sunday Worship on Radio 4 at 9.10 a.m. led me to think about Shame in Scripture & what God has done about it. The speaker said something I've never thought of before: that Jesus was anxious that the bridegroom & master of the feast at Cana should not be ashamed had the wine run out. That is a very intriguing thought and would you care to join me in looking at shame in Scripture. The Psalms have long been 'the church's hymn book', long before A & M or more modern hymn books were compiled. Before that, they were used in the Jewish prayer book and they still form a vital part of their daily services. As we read through the psalms there are many which are not often used today.
In these King David repeatedly asks: 'May I never be put to shame', Because he, and other Scriptures too, are so insistent about this, I wonder what they mean. Here are some examples of the psalmist's pleas. Psalm 31:17, Psalm 25:2-3, Psalm 69:6-7, Psalm 34:4-5. But this theme of shame & deliverance from it appears throughout the OT; e.g. Isaiah 50:7, Isaiah 54:4, Isaiah 61:7 & Joel 2:27.

Shame of course was experienced by our forefather Adam. He & Eve were initially naked and without shame (Genesis 2:25).

It was only after eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good & Evil that they realised they were naked, and they hid themselves in shame & fear (Gen 3:10). Now what exactly were they ashamed of? It was clearly not their nakedness alone, because they had been naked since they were made. No; nakedness is a euphemism for being uncovered from a spiritual point of view. They tried to cover their shame with fig leaves but this was not enough. We cannot cover our sinful nature by our own efforts, whether fasting, self flagellation, pilgrimage, paying into church coffers or by any other efforts of our own. Only the blood of the Lamb can effect true cleansing, and this is why the Lord God made them 'garments of skin' (Gen 3:21). We can imagine this was from a lamb. So we have the true significance of shame. It is the same shame of the man, invited to the wedding feast of the King's son, who was not wearing the wedding garment. Please read the parable in Matthew 22:1-14. The point is that the garment (the Robe of Righteousness) was offered free at the door & the guest chose not to wear it, as we mentioned in an earlier Study. So do you think this might have been at the root of the fear that David and all those believers in Israel would have felt; that they might appear before God naked and ashamed. There's song we sing at Christ Church which deals with this very fear. 'God of Grace' it begins. I hope you might wish to sing it, or at the least read it, either in SoF 138 or if you don't have the SoF hymn book then Google it. It's by Chris Bowater & sums up

our state and the answer. ('my nakedness, my shame, my guilt are all before Your Eyes....and Your Grace
clothes me in Righteousness..')

So this is the root of our potential shame and the remedy is Christ's death on the Cross. How? Because He took our shame on Himself. It was the worst of shames that anyone should be crucified. It was a curse. (Galatians 3:13). Christ became a curse so that the curse of Adam would be lifted from us. Hebrews 12:2 says that Jesus despised the shame of the Cross. It is not clear from the text but one might imagine that our dear Lord hung naked on that tree, and we have seen that nakedness was considered shameful. But in this great act of humiliation and horror Christ took our shame upon Himself and whilst for a moment, His Father turned His Face from Him (Matt 27:46 & Mark 15:24), He was restored to Life and entered Heaven in Glory for our justification. The most glorious unmerited exchange! So we see that throughout the OT all those concerned about being shamed, were above all, concerned about their state before God. There were of course occasions when they might be ashamed on earth, but their prayer is above all that they will not be ashamed at the Mercy Seat but rather that that God would shame their enemies and leave them vindicated. Zephaniah 3:19 indicates to me that the lifting of shame might occur on earth but for sure it
will happen at the Resurrection.

But moving onto the NT, I believe that Jesus did far more than take away the shame of all who put their trust in Him by His death and Resurrection. I believe He actually removed the shame of many whilst He was here on earth, as the lady on the Sunday Service suggested. Apart from the wine at Cana, what about the poor woman with the flow of blood in Matt 9:20-23, Mark 5:25-34 & Luke 8: 43-46? For her it was a shame to have this blood flow. It would mean she was an outcast from her peers, ceremonially unclean (i.e. not able to join in worship in the Temple) and either unable to marry or, if it began after she was married, unable to have intercourse with her husband. All this was shameful to her & Jesus, knowing this, was able to say 'Your faith has made you whole!' And there are other examples. A leper was someone shamed, by not being able to interact with society and having to cry 'unclean unclean'. Always on the fringe of society, they were desperate. This was why Miriam was shamed after questioning Moses' authority in Numbers 12:1-15. She had to quarantine herself for seven days until God forgave her. But on numerous occasions Jesus healed lepers (Matt 8:1–4 & Luke 17:11–19 for example). He removed their shame.
And the notorious example of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11 which is not in all m/s). She had been shamed by being caught in the act, but Jesus extended mercy to her, having shamed all those who stood around with stones in their hands. Then I think of the Samaritan woman in that famous episode in John 4:1-41). She was ashamed to come to

the well at the normal time (it was noon; the heat of the day!), because she had been either divorced or bereaved 5 times. How wonderfully she was delivered from shame & went into town broadcasting her joy. Perhaps you reading this can think of other examples where, as part of his ministry, Jesus was releasing people from shame. All those who by their illness or disability would have been unable to enter the temple, He released and healed, thus fulfilling His role as Messiah; anyone possessed of a demon, those blind or deaf or lame. I recall that King David in 2 Samuel 5:4-8) said the blind and lame will not enter the palace. Read the context. Was this prophetic in some sense!

I feel I understand much more now about shame. Shame takes so many forms. We may have done something stupid or embarrassing and we feel ashamed. Jesus can cover or remove that shame. I think of malicious men who shame their girlfriends by posting photos of them naked on social media. They can never erase these slights and live with that shame but I believe that if they appeal to God, He can cover that ignominy. I felt particularly angry over the way public figures like Harvey Proctor, Edward Heath, Leon Brittan, Lord Bramall & Lord Janner were shamed by lies told by 'Nick' (Carl Beech) which featured so prominently in the press, although they have been exonerated, It seemed as if the damage done to their reputations could not be undone. Lady Brittan has recently complained that her now deceased

husband never knew that he had been declared innocent. But I know that before the Mercy Seat, he will be clean of these offences, as long as he put his trust in the Saviour. I was also so upset over Cliff Richard's public shaming, and so pleased that he won his case against the BBC, to the delight of his many supporters. I confess I was also grimly satisfied that in the end Carl Beech was imprisoned for 18 years having been discovered to be a fantasist with hundreds of images of boys on his computer & who loved to see them abused. God is the judge and Carl fell into the pit he had dug for so many (see below). But Jesus can redeem them, as indeed He did with Jonathan Aitken who served an 18 month prison sentence for perjury but now works as chaplain to the prison service at Pentonville and is honorary president of CSW. (Christian Solidarity Worldwide). Whereas Neil Hamilton is still a byword for shame although he is a (somewhat ridiculous) media figure. He never embraced Christ.

I think we may rejoice that the Lord is able and willing to redeem any shame we might have experienced however severe that shame might have been. In fact Scripture tells us that the ones who dig a pit for us will fall into it themselves, or those who set a trap for our feet will themselves be trapped and descend to the pit. (Prov 26:27, Ps 7:15 & Ps 57:6). 'Vengeance is mine' says the Lord 'and I will repay'. So we may be sure that the enemy of our souls, whose job it is to bring us to shame, will one day be thrust down to hell and as

it says in Revelation 20:3, first locked in the Abyss, and then finally thrown into the lake of burning sulphur ..for ever (Revelation 20:10). So, to summarize this message of reassurance; when the enemy of our souls, this Satan, whose job it is to accuse us day by day (Rev 12:10), brings to our minds memories of things we might feel ashamed of, we must praise the Lord Jesus that He has taken our shame, as that little song reminds us, and covers us with a robe of righteousness, for He is Our Righteousness (Jer 33:16, 1 Cor 1:30).

If we refuse to receive and wear this robe then we are in danger of being ejected from the Heavenly Banquet and thrown out into the dark for eternity. It's a serious business, if we are to believe Scripture. It's God's intention to cover our shame; will we not let Him do so?

Let us spend some time with Him and give Him everything in our lives that needs covering, so that we may stand before Him unashamed on that final Day.

Amen

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The Glorious Name

> **We sing:**
> **God of Glory, we exalt your name** & any other relevant hymns

We ended last week's study by suggesting that we might look at the Name of God, because the Scriptures constantly invite us to praise the Name of the Lord (e.g. Psalm 148:13 & many other places). So; what's in a Name! We have touched on this subject many times before so before you think 'oh not again' let me assure you I will try not to cover old ground, but reveal new & exciting thoughts.

After all there is a saying 'a rose by any other name will smell as sweet', and nowadays people name their children, often to their enduring embarrassment, by the most unsuitable & excruciating names (of favourite pop stars, or holiday destinations or literary giants – or seaweed!). There a lady opposite us here called Antigone (that's a Greek play). Her second name is Hephzibah..... Follow that.

But Jesus was called Yeshu'a because as you already know, it indicates 'salvation' and that very word occurs many times in the OT with that very meaning, quite apart from the instances of it referring to Jeshua who came with Ezra (Ezra 2:2, Ezra 2:6, Ezra 2:36 etc & Nehemiah 3:19, Nehemiah 7:7 etc). There are many mentions of Joshua the son of Nun and to Joshua the High Priest in Zechariah 3:1 (two quite different people), but like Yeshu'a the name means Saviour, though there is a slightly different interpretation given by some as yeho (standing for the name of God) and shua meaning 'a cry for help'. Normally we see the name coming from the root yod shin 'ayin (yasha') meaning to deliver, save or rescue.

So much for the Name of our Salvation, the Name above all other Names, the Name at whom evrey knee shall bow in heaven on the earth & beneath the earth, the 'sweetest name I know' etc etc etc.

Now I want, if I may, to suggest seven or even eight special attributes to the Glorious Name as found in the OT. There the Name is of course YHVH or Yehovah, generally rendered 'Adonai' by most believing Jews out of a reverence for His Great Name which they believe they should not utter. May I say right now that the habit of even very erudite and pious English theologians and commentators of using the name Yahwey for YHVH absolutely horrifies me, and I am embarrassed by my horror because the ones who use it are

far more theologically erudite than I, and I feel they should know better. Yah is Scriptural yes, but the vowels under YHVH are not a followed by e but by sheva (ie a flat vowel) followed by an o and then a. OK got that off my chest & if you are meeting with us do ask any questions you wish. But now for these 7 or 8 attributes which we may profitable use to praise God for.

1. Jehovah Jireh or more accurately Yehovah Yire. Do you remember dealing with this term several weeks ago? It is always translated as the Lord provides, and appears when Abraham was told to take his son Isaac to Mt Horeb or Moriah in Genesis 22:14 because under the name el Shaddai (Almighty) He had forged a covenant with Abraham which required his absolute obedience. Isaac was perplexed that his father had brought wood (he was carrying it!) and a tinderbox for fire, but wondered where the sacrifice was. Abraham with a breaking heart replied 'The Lord will provide'. But as we discussed a few weeks ago what he actually said was.. (remember?) the Lord will SEE. (Yireh). The very word provide is from the Latin 'pro' meaning 'before' and 'vide' meaning 'see'. So God sees before we do what we need. Rather as Hagar realised in Genesis 16:13: 'I have now seen the God who sees me'. God had provided a spring for her, and life and significance. Now we see that the same Lord SAW and thus provided on the mountain

of the Lord. (Genesis 22:14). And of course that was where the Temple was built by Solomon and restored by Herod and symbolically where Jesus the Lord's great Provision was sacrificed for us. So we may begin on our first day by praising the Name of the Lord who provides because He sees the need. David exults in God his provider in 2 Samuel 22:47-50 and Paul likewise exults in the same God who 'will meet all your needs according to the riches of His Glory in Christ Jesus' (**Philippians 4:19**). Other references might be Matthew 6:31-33, Acts 14:17, **Psalms 147:8**& **Deuteronomy 2:7**. We need food, shelter, protection, clothing, finance, rest, peace and love, and yes God provides all these as He tells us in Matthew 6. So let us also Praise the Name of God our provider (Jehovah Jireh)!!

2. On day two let's praise Jehovah Rophe or God the Healer. The reference is from Exodus 15:26 when the Israelites were parched with thirst but found only a pool of stagnant bitter water they could not drink. They called it Marah (same names as Naomi called herself after losing her husband and 2 sons). But when Moses called to the Lord He provided a piece of wood which Moses threw into the water and it became sweet. What do you think this wood represents? Yes of course – the cross which sweetens our bitterness. In verse 26 of Exodus 15, following this test, God promises them He will not allow

any of the diseases He brought upon Egypt to visit them IF they pay attention to His command & keep all His decrees 'for I am the Lord who heals you' (YHVH Rophe). Have you ever sung 'I am the Lord who healeth Thee'? Do you believe it? Jesus went around everywhere healing people & casting out demons. He has built healing into our bodies, and still heals people today. One proviso; we need to obey His Commands. So let's praise His name Yehovah Rophe. Psalm 107:20.

3. On day three let's praise His Name Jehovah Nissi (the Lord is my Banner). What? Well the reference is to Exodus 17:15 when Israel was fighting the Amalekites at Rephidim and Moses was on the top of the hill with his staff along with Aaron and Hur. As long as he held up his hands the Israelites were winning but as soon as he lowered them the Amalekites prevailed. Does this say anything to you about raising our hands (Yadah) in praise? As Moses tired, Aaron & Hur sat him on a stone and held his hands up for him so Joshua in the valley below overcame the enemy. Does this say anything to us of the value of corporate prayer? The Lord asked Moses to inscribe this victory on a scroll for future generations to remember, because God intended to eradicate the Amalekites completely (and He did under King Saul (in 1 Samuel 15). Moses built an altar to the Lord & called it YHVH Nissi (The Lord is my banner) 'because', he said,

‘hands were lifted up against the throne of the Lord, the Lord will be against the Amalekites from generation to generation’ (v 16)

4. On Day four we can praise His Name Jehovah M'Kaddesh because in **Leviticus 20:7** God says ‘Consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I AM the Lord Your God. Keep my decrees and follow them. I AM the Lord who makes you Holy’. The angels in Revelation 4:8 cry ‘holy holy holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come’. And Peter in his first letter Ch 1:16 says ‘Be holy because I AM Holy’, which he takes from **Leviticus 11:44**, 45 and 19:2. To be holy is to be set apart for God; it’s not a term we use nowadays except in a derogatory way. You will remember that we dealt with the abusive term ‘holy Joe’ in a recent study. But let’s praise God for His Holy Name, because He wants us to hallow it as He says in His own prayer. Thank Him that He wants us also to be holy & obedient.
5. On Day five we could praise His Name Jehovah Shalom. Again, we’ve dealt with the true meaning of Shalom – much more than just peace; it include concepts of completeness, fullness, perfection. This term comes from Judges 6:24 when Gideon was threshing wheat in secret to hide it from the Midianites. A Mighty Angel visited him and called him a ‘mighty warrior’. When Gideon realised who he was speaking to, he exclaimed :

’Alas, Sovereign Lord. I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face’. But the angel replied ‘Peace! Do not be afraid; you are not going to die’. So Gideon raised an altar to the Lord there and called it ‘The Lord is peace’. We can praise this Name of God because He can give us, as Jesus promised, His Peace which passes all understanding. (**Philippians 4:7** & Jesus’ promise in John 14:27). I’ve been learning a Hebrew song sung by my precious Messianic singers: ‘Speak to my heart Lord Jesus.. in the midst of fear and the storm...words that silence the gale...for in your presence there is peace’. Thousands of songs and hymns have been written about our God who is Shalom.

6. On Day six we can rejoice in the Name of God who is Jehovah Ro'i or the Lord my Shepherd. You all know here this is from.... Yes Psalm 23 which we think we know so well. It’s good to read it again & then remember that Jesus said ‘I am the Good Shepherd’ in John 10:11 thus fulfilling the words of God in Ezekiel 34. See also the glorious promises in **Revelation 7:17**. Read this please. We have dealt also with this & the way the shepherd leads His sheep & will lead us in green pastures. Praise His Name
7. On Day seven we can remember Jehovah Tzidkenu from Jeremiah 23:5,6. The chapter begins with the same theme as Ezekiel concerning false shepherds but then

declares that God will raise up a righteous Branch who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land and He will be called 'the Lord our Righteous Saviour'. This of course is the Lord Jesus. Tzidek means to be stiff or straight, or essentially to be right. God's measurements are always exact. So we may praise His Righteous Name. See also 1 Corinthians 1:30 (Christ has become for us wisdom from God – that is our righteousness, holiness and redemption).

8. There is yet another Name for another day; Jehovah Shammah in Ezekiel 48:35. It means God is present and in a world, like this world, full of hatred, fear, selfishness, greed, unfaithfulness & hypocrisy we can rejoice that God is here. In **2 Corinthians 6:16** St Paul affirms that 'we are the temple of the living God'; as he said in his first letter (1 Corinthians 3:16) 'don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives among you!'. That's why we are to be holy even as He is holy.
9. When we looked at this again in 2026 someone reminded us of Acts 19:17 reminding us to take care not to use the Name of Jesus in vain.

So look at these wonderful Names of our God and of Jesus His Son. We can praise His Name because He's our Rock, He's our fortress, He's our Deliverer, our shield, our Salvation, our

stronghold, our strength.

We can sing that Psalm 18 and ‘praise the Name of the Lord our God’ for all His grace towards us, through all His Glorious Names.

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The Wells of Salvation

Today is May Day and I wonder if choristers still sing from the top of Magdalene Tower in Oxford. Well, there was a dawn chorus this morning unmatched by any human voices if we woke early enough to hear it, which I always seem to. Bless the Lord for the choir of creation which sings so melodiously to its Lord. Can we sing too, if not so melodiously? In Isaiah 12:3 it says, ‘With joy you shall draw water from the wells of salvation’. It’s worth reading the context, from Isaiah 12:2-4. Isaiah has much to say about springs of water, e.g. Isaiah 49:10, Isaiah 55:1, and in Jeremiah 2:13 it reads (read it). So we are directed to God as a spring of living water, and of course Jesus Himself proclaimed that He was that spring in John 7:37-39. And this is the key to this metaphor, if we had not already grasped it. The message that Jesus proclaimed in the Temple during the Feast of Tabernacles is for us all. He proclaimed it ‘in a loud voice’. Had we been there we would have heard it. It was not a private word to His disciples. So the offer is to all of us; that if we come to Jesus, if we believe in Him, we can receive an abundant supply of Living water, which will then flow out from us to those around us as we honour Him and declare His Salvation to others. There are

many songs bearing witness to this and right at the start of the charismatic renewal, there was, if you remember, a booklet of songs called 'Sounds of Living Waters', which we have long ago abandoned as being out of date. But it's worth recalling some of them, because they bear the imprint of excited renewal.

But it's the theme of wells I want to explore today if you would like to follow me. They spring up right at the start of the story of salvation. Look at Genesis 16:7 when the angel of the Lord found Hagar, who had fled from Sarai's ill treatment, near a spring in the desert. You will remember that Hagar names this well 'Beer Lahai Roi' meaning 'the well of the Living One who sees me'. Beer is well. Hai is Life, which is probably why Americans say 'Hi' when they meet someone, following the Jewish practice of saying 'Hai' (Life) to their Rabbis. Water – Life – Salvation – Joy – it's all knit together. The theme is developed when Hagar was finally sent away (in Genesis 21:21) from Abraham's tent, because Sarai (now renamed Sarah) felt her son Ishmael had been mocking Isaac. So off went Hagar with some food and a skin of water into the desert of Beersheba. When the water was gone she put 'the boy' (look how he's lost his name now) under a bush and sat down weeping. Again God 'saw' her distress and also heard 'the boy's' weeping and opened Hagar's eyes 'and she saw a well of water'. The rest is history. One of the things most feared in the desert is thirst, which can lead to death. So here,

as elsewhere, two people, mother and son, were on the point of death, so that a well, or a spring of water was in every sense, salvation for them, and her tears were turned to joy. Directly after this we encounter a dispute between Abraham and Abimelech over a well (Genesis 21:25). Read Genesis 21:25-33. We see how the name Beersheba was conceived.

The next significant story about a well comes in Genesis 24. I just love this extended narrative. I can enter into the story as if I were there. I love the intimate details and can picture the beautiful girl who became Isaac's wife. But the encounter happened at a well didn't it. It's a long story but let's read a little to get the flavour. Say from Genesis 24:10. The servant (who is never named but I imagine it was still Eliezer of Damascus (see Genesis 15:2)), had been commissioned by Abraham to find a wife for his son Isaac from amongst his relatives in his own country. The old man prayed for God's help in this enterprise and as you will see was wonderfully answered. I just love this story. Read up to Genesis 24:22. So this all took place at the well in Nahor in Aram Naharaim. Rebekah was the daughter of Bethuel son of Nahor, after whom the town was named. Look how the lovely girl pours water for Eliezer and confirms his prayer & concludes his search. She drew water with joy (can you not see her sweet smile and ready hands) for this total stranger. She demonstrated her godly nature. A little surprise; when they neared their destination, back to meet with Isaac, where does

he spring from? Genesis 24:62. Why, from Beer Lahai Roi! He had gone into the fields to meditate. Was he drawing water from his brother's well? Why was he living in the desert (the Negev)? Have you ever seen a photo of the Negev? It's pretty bleak. Well, his meditations were gloriously answered when this beautiful girl, suitably veiled, turned up. Isaac brought her into the tent of his (deceased) mother and married her and was comforted thereby. May You Lord comfort many a bereaved son with the comfort of a lovely wife.

The next reference to wells is in Genesis 26:18. Read from Genesis 26:17-33. Look at all this controversy over wells ending in the well in Beersheba. It seems as if this is an alternative tale of the naming of Beersheba. Which do you prefer & why? But there are lots of things to note in this story. We learn that the Philistines had stopped up the wells that Abraham had dug. What does this say to you? To me it speaks of enemy activity. A well is a source of Life; to stop it up is to deprive men of that Life. So Isaac reopens them and gives them the same names that his father had given them (Genesis 26:18). What were these names? Esek. Meaning dispute, for the reasons given. Sitnah meaning opposition for the same reasons. Then we have Rehoboth, meaning room. At last Isaac had room to expand and flourish in the land. Isaac also dug a well at Beersheba, which he called Shibah, meaning oath or seven. As I said earlier, you may take your pick as to which story appeals most. Was it named for the seven ewe lambs in

Genesis 21:29 or the oath in this second passage? Either way we see a blessing, joy and salvation from Rehoboth and Beersheba.

The next dramatic story is in Genesis 29. We can read from Genesis 29:1-12. How similar the two stories are. In both cases, the father had told his son not to marry a local girl but to be sure to find a wife from Paddan Aram, from the same family, of Bethuel. Thus Jacob arrives at Paddan Aram near Harran. This time he rolls the stone away from the well to water the sheep. It's not too fanciful to say that Jacob was inspired by Rachel's beauty, because Genesis 29:10 tells us he acted upon catching sight of her. Anyhow he kissed her! And indeed he rated her so highly that he worked seven years and then, through Laban's deceitfulness, another seven years for her hand. This tale of Jacob & the well inspired our prayer years ago when we were awaiting the response of the Church Commissioners to my request to change the covenant I had with them from 'Craft Centre' to 'Place of Worship'. I was aware that a stone had been placed on the well here, thus preventing its outflow to the town. I believe our prayer (with a group of about 10 others) was partially effective but it needs to be renewed. Scripture is not just dead and historical but live and inspirational & can be empowered by the Holy Spirit.

There are many encounters with wells in the OT but one very poignant one was in Numbers 21:16-18. Do you like the idea of singing to the well? I'm sure Julie or maybe Emily could write a suitable song to sing. I wrote one myself & sang it to our well in St Julian's. But think a minute; does one dig a well with a sceptre? Clearly not, so what's going on here? A little research reveals that a sceptre was a symbol of power and authority so these nobles struck the earth rather as Moses struck the rock & out came the water. So these (70?) elders commanded the well to spring up. There are other explanations (such as that the well was dug by labourers & then lightly covered over so it could be formally opened by elders & chiefs). But I like the idea that just as Moses commanded the rock to yield water, by order of the Almighty, so these leaders had the authority to command the well to spring up. And through a song at that! You may ask why this matters. But as I said, Scripture is living and powerful and I truly believe that our own well here and other wells in neighbouring churches, where worship has been engaged in for centuries (in our case for 1000 years), can be opened through inspired & directed singing. I know that Julie agrees with this & others too. Which is why it's so good that she is persevering with this promise, as we have done & will continue to do until the whole town is watered from our well.

Finally we can move to the over-used story of 'the woman at the well' (John 4). It is SO well known that I hesitate to ask

anyone to read it through, unless anyone present has a burning desire to do so. But look at the salient words 'Living water' in John 4:10. That it was Jacob's well in John 4:12. And then in John 4:14 we have this wonderful, memorable promise that whoever drinks of the living water that Jesus offers will experience the out-flowing, the gushing of this water, springing up to eternal Life. This assertion is followed by Jesus' mighty proclamation that I spoke of at the start of this study. John 7 beginning at John 7:37. Do you remember, or shall we read it again. 'Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.' Would you not wish that these living waters should flow from you? Then believe in Him. Ask of Him and He will give You what He longs to give you. It is only in this way that salvation will come to our town and to our county and to our nation and to the World. 'My house shall be a House of prayer for all nations'. Beginning at Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit is not a power for us to revel in, or to delight in, or be uplifted by, but a living river to heal, to revive, to transform and to raise the sons and daughters of earth and to make them sons and daughters of the Living God. 'Born to raise the sons of earth; born to give them second birth' as Wesley wrote. I beg you – believe in Him who came from heaven to earth to bring Life to fallen sinners, and in believing receive from Him that Living Water which brings Life to the Dead. Are you content to see those around us go to a lost eternity, far from God, and to dwell in utter darkness for eternity? I'm not. I really am

not. And I am assured if you will but believe in Him with all your heart you will not only be transformed yourselves but see your neighbours your street, our town, our county and our nation transformed by His potent Life-giving power.

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Was Jesus a Christian!



Obviously this heading is designed to get you to read the rest!! It's a ridiculous question, like asking 'Is bread feeding?' Or 'are the trees green?' But as some of you will know, there's wisdom in the madness. The question has arisen from one of our number who has been very upset by the 'right-wing' attitude of some in our group. 'Some of these comments' (this person said) 'don't sound very Christian'. Now this raises an extremely important point, which I know many in the world would agree with. I well remember one of our neighbours, when we lived at St Julian's, rebuking me because I was

complaining at the vast piles of leaves which were being blown down our path daily from St Alkmund's horse chestnut tree. 'That's not very Christian' they remarked. And I wondered just how they came to that conclusion. After many decades of contemplation, this conclusion formed in my brain. The world thinks that Christians are meant to be 'loving, kind, inclusive, tolerant of all the many attitudes and mores [noun; pronounced 'moraes'] of those around them, always helping people, raising money for needy situations, embracing all, forgiving all, loving all.' Well now, some of this is TRUE and some results from a misunderstanding

But that is Judaism and we are not Jews..

What is true? Yes, we are to love everybody as Jesus did, especially the poor and vulnerable. We are to give generously of our time & money wherever it is most needed and yes we should be tolerant of all the mores of those around us.

BUT. Are we to agree with everyone willy nilly? More important, did Jesus agree with all those around Him? Was He 'left-wing' or 'right-wing', liberal or conservativ'e, labour or Reform!?' I think He would have answered 'You are asking the wrong question. You should be asking 'Am I a Holy God? and my answer would be 'Yes I am and I cannot tolerate evil'. The image of God, the Farther of Our Lord Jesus Christ, that is being given from most pulpits around our land, is that of a very kindly old man, who sits somewhere far above us who

disseminates blessings to all His creatures, male, female, trans, gay, politically questionable, right, left and zero wing, believing or unbelieving, dead or alive. (Yes many come into St Julian's to burn candles for their 'nan' who is always helping them when they need it!)

But is this a picture of the true God? Well, how should we discover the answer? How has the Lord made Himself known? The surest, most dependable way, is to look into His Word as revealed in both the Old and the New Testaments. So let's do that & see what we can find. Warning: the results may surprise & even distress us!

FIRST then, our God is a HOLY God. What does this mean? Holy means 'set apart' 'pure' 'perfect' 'sinless' 'worthy of worship' (any other suggestions?). I'm writing this on Yom Kippur' or more fully 'Yom HaKippureem' which means Day of the Atonements. It is a very Holy day, a day set apart, in which Jews were not to work and were to 'afflict their souls' = fast! 'On this day a great shofar will be blown, and a small still voice will be heard. The angels will make haste, and be seized with fear and trembling, and will say: "Behold, the day of judgment!"... On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on the Yom Kippur fast it is sealed, how many will pass and how many will be created, who will live and who will die, who in his time and who not in his time... But repentance [teshuva], prayer, and charity [tzedakah] remove the evil of the decree...

For You do not desire a person's death, but rather that he repent and live. Until the day of his death You wait for him; if he repents, You accept him immediately.'

But we are not Jews. But the Book of Hebrews in particular, in Hebrews 9:7 (read it) we see how the writer of this New Testament letter viewed the Old Testament decrees. The inner room in the NIV means the 'Holy of Holies' - there's that word again. This chapter is so worth reading to see how the writer speaks of Jesus as our Great High Priest, as the pure and Holy One who entered the spiritual Most Holy Place (**Hebrews 9:12**) by His own blood, and thus obtained our 'eternal redemption'. These things are so important, so vital for us to understand, all of us, if we are with Him to enter the Most Holy Place and live with Him for evermore. I cannot emphasise this too greatly. It's not by 'being good' that we can hope to gain everlasting Life with Jesus and His Father, because our very best deeds are 'filthy rags' in God's sight. We can never be 'good' enough. Even Jesus replied to a man who called him Good Teacher: 'Why do you call me good; there is none good but God'. But all we like sheep have gone astray and there is none good (Psalm 14:3). I recall that sweet hymn by Francis Ridley Havergal 'There is a green hill' where she says 'There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin; He only could unlock the gate of heaven & let us in'. It's so

good to have leaned these hymns when at our mother's knee to recall them on our death beds and thus seek entrance to that Heavenly Kingdom. Oh let's sing it shall we?

The angels cry 'Holy, holy holy' in Revelation 4:8-11 and we too sing Holy. Sing 'The angels cry holy, the angels cry holy is the Lord' (We see the Lord)

So we have a Holy God - a God who is pure and without sin, set apart from us and the contamination of sin in the world. There is a great gulf fixed between us in the heavenly places and the world below, which has been invaded by that serpent, who coils around all the lower spheres. We let him in back in the Garden of Eden and now the World is His and all in it, subject to death and decay. Only through the blood of Jesus can we escape from the inevitable death of all living things. The ramifications of this are immense.

But the question we asked at the start is 'Was Jesus a Christian'? The answer is no, not as we might interpret the term. He was extremely hard against sin, of hypocrisy, of judgementalism, of selfishness, of ungodliness and of pride. 'Being nice' just didn't wash with Him. The young man who came up asking how to inherit eternal Life was told to go away & sell all that he had. Others were told to leave everything behind; family, fame and fortune, and follow Him. Yet others were to repent and believe - in Him. Not in an airy fairy idea of God, but in a living Saviour who was going to

suffer a cruel death on a Roman Cross - He the Son of God - and then rise again. He had no patience with half heartedness or unbelief. OK you will perhaps tell me that the God who destroyed whole swathes of Gentile Nations in the Old Testament had reformed & decided to be kind and loving. But this kind and loving Saviour, who 'went about doing good' also threatened His own people with destruction if they did not repent and turn to him. And in AD 70 it happened. The Temple which they so honoured, with all its sacrifices & rituals was utterly destroyed and all the people in Jerusalem either killed or transported by the Romans. This was the action of our loving God. And whatever you do, if you still hold to a harmless God, don't open the Book of the Revelation to St John. Forget that it says 'Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it.' And what is written in it? That anyone whose name was not found written in the Book of Life was thrown into the lake of fire Revelation 20:15. Those not written there will include the sexually immoral, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood Revelation 22:15. In Revelation 21:8 it includes the cowardly, the unbelieving....all liars and in Revelation 21:27 'nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful' Now I don't know about you, but I tremble at these words. Even if we can tick 'Not Guilty' to most of these things, we are left with the word 'cowardly'. Selah. And don't forget, these are the words of the Lord Jesus

Christ, the loving, the gentle, the inclusive, the tolerant, the forgiving, the kind. And He concludes 'If anyone adds anything to the words of this book, God will add to Him the plagues described in the book....' Have I made my point?

So we discover a Saviour who declared utter destruction to the city He loved. The city His Father loved. But Father God required belief in & obedience to - His Son and all that He said, eg 'Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, you will certainly not enter the Kingdom of Heaven; (Matthew 5:20) and 'If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell'. We did the Sermon in the Mount a few weeks sago,. Did it not make you tremble? If not maybe we should re-read it. It's not easy reading. And the denunciations of the Pharisees was fearful. And yet they were the godly men if the age. They were endeavouring to keep the Law. Are we ever proud? God HATES and LOATHES the proud; see last week's passage in Amos 6:8. 'God scatters the proud in the imagination of their hearts' sang Mary in Luke (Luke 1:51). If ever we are proud, we are in danger of hell fire. So once again I ask 'Was Jesus a Christian?' using the word as most people would use it today? Ask yourselves. Maybe we had better re-define the word 'Christian'. It does nor mean 'nice' or easy-going'. It might mean 'impatient at injustice or unrighteousness', And what is unrighteous? Why,

those who practice sexual immorality. Sorry to home in on this one, but we are taught now that it's OK for men to have sex together and for women likewise. For men to masquerade as women when God made them separate. God says what we look at can contaminate our souls and yet social media dishes out such filth that the angels look away. Holiness belongs to the Lord and He says 'Be holy even as I am Holy'(Leviticus 11:44–45, 19:2 &1 Peter 1:16).

So 'what should we do?' as those on the Day of Pentecost asked . 'Repent' said Peter.(Acts 2:38) Repent said Jesus. (Matthew 4:17) Repent said the Baptist (Matthew 3:2)

Now if Jesus was all woolly and nice as the liberals would have it, then what is the need for repentance? The gates of Heaven would be flung wide & all would come in. Then purity would be stained and befouled. But, I hear some one say: 'prostitutes and sinners did come in'. Yes, they did, but first they repented. Look again at that wonderful story of Jesus forgiving the adulteress in John 8:3–11. Look carefully at the last verse ('Go now and leave your life of sin'.) We have evidence that Jesus' favourite girlfriend was an adulteress, out of whom came 7 devils (Luke 8:2). The point is surely that the Lord God heals & transforms, so that tax collectors and sinners can enter. Look at Matthew himself, look at Zacchaeus. Lord how wonderful is Your transforming presence! So may we tremble at the curse upon all mankind

but weep with gratitude that Jesus comes and makes us whole. Away then with this anaemic, soft & cuddly Jesus and enter the strong ,the mighty One with eyes of flashing fire and with a sharp double-edged sword issuing from His mouth, who holds the keys of death and Hades. No, He's not the 'Christian' that the world looks for, but He can utterly transform those who hanker after wealth and fame and fortune, and the things and the values of this world. 'Turn your eyes upon Jesus' runs the old song 'look full in His wonderful Face - and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His Glory and grace.' Sound the Shofar - a new Age is heralded - not the New Age of the mystics and the hippies but a New and Glorious Age where there will be no sin, no hatred, no envy, no subterfuge, no rancour, no disputes, no judgementalism, no harshness or backbiting, no ugliness of spirit, no pride, no ambition save that of pleasing and honouring the Lamb. The Lamb who went to His death to save our souls from Hell. So look to this Jesus, not the Jesus the world paints, who hangs around doors, abjectly knocking for entry. We need to open to Him swiftly and eagerly. Let us look at the God that Scripture portrays and come trembling before Him now, beseeching His forgiveness for our hardened hearts.

> **Sing:**
>
> **Lift up your hearts, we lift them Lord to Thee.**

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Watch your tongue!

> **Sing:**
>
> - **SoF 1448: May the mind of Christ my Saviour** (& see **1446** & **1449**))

Did your mother or father ever say this to you when you were little? I don't think mine did, but I hear it often enough on TV dramas. Little children do tend to blurt things out, but then so do we sometimes, and then regret it! I've been reading the Book of Proverbs recently, very slowly, sucking it like the proverbial Murray Mint. It is really "too good to hurry". I have three translations to hand and also Derek Kidner's commentary, which is sometimes very illuminating. It's a message I really need to hear; let's see if you do too. There are so many proverbs about the tongue, the lips, the mouth, but mostly the tongue. The Psalms too are full of warnings, as is James's letter. I am so sorry to ask you to flip through your Bibles yet again, but you will be used to it by now. I'll try and make the references consecutive to help you along. Let's start with the grave warning in James 3:1-12. Let's read it. I can tell you quite honestly that reading this again makes me quail! Please don't consider me a teacher, otherwise I'm in for a very

strict judgement, because I stumble at every hurdle, especially in what I say. I am so privileged to know some good friends, like our brother Ray here, who never seem to speak out of turn. I both envy and admire folk like him — is he blushing? It is a rare gift which I just don't possess. So, as we work through this diatribe by James, remember we're doing it together and I stand more in need of it than any of you.

"No man can tame the tongue", he says. "The tongue is a fire!" I hope we don't curse anyone. I can't recall ever doing so, but do we create havoc with our tongues; do I? James has the same advice as my dear father had, in James 1:19. Read it. My father never said "watch your tongue" exactly, but he did quote a rather tiresome little poem:

> There was a wise owl
> Who sat in an oak;
> The more he saw
> The less he spoke.
> The less he spoke
> The more he heard;
> Wasn't he a wise old bird!

I confess to having been rather irritated by this, because I found folk who sat silent in a corner to be exceedingly boring. But then my dear father had a real conversation stopper

which he added as an attachment to this tedious poem: “Better keep silence and be thought a fool, than open it and leave no shadow of doubt.”

Clearly James would agree, because his conversation stopper is a few lines further down in James 1:26. But it is not only James who has advice on the employment of the tongue. We could start with the Psalms. There are too many to mention, but let’s look at a few consecutively and try to place them under three headings for a start. On the left we can put those which are a warning, with at least two subtitles: malevolent or foolish. I would suggest that gossip might come in the second category. In the middle, those which both warn and encourage. On the right, those which simply encourage, and under this main title might come those uses of the tongue which give joy to others, then those which please God, and also perhaps those which encourage our own souls. There may be some which slip outside these parameters, but that’s inevitable.

So let’s start with the Psalms. What about starting with Psalm 10:7? This man is talking to himself, isn’t he! What category shall this come under? Then to Psalm 12:1ff. The deceitfulness of the flattering tongues is here contrasted with the words of the Lord. Which heading shall we put this under? Any comments? Over the page to Psalm 15, and especially Psalm 15:2-3. Comments? Psalm 17:1, 3b, 4, 10. Now Psalm 34:1: is

this, do you think, an antidote to speaking falsely? Rather than sitting silent, as my dear father recommended, to articulate God's praise! But then Psalm 34:13 is surely a clear warning. Over to Psalm 39:1-2. The psalmist was trying hard to adopt my father's recommendation, but it proved too much for him. Any comments? Then over to Psalm 52:1-5, and especially Psalm 52:5. What do you think God is asked to tear from its tent? Could it be the tongue? In another psalm He is being asked to cut off all flattering lips, so why not do the job thoroughly! Psalm 64:3 and Psalm 64:8. Discuss. Now Psalm 66, and especially Psalm 66:14 and Psalm 66:17. A very different message here. Please comment. Psalm 71:15-16 says very much the same. We could go on to Psalm 119 and Psalm 141, where the psalmist wants the Lord to guard his mouth in Psalm 141:3 and to keep watch over the door of his lips. But I think the message of the Psalms is clear, isn't it. Please say what you think, but to me, the antidote to slander and malicious talk is praise. So that, as James says, sweet and bitter water should not come from the same spring.

Let's turn to Proverbs, which first alerted me to my own predicament. For as well as malicious talk, which King David seemed to be suffering from in great measure, there is loose and thoughtless talk and sheer gossip. Taking them in order, let's look at Proverbs 6:17 and Proverbs 6:19. Right at the start we see that God hates lies and anyone who gives a false witness. So which category? Then a very astute observation in

Proverbs 10:19 brings me up abruptly back to my father, who would undoubtedly have agreed with Proverbs 10:8! But carry on to Proverbs 10:20-21. Now then what? It's a balance, isn't it? We can nourish others with righteous words. There are so many proverbs which say the same. In Proverbs 12, the contrast between healing words and destructive words is very clear. Shall we look at a few verses and place them in their category? Proverbs 12:6-7, Proverbs 12:13-14, and Proverbs 12:18-19. Then Proverbs 13:3. Likewise, in Proverbs 15:1-2 the contrast is clear. Then look at Proverbs 15:4. Discuss. And Proverbs 15:28. Now a genuine question: what do you make of Proverbs 16:1? But I love Proverbs 16:24, don't you? Easy to categorise this verse. If we look at Proverbs 17:28, we can see where my dear father got his thought, so I really can't say anything. It's there in the Word! But I think the previous verse, Proverbs 17:27, is more constructive, don't you? Proverbs 18 has lots of advice: see Proverbs 18:4, Proverbs 18:6-8, Proverbs 18:13 — oh dear, my wife often tells me off for this! — and look at Proverbs 18:21! Life and death. This is so stark, isn't it? Proverbs 18:20 is intriguing too. In Proverbs 21:23, we're back to caution again, whereas in Proverbs 31:26 the amazing wife, whom none could hope to emulate, only speaks with wisdom. We could go on, for there are so many, but surely — and please tell me what you think — the key is this coveted wisdom. Perspicacity, prudence, or whatever you prefer to term it. If we exercise wisdom, then we won't say too much and fall into the pit of brashness. It would be so

easy to see evil talk as coming from an evil heart, but Proverbs makes it clear that very often real evil can be done by sheer thoughtlessness and carelessness and lack of discretion, which has been one of my main failings. I have freely admitted my own faults, and you may wish to admit to yourselves where you fall short. Looking at each one of you, I can't see that any of you fall short in any way, because you are always so kind, thoughtful and sagacious, but you know your own hearts, and so does the Lord.

Words concerning the mouth, the lips and the tongue appear throughout Scripture, not just in James, Psalms and Proverbs. Even young Elihu, in speaking to Job in Job 34:1-2, observes that "the ear tests words as the tongue tastes food". We are surrounded nowadays by so many million words — on radio, TV, in newspapers, social media, in the streets, in bars and meeting places — it is easy to forget that in fact every word is fraught with danger or tinged with delight. That's why poetry is so valuable, because it can distil the deepest thoughts in the most immediate language.

Jesus, of course, has a lot to say about words, the tongue and mouth. See Matthew 12:36-37, Matthew 15:11 and Matthew 15:18, and Matthew 18:18. When I read Matthew 12, I experience a rush of sheer terror. Do you? Is this the last word, for if it is, then we are all sunk without hope. At least I most certainly am. But surely there is forgiveness if we ask

for it; otherwise, why did Jesus die? Matthew 15 is more understandable and gives great cause for thought. Any comments? Finally, Matthew 18:18 is the most perplexing of all. Can our words bind and loose? Discuss! I've hunted some more observations in several of Paul's letters. He is more black and white than Proverbs. In Colossians 3:8 he warns against slander and filthy talk and lies — quite unequivocal. But in Colossians 4:6 he is much more positive and recommends us to season our conversation with salt and be full of grace. I love that. In Titus too, he warns against slander. In Ephesians 4:25, 29, he speaks against falsehood and unwholesome talk and advocates only that which builds up and benefits others. Peter too quotes Psalm 34:12–16 in 1 Peter 3:10–12, which we haven't mentioned earlier. It's worth reading it together.

If we're not punch-drunk after all these gobbets of warning and advice, then we must be pretty thick-skinned. If I send these notes to you, you may want to pursue them in the relative tranquillity of your own homes, but for me my head spins and my heart quails when I consider how careless I have been all my life over what I say. You will be your own judges under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but don't please be too hard on yourselves, because God is above all merciful and gracious and will always be ready with arms of love to

comfort those who would condemn themselves. Repentance is the pathway to forgiveness and is always there for each one of us, and God does not change.

It would be good to pray these things through. Then sing something positive!

Amen

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