

Introducing Bible Basics

Introduction

The aim of the Bible Basics Introductory Studies is to enable you to systematically study the Bible for yourself, by yourself. At the end of the Studies, you will have a clear view of the basic Gospel, which Jesus taught. He commanded His disciples to preach the Gospel to the entire world, and to baptise believers by immersion in water - into His death and resurrection. We hope that by the end of your studies you will be in a position to decide to believe the Gospel and be baptized. At this stage, of course, you are just beginning. Pray, as best you can, for God to open up His word to your understanding. Tell Him about all the issues in your life and try to see how He is guiding you, through His word, seeking to bring you closer to Him.

There are 12 Studies in this introductory course. After this, there are 11 more detailed chapters contained in a 350 page book called "Bible Basics". We will send this to you once you have completed the 12 Studies. All these things are quite free of charge; we will never ask you for money, we promise you this. Neither will we call on you unless you request it. If you would like to meet one of our members for a discussion, please tell us as it may be there will be a representative in your area.

We do truly care for you and want to help you towards a place in God's eternal Kingdom here on the earth, when Jesus returns. We therefore pray for you, and look forward to receiving your answers to the lessons or your comments on them.

HOW TO DO THE COURSE

You will gain the maximum benefit from these Studies by going through them several times and looking up the recommended passages from the Bible.

At the end of each Study there are some multiple-choice questions. Referring again to the notes if you are uncertain of the answers. There is no point in rushing through the Studies and guessing the answers; sufficient information is given to enable you to answer all the questions correctly, which will serve as a good foundation for the more advanced Studies to follow.

When you are sure of your answers, submit them as indicated. Your answers will be forwarded to a personal tutor who will respond to you with comments on your answers.

You are welcome to add extra comments or to ask questions on any Biblical matters. We shall be pleased to correspond with you about these things.

Study 1 - The Bible

The Bible makes great claims. It clearly states that its author is God - the Creator of the universe. It claims to reveal God and His purpose and it speaks with authority. If this claim cannot be upheld, then the Bible is the greatest and most cruel hoax which has ever deluded mankind. If the claims of the Bible can be supported, then we are in possession of the world's greatest treasure.

The Bible, as the true Word of God, contains the key to peace and happiness. It answers the most perplexing questions concerning the meaning and purpose of our existence and the final outcome of the struggle between right and wrong.

LET US LOOK MORE CLOSELY AT ITS CLAIMS

Paul, writing of the Old Testament, says, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Timothy 3 v 16). Every word of the original manuscripts was written under direct Divine guidance. The Apostle Peter stressed the same fact, "For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" or Holy Spirit - Revised Version (2 Peter 1 v 21).

These two apostles claim Divine authority for the writings of the Old Testament, recorded centuries before their own days. This Divine authority is responsible for the complete harmony of teaching revealed in the Bible. The writers were separated by time, education, occupation, experience and social position, yet their writings all combine to form one united Book.

WHY THE BIBLE WAS WRITTEN

The Bible tells us how the human race began and how God's plan of salvation will lead to the final victory of right over wrong and the extermination of every trace of sin and evil. The chief purpose of the Bible is to make known to the condemned human race this way of salvation through Jesus Christ. The Old and New Testaments combine to present Jesus as the only Saviour of mankind.

"These signs are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing ye might have life through his name" (John 20 v 31). In the pages of the Bible we find all the teaching necessary for man's enlightenment, the Divine definitions of right and wrong, and of man's duty to God and to his fellow-men (2 Timothy 3 v 15-17).

Finally, the Bible has been given to tell us, in broad outline, what the future holds, that we might be prepared for the coming of Christ (2 Peter 1 v 19).

THE CONTENTS OF THE BIBLE

The Bible is a collection of books divided into two main sections. The books of the Old Testament were written before the time of Christ and the books of the New Testament after the time of Christ. There are 66 books altogether. You will find a list of them at the front of your Bible. They were written by about 40 different writers over a period of 1,500 years. They were written in a number of different countries - such as Israel, Egypt, Italy and Babylon.

All the books combine in one consistent theme - the theme of the working out of God's purpose with man from the very beginning, recorded in Genesis to the time when "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever" (Revelation 11 v 15).

THE OLD TESTAMENT

The books of the Old Testament fall into four main sections:

(a) THE BOOKS OF MOSES

The first book is called Genesis, which means the beginning. It tells us about God's dealings with the first men on the earth. Then follow Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. They tell how God called Abraham, made a covenant with him and with his descendants, brought them out of Egypt and gave them the land now called Israel.

(b) THE HISTORICAL BOOKS

These, from the Book of Joshua to the Book of Esther, are a record of the history of the Israelites (or Jews) and of God's dealings with them.

(c) THE POETIC BOOKS

The books of Job, the Psalms, the Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs were written in Hebrew (the language of the Israelites) in poetic form. They contain much important teaching about the ways of God and the feelings and duties of man.

THE BOOKS OF THE PROPHETS

The word prophet means seer - one who has insight or visions, not only of future events, but also of God's requirements of man. The long prophetic books of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel are followed by a number of shorter ones.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

(a) THE GOSPEL RECORDS

These are four separate accounts of the life of Christ, written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; each is telling the gospel (the good news) in his own way.

(b) THE BOOK CALLED "THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES"

This was written by Luke and tells what happened after Jesus Christ was risen from the dead. We are told how the first churches were formed as the apostles carried the good news throughout the Roman Empire.

(c) THE LETTERS

These were written by some of the apostles to help the early believers in the small, scattered, young churches.

(d) THE BOOK OF REVELATION

This was the last message of Jesus, given in vision to the Apostle John.

JESUS CHRIST BELIEVED EVERY WORD OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Jesus Christ is the central figure of the Bible plan and when he was born the New Testament did not exist. The Scriptures which he used and studied were the Old Testament. Jesus believed these Scriptures, he based his teaching on them and accepted them as indisputable authority. Look at these passages: John 5 v 46-47; Luke 24 v 27; Luke 24 v 44-48; Matthew 22 v 29; Mark 7 v 6-13.

Jesus speaks of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David and Solomon, and of many other people about whom we read in the Old Testament and bases his teaching on the fact that these people were real and that all of the Old Testament is the Word of God.

THE BIBLE CANNOT BE PROVED FALSE

All the developments of modern thought and technology have combined to establish that the Bible records are true. Many enemies of the Bible, including some very clever men, have tried to prove it wrong, but they have all failed. Since truth cannot contradict itself, we should naturally expect the Word of God to be in harmony with observable scientific knowledge.

A further evidence of the authority of the Bible is the way in which it has been preserved over the centuries. The Bible has triumphantly withstood every effort of man to overthrow it. It has been suppressed and withheld from the common people; whole editions of it have been burned and many books have been written in attempts to disprove it. No other book has been subjected to such continuous and determined opposition: the Bible still stands, immovable and unconquerable.

The great antiquity of the Bible, its preservation and influence upon the human race, are factors which cannot be ignored. The evidences of archaeological discoveries by such people as Rawlinson, Layard, Smith, Woolley and Kenyon, in Egypt, Nineveh, Assyria, Babylon, Ur, Syria, Lebanon and Israel are all striking confirmations of the truth of Bible history. Exhibits in museums all over the world clearly demonstrate this. The inscriptions of nations which fought against Israel confirm the Bible accounts both of events and of ancient customs and local habits. Present-day archaeology continues to add material supporting our reasons for believing the truth of the whole Bible.

Even the criticisms relating to the care taken by the Jewish copyists of the original writings are discounted with the discovery of ancient manuscripts. The remarkable discovery in 1947 of the Dead Sea Scrolls has provided yet more valuable evidence of the accuracy of the Bible. These manuscripts are some of the earliest available, dating back to the second century B.C. Despite their age, the slight variations that do occur are only in respect of spelling and do not affect the doctrine, prophecy or historical facts.

So the work of the archaeologist confirms in a remarkable way the truth and reliability of the Bible and thus, indirectly, that it is the production of Divine inspiration.

PROPHECY PROVES THE BIBLE TRUE

God himself has chosen prophecy as a great proof of His infinite superiority over all other beings (Isaiah 46 v 9-10; Isaiah 42 v 9).

The Bible speaks from time to time of events that would come to pass hundreds of years later. In Matthew 2 it is recorded that the wise men came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?" When Herod asked the chief priests this question, they at once replied, "In Bethlehem of Judaea" because hundreds of years before it had been prophesied in one of the books of the Old Testament (Micah 5 v 2).

In addition to prophecies about Jesus Christ, there are many relating to ancient nations and, in particular, to the Jews. Many of the ancient nations have disappeared from world affairs, but the Bible said that the Jews would survive. The Jewish people still survive today in spite of many efforts to destroy them (Jeremiah 30 v 10-11). If the Bible had been of mere human production,

at any time in history such a declaration could have been found false. The Jews are still with us today with their own state, Israel, and its capital city, Jerusalem, now in their complete control.

The Bible gives us the reasons for these facts. This is a powerful proof that the Bible is Divinely inspired and therefore infallible.

SUMMARY OF SOME OF THE REASONS FOR BELIEVING THE BIBLE TO BE INSPIRED

1. The unity of its message in spite of the number of writers who wrote
2. over a great period of time.
3. Its miraculous preservation.
4. The evidence of the discoveries of the archaeologist.
5. The fulfilment of Bible prophecies - (further examples will be given in later Studies).

CONDITIONS TO BE MET

If we are to understand the Bible, Jesus said we must become teachable as little children, Matthew 11 v 25. We must want to find out for ourselves the truth and wisdom of God's Word (Proverbs 2 v 3-6). We must believe that God will reward us in our search (Hebrews 11 v 6). We must be willing to bring our lives into harmony with God's commandments.

Jesus said, "If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them" (John 13 v 17) and, "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 7 v 21). The Apostle Paul wrote, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2 v 12).

HOW SHALL WE STUDY THE BIBLE?

As with any course of study, regular, planned reading is the most helpful. To begin, follow the suggestions for study contained in this Study. The Bible itself is its own best interpreter. Always consider passages in their context and compare Scripture with Scripture.

As you go through this course, you will see that every basic belief is supported by clear and positive Scripture. With this foundation all apparently 'difficult' or 'contradictory' verses can be explained or harmonized.

A concordance, marginal references or Bible commentaries can sometimes be helpful, but it must be remembered that the compilers of these were not guided by Divine inspiration. If their conclusions contradict the teaching of Scripture, they are in error (Isaiah 8 v 20).

The purpose of this course of Studies is to help you to understand the Bible for yourself, so that you may accept it as it is, the Word of God, offering the hope of everlasting life to all who will hear and obey it.

PASSAGES FOR BIBLE READING

2 Timothy 3; 2 Peter 1; Luke 24; Isaiah 8v20 Acts 28v23-31; Ephesians 4v21-32

Study 2 - God

There are a number of arguments for the existence of God.

THE WATCH ARGUMENT

If we found an old watch on the ground, having never seen a watch before, we might pick it up and examine it. We might open the back and look at the complicated mechanism. We would notice how the tiny wheels worked against each other and turned the hands on the face.

We would know that such an intricate piece of mechanism must have been made. The watch must have been designed; it must have been planned. The watch could not have made itself. The parts could not have come together by accident. The fact that the watch exists is evidence that there must be a designer - there must be a watchmaker.

The universe is made up of millions of stars. The earth has a moon revolving round it. The sun and the planets are part of a marvellously intricate system of which every part is moving exactly along its appointed path. This is much more complicated than any watch. This did not happen by accident. There must be a designer. "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork" (Psalm 19 v 1).

BIBLE EVIDENCE

One of the most powerful arguments for the existence of God is contained in the Bible. The Bible contains many prophecies about the rise and fall of kingdoms and nations; about individuals and about events. In many cases these prophecies were recorded hundreds of years in advance. This is something that man could not do. Only God, who controls all things, could have caused these prophecies to be written. Look at Isaiah 46 v 9-10.

Some of these prophecies will be dealt with in future studies. The purpose of this Study is to explain what God has revealed about Himself in the Bible.

WHAT THE BIBLE TELLS US

God has revealed Himself as the Creator. "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (Genesis 1 v 1). "I have made the earth, and created man upon it: I, even my hands, have stretched out the heavens, and all their host have I commanded" (Isaiah 45 v 12). God has revealed Himself as eternal. He has always been and always will exist.

"Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God" (Psalm 90 v 2). "Thy throne is established of old: thou art from everlasting" (Psalm 93 v 2).

There is only one God. Israel were reminded that the various gods the Egyptians worshipped had no power and were no more than man-made images.

"For all the gods of the people are idols: but the Lord made the heavens" (1 Chronicles 16 v 26). God is all powerful. He knows all that is going on and is present everywhere by the power of His spirit.

"Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off...and art acquainted with all my ways" (Psalm 139 v 2-3).

David in this Psalm says that our minds are too small to understand the greatness of God (verse 6). But if we know that God sees and knows all things it can be a great comfort and a source of strength. "If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me" (Psalm 139 v 9-10).

The Bible tells us that God's ear is always open to hear the cry of His children and God has declared, too, 'I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee' (Hebrews 13 v 5; Joshua 1:5).

THE UNITY OF GOD

The Bible teaching that there is one God is important, particularly as there are many who do not believe this. It is the clear teaching of both Old Testament and New Testament.

Look up these verses - Isaiah 45 v 5; 1 Corinthians 8 v 6 & Ephesians 4 v 6.

The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" Jesus himself emphasised the importance of this Bible doctrine when he said, "This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17 v 3).

THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

Few doctrines are more generally accepted by the Christian world than that concerning the Godhead, known as the doctrine of the Trinity. Roman Catholics, the Greek Church, and almost all denominations of Protestants, however they may differ upon some points, agree on this, and believe that 'the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God, and yet there are not three Gods, but one God'. They further believe that all three are co-equal and co-eternal.

Is this a true doctrine? If so, while we may not understand it, must we accept it? How are we to know? Obviously only by what God has been pleased to reveal in His word. Therefore, to the Bible we go and soon discover that there is no support anywhere in its pages for this popular doctrine, but quite the reverse. The Scriptures always teach the unity of God, not the trinity. The following quotations clearly show this:

"Here, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord" (Deut. 6:4; Mark 12:29).

"I am the Lord, and there is none else, there is no God beside me" (Isa. 45:5).

"To us there is but ONE GOD, the Father, of whom are all things" (1 Cor. 8:6).

These are not by any means isolated passages, but examples of many more might be quoted, all teaching that God is one, not three. The last of the above passages is strikingly significant. Christ had appeared, had died, been raised from the dead and exalted to the Father's right hand, yet Paul says there is ONE GOD! And who is this? The triune God of orthodoxy - Father, Son and Holy Ghost? No! it is THE FATHER. He was the God whom Paul worshipped.

WAS JESUS GOD THE SON?

What, then, of Jesus Christ? Was he not 'God the Son'? In view of the frequent use of this expression today, it is remarkable that such a phrase is not to be found in the Bible. We read of the "Son of God", but not 'God the Son'. The natural inference is that the doctrine involved by that expression is not a scriptural one. The Athanasian Creed says of the Father and Son that they are co-equal and co-eternal. Passing over the remarkable conception that a Father and Son can be co-eternal, what does the Bible say concerning the co-equality? It speaks most

plainly on the matter. Was Christ the equal of the Father when he was here 1900 years ago? Let him answer for himself:

"I can of mine own self do nothing" (John 5:30).

"My doctrine is not mine, but His that sent me" (John 7:16).

"My Father is greater than I" (John 14:28).

The very fact that he was sent by the Father (John 5:24,37) negates the theory of co-equality, whilst his want of knowledge concerning the time of his second coming is an additional evidence against the popular belief, for one cannot imagine the Second Person of the Trinity being ignorant of anything. Not only was there this absence of equality in the past, it is the same now. Ponder the words of Paul when he speaks of the "God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 11:31), even as Jesus himself, after his resurrection, referred to the Father as "My God" (John 20:17). The further fact that "there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5), is another testimony to the same effect.

CHRIST'S FUTURE POSITION

This line of evidence can be carried further. We look forward to the time at the end of Christ's reign on earth of one thousand years. What do we see?

"Then cometh the end, when he (Christ) shall have delivered up the Kingdom to God, even the Father...He must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet...When all things shall be subdued unto him, then shall the Son also himself be subject unto Him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:24-28).

Thus in the past, the present, and the future, high as is the position assigned to Jesus Christ, the Father is supreme, and co-equality is never even suggested. Who, then, is Jesus Christ? The Son of God, born of a virgin mother, as recorded in Matthew and Luke:

"The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall over shadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).

Jesus lived as recorded in the Scriptures, was tempted, suffered, and died, but was raised from the dead by the Father, and exalted to the Father's right hand as High Priest and Mediator. There he will remain until the time when he shall return to the earth to establish the Kingdom of God.

THE LOVE OF GOD

If there is one attribute of the Almighty which shows that His character is different from the gods which have been invented by men, it is the love that He shows.

Think of the love that a parent shows to his children. God shows all that love - and more - to us.

"God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3 v 16).

The work of the Lord Jesus Christ forms the subject of another Study. Man's need of salvation is also dealt with fully later. But the purpose that God has with the earth and with man needs to be outlined here.

It is the clear teaching of the Bible that God intends in the future to change the world, to remove the evils which at present afflict it

GOD'S PLAN FOR THE EARTH

Very early in the history of Israel, God declared, "As truly as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord" (Numbers 14 v 21).

The earth is certainly not filled with the glory of God now. But it will be. This is God's purpose.

The Apostle Paul spoke to the people of Athens and told them that one day the world would be ruled in righteousness by a king appointed by God and that this was guaranteed by His raising the one appointed from the dead.

The world is certainly not ruled in righteousness now. But it will be. When this time comes it will be called the Kingdom of God and Jesus will be the king. God's purpose with the earth is dealt with more fully in the next Study. One of the sure ways in which God has shown His love for man is that He has made known His purpose in the Bible. His love is also shown in the provision of His own son as the centre of that purpose.

THE SPIRIT

A Study about God would not be complete without mentioning two words which are associated with the Almighty and His work. The word 'spirit' is often used in the Bible to mean the power of God, universally present. "Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?" (Psalm 139 v 7). "Uphold me with thy free spirit" (Psalm 51 v 12).

HOLY SPIRIT

The word 'holy' means special, set apart, sacred, consecrated. When we read of the Holy Spirit, the Bible is speaking of the Power of God when used for a particular, special purpose. The Authorised Version of the Bible sometimes has the word for spirit translated as 'Ghost' but the Revised Version used the word Spirit and if we look at some of the places where the words appear the meaning will be clear.

When Mary, the mother of Jesus, was told that she was to have a son who was to be called Jesus, she was told that the Holy Ghost (Holy Spirit) would come upon her and Luke emphasizes the meaning by repeating "the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee" (Luke 1 v 35). Look at the verse. The angel is explaining that the birth of Jesus would be a miracle brought about by God's special power operating upon Mary. Because of this, Jesus would be the Son of God.

WRITING THE BIBLE

We have already looked at a verse in the second letter of Peter which says that "the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" ('Holy Ghost' in the Authorised Version). It was God's special power that caused the prophets to speak and the writers of the scriptures to set down God's Word. They were moved by the power of God.

The word 'spirit' is often a translation of a word in Hebrew (in the Old Testament) or a word in Greek (in the New Testament) that means breath. So when the Spirit of God moved a man, it could be said that "God breathed into him". This meaning behind the word makes some of the passages which speak of the power of God particularly beautiful. This, too, is the reason that

Paul, writing to Timothy, says the scriptures are God-breathed - "all scripture is given by INSPIRATION of God" (2 Timothy 3 v 16).

The power of the Holy Spirit was given to Jesus as the New Testament says. The apostles later were also given this power that enabled them to perform miracles. The last verse in Mark 16 v 20 tells us that the purpose of this was to enable the apostles to confirm the words that they spoke.

Paul speaks of the way in which the gifts of the Holy Spirit were used in the first century. The greatest attribute above all gifts which we should try to cultivate is love. (Read 1 Corinthians 12 v 28-31 then 1 Corinthians 13 v 1-13)

God has shown His love for us in many ways. We can best show our love for Him by trying to live our lives in a way that pleases Him.

SUMMARY OF SOME IMPORTANT POINTS

- There is one God.
- He is the Creator. He is immortal - from everlasting to everlasting.
- God sees and knows all things.
- God is righteous. God is loving.
- God has revealed His purpose in the Bible.
- The power of God is described as His Spirit.
- The scriptures were written by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- Jesus was born as a result of the action of the Holy Spirit upon Mary.
- It is important to our salvation that we should understand the nature of God.

PASSAGES FOR BIBLE READING

Genesis 1; Isaiah 45; Acts 17 (Notice what those at Berea did); Psalm 139; 1 Timothy 6.

Study 3 - God's Plan and Purpose

The love of God has been stressed in the previous Study - His love for the world in giving His only begotten Son. This love which God shows and which we are asked to show in return must not be confused with sentiment or 'softness'.

The Bible emphasizes the righteousness of God and His justice. It was the absolute justice of God as well as His love for man that was the reason that Jesus rose from the dead. Because Jesus did no wrong it was not possible that he should remain dead (Acts 2 v 24). It would not have been right for Jesus to remain in the grave. God raised him from the dead.

In the same way, it is not right that the world should continue to be a place where wickedness flourishes and where so much that is wrong takes place. The Book of Proverbs tells us, "A false balance is abomination to the Lord" (Proverbs 11 v 1). Look at these verses:

"God is angry with the wicked every day" (Psalm 7 v 11).

"The Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thessalonians 1 v 7-8).

This is the side of God's character that is often overlooked. The righteousness of God will not allow wickedness to continue. God is not going to permit the world to be ruled by men who may not set right standards. It is God's purpose that one day the world will be ruled in righteousness by the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 17 v 31). When he is King, many of the problems that man faces today will be solved. This wonderful time is called the Kingdom of God.

Jesus taught his disciples to pray for the Kingdom to come so that God's will would be done on earth even as the angels now obey Him in heaven (Matthew 6 v 10.)

PROPHECIES OF THINGS TO COME.

We find in the Bible the most confident assertions about the future; not just one, nor a mere half-dozen, but scores of prophecies. We find prophecies concerning individuals, concerning powerful nations and weak nations, some of which had, at that time, no existence. There are long-term and short-term prophecies; prophecies of things to come, the like of which had never happened before; of extraordinary experiences which nations would have, experiences without parallel and contrary to all natural expectation. We find all this in the Bible. We discover that without a single exception none of the prophecies has been falsified. What are we to make of this? Could unaided men perform such a feat? They could not. There can be only one conclusion: the men who wrote the Bible received direction from on high.

"For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21).

Do not underestimate the force of Bible prophecy. Peter, in the chapter just quoted, speaks of it as the "more sure word of prophecy" and compares it to a light shining in a dark place (v19). This is a very apt comparison. We look around the world and it seems all confusion, with no apparent meaning or purpose. History seems just a haphazard sequence of events, with no obvious aim, apart from the fleeting ambitions of the men who pass across the world's stage. But a study of the Bible alters all this and demonstrates beyond all doubt that human affairs are under control and are moving forward to a totally unexpected climax - unexpected, that is, by all but the few.

"The Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will" (Dan. 4:32). These words were addressed to Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. He was no fairy-tale figure, but a powerful monarch in the ancient world. In recent times his city, Babylon, has been excavated and proved to have been in reality the immense city of which the Bible speaks. The hundreds of thousands of bricks that have been dug up all bear the name of the proud monarch who ruled the world of his day. Indeed, Nebuchadnezzar might well lay claim to be the first monarch of the world. He it was to whom it was said, "The Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men". But he was told far more than just that.

AN AMAZING VISION

One night, as Nebuchadnezzar lay on his couch, the king wondered what would be the fate of his vast empire after he himself had passed from the scene. 'On whom will my mantle fall? Will the mantle be torn in pieces by jealous rivals?' Such questions must normally go unanswered, for no man can tell what the future holds, but Nebuchadnezzar was given the answer by God. We can read it in the 2nd chapter of the book of Daniel. Please read it through, it is one of the most remarkable chapters in the whole of the Bible.

We are told of a dream in which the answer that he sought was given to Nebuchadnezzar in symbolic form.

It may be asked why Almighty God troubled to satisfy the questioning of a pagan king; why he chose to do so by way of a dream, and why the visionary message was clothed in symbols which the king could not understand, nor even remember on waking.

The following observations may be made in answer, and will serve to introduce the details of the prophecy and its fulfilment:

(i) The importance of Nebuchadnezzar in the purpose of God lay not so much in the greatness of his empire as in the fact that his dominions included the land of Israel, and that the people of Israel were taken as captives to Babylon for 70 years. God's land - God's people - were subject to Nebuchadnezzar's rule.

(ii) The method used to give the information also brought to the forefront the man Daniel, a Jew, the only man who could explain the dream. This underlined the fact that the "God who revealeth secrets" is the God especially of Israel. A vital aspect of God's plan was thus brought home.

(iii) The symbolic style adopted is a most effective way of conveying a great deal of information in a very compressed form. The modern political cartoon is an apt example of the same thing. But the cartoon illuminates events of past and present. Nebuchadnezzar's vision threw a flood of light on the future.

THE VISION'S MEANING

In his dream the king saw what he himself would probably have described as a 'god'. It was the image of a man composed of various metals. An artist's impression of the scene is as follows - golden head, silver breast and arms, bronze belly and thighs, iron legs, feet part iron and part clay. This metallic statue stood erect - until some unseen power directed a stone at its feet. The image crashed, its remains were ground to powder and blown away by the wind, while the stone that had done the damage "became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth" (Dan. 2:35).

What did all this mean? The clear words of Daniel placed the meaning beyond doubt. The image stood for the kingdoms of men in the ages that were to follow. The nations of the known world

were at that time subject to the king of Babylon, who was represented by the golden head. "Thou art this head of gold" (verse 38). Following this there was to be a second, "silver", empire, then a third and a fourth. The fourth kingdom was to be "strong as iron"; but after the strength was to come weakness:

"Whereas thou sawest the feet and toes, part of potters' clay, and part of iron, the kingdom shall be divided..., And as the toes of the feet were part of iron, and part of clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong, and partly broken...they shall not cleave one to another, even as iron is not mixed with clay" (Dan. 2:41-43).

The question that must now be answered is, how do the facts of history compare with this prophecy? The correspondence is perfect - so much so that some have tried to say that the second chapter of Daniel was written after the events it describes. This is sufficient testimony to the accuracy of the prophecy, but is plainly impossible, for the prophecy is still being fulfilled! Copies of the book of Daniel have been found amongst the second century BC Dead Sea Scrolls.

AN OUTLINE OF WORLD HISTORY

Four great empires followed each other. Consult any history book covering the period and you will find described how Babylon fell to the Medes and Persians, a joint empire in which first the Medes and then the Persians took precedence. Their supremacy was ended by Alexander the Great, who founded the Greek Empire. This, in turn, yielded to a stronger power: Rome was unquestionably the strongest and most durable of the four empires.

For centuries Rome held sway. The world had never known anything to compare with the mighty "strong-as-iron" Roman Empire. What power on earth could ever break it or conquer it? No single power could. Rome was not to be superseded. There was not to be another great empire in the line of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome.

First the empire was split in two: Eastern Rome, ruled from Constantinople, and Western Rome, ruled from Rome itself. (It will be remembered that the image Nebuchadnezzar saw had two iron legs.) Later, both halves gave way by degrees to hostile forces from without and decaying processes within, and over the vast area once ruled by Rome a number of independent kingdoms emerged, some strong, some weak. This has been the state of affairs ever since. THERE HAS BEEN NO FIFTH UNDISPUTED EMPIRE IN SUCCESSION TO THE FOUR WE HAVE NAMED, WHOSE DOMINIONS INCLUDED THE LAND OF ISRAEL. Many attempts have been made, but all have failed: Philip 11 of Spain, Napoleon 1, Kaiser Wilhelm 11, Hitler...Today we see the countries of Europe trying to weld themselves together into a united whole. What a task it is proving! (But Europe does not include Israel.) True were the prophet's words: "They shall not cleave one to another, even as iron is not mixed with clay".

Who could have foreseen all this as long as two and a half thousand years ago? Who could have asserted so confidently that there would be four empires, not three, or five, or six? Who, in a few bold strokes, could have delineated the outstanding features of their history, and its sequel with such uncanny accuracy? Could any man? From all that we know of human forecasts, we must answer, No. We note that Daniel disclaimed all credit for his message:

"The great God hath made known to the king what shall come to pass hereafter: and the dream is certain, and the interpretation thereof sure" (Dan. 2:45).

Men and women of all times since who have studied this prophecy have found here solid grounds for confidence in God and His Word. It is a confidence which you, who read these words, certainly should share.

PART OF THE PROPHECY STILL FUTURE

Moreover, the steady, accurate fulfilment of Daniel's words lead us to look with renewed interest at the last stage of the prophecy. What shall we make of that little stone which fell with shattering effect on the feet of the image, grinding it to powder, and then becoming a great world-filling mountain?

If the image represented the kingdom of men, obviously the stone stands for some power external to human rule, which is to establish itself as a world power upon the ruins of human governments. These it will "break in pieces and consume". This is the explanation Daniel gave:-

"And in the days of these kings (i.e. the divided state of the nations) shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people...it shall stand for ever" (Dan. 2:44).

This is one of many promises in the Bible that God has not forsaken the earth. He has devised a plan - the Master Plan - for human salvation, and that plan centres in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thoughtful readers will readily be able to identify the stone "cut out of the mountain without hands" with the one who was born the Saviour of mankind, 'cut out', as it were, of the mountain of humanity, not by human hands, but by the power of God, in the miracle of his birth. Jesus, in fact, spoke of his role as the stone - "the stone which the builders rejected", and he went on, "...whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder" (Matt. 21:42-44).

All the signs indicate that soon the stone will fall with devastating effect on an unsuspecting world. Will you escape the coming destruction?

Will you share in the benefits of the Kingdom of God, which Jesus is coming to set up on the earth?

Jesus alone has power to save.

But before we leave the prophecy of Daniel, let us note that the teaching of the dream of Nebuchadnezzar was elaborated in a vision seen by Daniel himself as recorded in chapter 7 of the book which bears his name. The symbolism is changed and extended in detail using the figures of four beasts to represent the four great empires portrayed in the dream of Nebuchadnezzar. The equivalent of the reference to the Kingdom of God in Daniel 2:44 is given in the words of Daniel 7:27 as follows:

"And the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people of the saints of the most High, whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him".

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

But let not any of our readers think that the only Old Testament prophecies about the coming Kingdom of God are those in the two chapters in the book of Daniel to which we have referred. To illustrate this point we can turn to the book of the prophet Isaiah where details of the coming Kingdom of God are given in plain language i.e. without symbology. Because of all the many

references in the book of this prophet, Isaiah has been referred to as the prophet of the Kingdom. We commend the following quotations to the attention of our readers:

"And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Isaiah 2:2-4).

"Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him" (Isaiah 40:10).

Equally important also are the references to the conditions of salvation. From these we select one from Isaiah (66:2):

"To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word".

DANIEL'S EXPLANATION

This explanation is not the invention of the publishers of this series of Studies. READ Daniel 2. Daniel said:

"Forasmuch as thou sawest that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it brake in pieces the iron, the brass, the clay, the silver, and the gold; the great God hath made known to the king what shall come to pass hereafter: and the dream is certain, and the interpretation thereof sure" (Daniel 2 v 45).

GOD'S KINGDOM

Just as Medo-Persia followed Babylon; just as Rome followed Greece; just as certainly as there has been no fifth universal Empire, so the last part of the prophecy will also be fulfilled.

"In the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed...but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever" (Daniel 2 v 44).

The little stone destroyed the image which represented human rule through the centuries and it grew into a great mountain which filled the earth. The little stone represented the Kingdom of God.

Daniel concluded the prophecy by saying, "the dream is certain and the interpretation thereof sure". This is only one of many prophecies which give us confidence that God's purpose with the earth will be fulfilled.

THE TEACHING OF THE OLD TESTAMENT AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

Find in your Bible these two passages that you looked at in the last Study:

Numbers 14 v 21 and Acts 17 v 31.

When the Kingdom of God is established, there will be divine justice in the way the kingdom is ruled. There will be no oppression and no persecution.

"He shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears: but with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth." (Isaiah 11 v 3-5).

Then the words of Numbers 14 v 21 will be fulfilled just as the angels sang at the birth of Jesus. When Jesus is king over all the earth, there will be "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2 v 14).

The last book of the Bible describes the state of affairs which will exist when God's purpose is fulfilled:

"And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God".

"And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (Revelation 21 v 3-4).

A REAL KINGDOM

Peter was the spokesman for the other disciples when he asked Jesus a question, "We have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?" (Matthew 19 v 27). The reply of Jesus is important. He emphasized that the kingdom he taught was a real kingdom in which his disciples would share:

"Ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters ... shall inherit everlasting life" (Matthew 19 v 28-29).

JESUS WILL COME AGAIN

In order to establish a real kingdom on the earth, Jesus will come again. When he ascended to heaven at the end of his ministry, angels told the disciples:

"This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11)

The return of Jesus to bring about the last stages of God's purpose with the earth is dealt with more fully in later Studies. The teaching of many of the parables of Jesus shows that it is at his return that the righteous will be rewarded. It is, therefore, very important that we are ready for his coming.

SUMMARY

- The Bible emphasizes the righteousness and justice of God as well as his love.
- God does not intend to allow the world to continue in its present state.
- God will interfere in world affairs and divine rule will be established with Jesus as King.

- The outline of world events given in Daniel 2 gives us confidence that the final stages of God's plan will certainly come to pass.
- When Jesus returns to rule over the Kingdom of God, his followers will be rewarded with places in his kingdom, but they need to be ready for his coming.

PASSAGES FOR BIBLE READING

Isaiah 11; Isaiah 35; Matthew 19 & 25; Daniel 2.

Study 4 - Death

A disaster is invariably headline news. Sudden and violent death arouses curiosity; but the subject of 'death' itself is not news nor, strangely enough, does it generate much interest. Yet, in the time that it has taken you to read the previous two sentences, it is estimated that 25-30 people have died (that is, over 6,250 people an hour or 150,000 a day). One day you will be one of them! The chances are not that you will be involved in one of the disasters, which account for relatively few deaths, but that on one otherwise ordinary day your daily routine will cease and the world will carry on without you. This is why a study of the subject of death is of prime importance.

Thoughts of death give rise to the questions, 'What am I?' 'What happens to me when I die?' 'How do I fit in with God's purpose in creation?'

Basically there are three possible attitudes to death:

1. Ignore it
2. Take the view that it is not really what it seems to be
3. Face its stark reality and look for a way of escape.

Let us look more closely at these three attitudes.

1. IGNORE DEATH

This is the attitude of a growing section of those who are influenced by Western culture. The goals of materialism, the philosophy which predominates in Western society, are centred in science. The scientific approach to the problems of life deals with these things which can be measured. Speculations such as 'What happens after death?' do not lend themselves to the scientific method and therefore they are largely ignored.

Many people, dazzled by the bewildering array of marvels which science has produced, dismiss all thoughts of death from their minds as much as possible.

2. THE VIEW THAT DEATH IS NOT REALLY WHAT IT SEEMS TO BE

This is the age-old view taken by the vast majority of the world's religions. Death, it is said, is not the end of life but the gateway to eternity. At the root of the great variety of forms which this belief takes is the idea that man has an 'immortal soul'; that there is something in man which cannot die, but which at death is released from the body and lives on in another form.

But these ideas cannot be proved from experience nor from the religious books of the world which, apart from the Bible (2 Timothy 3 v 16), are only the speculations of minds groping in the dark. The experiments in telepathy and extra-sensory perception may prove that there is more to man than science has yet discovered, but they do not prove that 'something' lives on when the body dies. Man needs a reliable revelation from God, his Creator, on the subject of death.

The Bible is the only book which provides this. It demands that man must.

3. FACE THE STARK REALITY OF DEATH AND LOOK FOR A WAY OF ESCAPE.

NOWHERE IN THE BIBLE CAN BE FOUND THE IDEA THAT MAN HAS AN IMMORTAL SOUL WHICH LIVES ON AFTER DEATH.

This may come as a shock to those who hold orthodox Christian beliefs. But the Bible says, "For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not anything." "There is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest" (Ecclesiastes 9 v 5, 10).

This fact may not be very comforting to contemplate, but it should be a cause for humility and should provoke a realization of man's urgent need for a way of escape.

SALVATION COMMENCES WITH HUMILITY

God has declared, "To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word" (Isaiah 66 v 2).

The description "poor" means that the man recognizes that he has nothing of value while he is mortal. The word "contrite" means humble.

Man is naturally a proud creature. The idea of having an immortal soul appeals to his inborn pride. But if we want the whole truth, we do well to cast aside all preconceived ideas, however flattering, and to consider carefully what God has revealed about man's natural condition.

THE NATURE OF MAN

The Bible goes to the very root of this vital subject. It tells how, in the beginning of human existence, death came about. The record of the first human beings, Adam and Eve, is no myth! Consider the deep significance of the facts recorded in the opening chapter of the Bible.

"The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Genesis 2 v 7).

Adam's body was made from the elements which form the basis of all matter. These elements were shaped by the all-powerful Creator into the marvellous complexity of the human body, with all its delicate and interrelated organs. In principle the same marvel occurs today in the development of a baby in the womb.

Adam's body of dust was given life from God who "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" and what otherwise would have been a lifeless body "became a living soul".

THE SOUL

Life is a mysterious, indefinable, but readily recognizable quality imparted to dead matter. There is no evidence to suggest that life can exist independently of the body. The Bible reveals and experience shows the 'body' and 'life' are interdependent and together constitute a "living soul" or 'creature'. The word 'soul' is widely applied in the Bible both to man and to the animal creation. It is translated, 'mind', 'beast', 'man', 'creature', but it is never connected in any way with the idea of immortality.

A LIVING SOUL

The statement in Genesis 2 v 7: "And man became a living soul", means that man became a living creature along with all the other creatures God had created.

See Ecclesiastes 3 vs. 19-20: "For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no pre-eminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again."

The word "soul" means "creature". The soul is the man. The soul cannot live on separately from man or animal. The verses quoted show that man is entirely dependent upon God for his life. If God withdraws the breath, or spirit, of life from a man, he becomes a dead creature. It is essential to understand this, as many Christians hold the view that man has an immortal soul that lives on after death. This is not taught in the Bible. This was, in fact, the serpent's lie in the garden of Eden. He said to Eve, "Ye shall not surely die" - a direct contradiction of what God had said to Adam and Eve. Ecclesiastes 12 v 7 proves man's dependence upon God for his existence: "Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it." It does not prove that man goes to heaven when he dies. See John 3 v 13 and note in particular the words, "And no man hath ascended up to heaven." Man dies because of sin: "...the soul that sinneth, it shall die." And in Romans 3 v 23 we read, "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." Therefore it follows that all die and become unconscious until the resurrection. 1 Corinthians chapter 15 deals with the hope of the resurrection in some detail.

MAN - A CREATURE TO GIVE GOD PLEASURE

The purpose of man's creation was, as with that of all creation, to give God pleasure. "Thou has created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created" (Revelation 4 v 11). Unlike the animal creation, man was given free will to obey or to disobey, so that he could exercise a certain degree of choice over his behaviour. We can appreciate how much more pleasure man could give God by using his free will to please God and not himself. It is a pleasure which, on a lower scale, parents gain from children who voluntarily obey and respect them.

MAN'S FAILURE

To test man's response to the use of his free will, God gave a simple test to Adam and Eve. They were told:

"Of every tree ... thou mayest freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2 v 16-17).

Man failed and so brought upon himself the sentence of death. Adam and Eve were tempted by the serpent's suggestion that they would be as gods, knowing good and evil, and because the fruit looked tempting and good to eat. In this way their pride and lust overcame them. These two characteristics have formed the basis of human behaviour ever since. Note carefully the words of the serpent tempting Eve, "Ye shall not surely die" (Genesis 3 v 4).

This was a lie, a denial of God's word, the lie which has formed the basis of man-made religions ever since.

MAN'S CONDEMNATION

Adam and Eve were subjected to the just condemnation of God. The words of the sentence pronounced upon them are significant for they give us the basic definition of death.

"Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Genesis 3 v 19).

That is, when a man dies he ceases to exist and decomposes into the elements of which he was made. "His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish" (Psalm 146 v 4).

Death is a punishment for disobedience. After God had pronounced this sentence, He set a guard to prevent man from eating of the tree of life, "lest he ... live for ever" (Genesis 3 v 22).

SIN

Death is a punishment for sin. "The soul that sinneth, it shall die" (Ezekiel 18 v 4).

There is a simple logic in this statement. SIN BRINGS DEATH. It is therefore of the utmost importance to find out what 'sin' is if we are to find a way to escape eternal death.

Sin is the disbelief of God's Word and disobedience to His will. Its effects are universal.

"All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3 v 23).

Adam and Eve have passed on this fatal tendency to all their descendants. This flaw in man constitutes 'human nature' or what the Bible calls 'the flesh', or 'the carnal mind'.

It can take many aspects, "The works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulation's, wrath, strife, sedition's, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like" (Galatians 5 v 19-21).

These are the natural consequences of the way of life upon which Adam and Eve embarked six thousand years ago. Obstinate disregard for God's way has brought the world to its present troubled state.

THE ONLY HOPE

In Study 2 some of God's characteristics were examined. Some of man's have now been briefly considered. The obvious and startling contrast is expressed by God in these words:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55 v 8-9).

It is clear then not only why man dies but why he must die. God is just and His justice cannot permit sinners to live for ever. But two of God's many attributes are His mercy and His forgiveness.

"There is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared" (Psalm 130 v 4).

There is a vital need for God's forgiveness, because man cannot stop sinning. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves" (1 John 1 v 8).

The Bible describes in detail God's way - the only way to be set free from the vice-like grip of sin and death. The Way, in a phrase, is 'through faith'. The faith which God requires is a very special quality. It is defined as "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11 v 1).

Faith is not blind credulity or belief in the absurd. It is complete trust in God and the firm belief that He really means to carry out what He has promised, even if its fulfilment appears to be an impossibility. Our faith then has to be demonstrated by obedience to God's commands. The eleventh chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews describes many practical examples of faith. Foremost among these is the faith shown by Abraham. "He believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness" (Genesis 15 v 6).

His faith was then shown by his obedience to God. Read James 2 v 17-26.

Thus faith and obedience can, in God's mercy, secure the forgiveness of our sins and, in consequence, death also can be overcome. THIS IS THE ONLY HOPE MAN HAS OF ATTAINING IMMORTALITY. Eternal life is, in truth, a gift.

"The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6 v 23).

The way in which this has been made possible by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is dealt with in a later Study. Eternal life is to be given at a future time when there will be a resurrection of the dead. "Many of them that sleep (that is, who are dead) in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life" (Daniel 12 v 2). Then those who are worthy of this precious gift will be changed into immortal beings. The resurrection of the dead may sound incredible but it is one of those things which God requires us to believe. We know that all things are possible with God.

The resurrection will occur when Jesus Christ returns to the earth. "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven...and the dead in Christ shall rise first" (1 Thessalonians 4 v 16).

Some of the signs which tell us that these momentous events are very near will be explained in Study 9. We need to be ready for that day.

SUMMARY

- Death is the end of life, not the gateway to eternity.
- Salvation begins with humility.
- Death is caused by sin.
- Sin is disbelief of God's Word and disobedience to His will.
- Man cannot stop sinning.
- Man can obtain forgiveness by belief in God's Word and obedience to His will.
- Faith is belief of God's Word and is shown by obedience to it.
- Eternal life is the gift of God, to be given to His faithful children.
- Eternal life will be given at the resurrection, when Jesus Christ returns to the earth; this is man's only hope of obtaining immortality.

PASSAGES FOR BIBLE READING

Genesis 2 and 3; Psalms 49 and 146; Ecclesiastes 9; Romans 5 and 6; 1 Corinthians 15.

Study 5 - The Promises of God

Study 4 outlined, from the Bible, why man dies, the nature of death and the only hope of salvation from an eternal grave. In Study 5, by considering some of God's promises, we shall gain a greater understanding of the development of the scriptural revelation concerning that salvation.

A PROMISE OF DELIVERANCE

In the beginning, after the disobedience of Adam and Eve, in the curses that God pronounced in consequence of man's sin, a short but wonderful promise provided a ray of hope. It comes in a verse that is not easy to understand:

"The Lord God said unto the serpent ... I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Genesis 3 v 14-15).

A full explanation of this promise is outside the scope of this Study and will be dealt with in 'Bible Basics', but, as we gain a greater knowledge of God's plan of salvation, it is clear that here there is the first promise that sin would ultimately be overcome by one of Eve's descendants. Sin would be dealt a mortal blow but the descendant who did this would only be wounded temporarily (in figurative language - a wound in the head and a wound in the heel). It is a promise of the coming Saviour, and the Bible leaves no room for doubt that this Saviour is Jesus Christ to whom all the promises of God point.

GOD'S PROMISE IN EDEN

The serpent, because of the part it had played in Adam and Eve's transgression of God's law, became the symbol for sin. Jesus used the same term for his enemies, addressing the Pharisees with the words, "Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers." The bruising in the head, a fatal wound to a serpent, promises the utter destruction of sin and death. The seed of the woman is the destroyer, and in carrying out this work receives a bruise in the heel, a wound from which there can be recovery.

A careful reading of the Bible will show that this parable of the seed of the woman speaks of the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, in which he gained the victory over sin and death and has paved the way to everlasting life for all who believe in him.

A clue to the identity of the seed of the woman is given in the words, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."

This was quoted in the message of the angel to Joseph telling him that his espoused wife Mary was to "bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus; for he shall save his people from their sins. Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet", and then follows the quotation from Isaiah 7. The Apostle Paul comments, "When the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law."

By Jesus' triumph over sin and death, the serpent (sin) was bruised in the head, i.e. utterly destroyed, as far as Christ was concerned; in the process he received, by his death on the cross and his short stay in the tomb, a bruise in the heel, as the prophet Isaiah had foretold, "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities." The first stage of God's plan of redemption was thus completed. But Christ was only the firstfruits. There is to be the harvest in two further stages which will accomplish the abolition of sin and death completely.

The second stage will be completed when Christ returns to reward his friends - who will be those who have done whatsoever he has commanded them. These he will raise from the dead, and will bestow on them eternal life, to be enjoyed on the earth as rulers with Christ over the nations who submit to him at his coming, this stage lasting a thousand years.

The third and final stage will be at the end of the thousand years, when there will be a final judgment and sin and death will be completely destroyed. "Christ must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death." As unbelief brought death, so belief in the Gospel and obedience in baptism and continuance in well doing can bring everlasting life.

THE UNFOLDING PLAN OF GOD

NOAH

As the descendants of Adam and Eve increased, the tendency to sin, which they had inherited from their wayward parents, began to show itself. Genesis chapter 6 records: "God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6 v 5).

Such was the state of mankind that "It repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart" (Genesis 6 v 6).

Noah was the only man with whom God was pleased (see Genesis 6 v 8-9). God determined to make a fresh start with His creation and to use Noah in this purpose. "And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth" (Genesis 6 v 13).

THE FLOOD

God chose to flood the earth so that all air-breathing creatures, including man, would be drowned. The Genesis record of the Flood is considered by many to be a mythical story. But if we examine it carefully we shall find that there is much scientific evidence to support the truth of the Bible record. The Bible uses the account of the Flood to teach powerful moral lessons. The life of Noah stands out as a shining example of faith in contrast with the unbelief of his age.

GOD'S PROMISE

The Almighty at this time declared that He would never again destroy the earth with a flood. God has a purpose with the earth and God promised that for all time the seasons would follow in their turn and that day and night would succeed each other without interruption in this way again. Look at Genesis 8 v 21-22.

FEW ARE SAVED

A further lesson taught by this record is the Bible truth that it is only relatively few who are prepared to believe God and consequently few who will be saved. This principle, so vividly displayed in the account of the Flood (1 Peter 3 v 20), applies also to the far greater salvation from eternal death. Jesus Christ said:

"Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few" (Matthew 7 v 13-14 Revised Standard Version).

This, and many other Bible examples and statements, casts doubts upon world religions which claim the adherence of millions of 'believers'. The Bible teaches that salvation from eternal death is a highly individual matter, and that few have been, and are, prepared to accept the challenging requirements which God demands - the hard, narrow way of faith.

ABRAHAM

Abraham is an outstanding example of a man who was prepared to accept and successfully endure many rigorous tests because of his faith in God's word.

ARCHAEOLOGY BRINGS THE BIBLE TO LIFE

Abraham lived about 2,000 BC in an ancient city called Ur, which was situated near the head of the Persian Gulf. The site of Ur has been excavated by archaeologists in recent times. Their discoveries show that the city was part of a highly advanced civilisation capable of building large houses, palaces and temples and of producing exquisite works of art. Archaeology aids the study of the Bible by giving us a vivid picture of bygone ages. It certainly aids the appreciation of the greatness of Abraham's faith, because God commanded him: "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee" (Genesis 12 v 1). From the archaeological evidence we know that God was asking Abraham to leave behind a life of comparative ease and security to face the dangers of the unknown, in which God alone would be his guide. Abraham, unlike Adam and Eve, believed and obeyed.

"By faith Abraham, when he was called ... obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went" (Hebrews 11 v 8).

THE PROMISES TO ABRAHAM

Abraham's faith was founded upon promises of blessing which accompanied God's command. He realised that when God, the All-powerful and All-wise Creator, makes promises, then they are certain to be fulfilled. God said to him:

"I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: and I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 12 v 2-3).

Throughout Abraham's long life these promises were repeated many times, and each time something was added to the original promise. For the purpose of this Study we will consider the most significant aspects of the promises under the following headings:

1. Abraham's descendants to possess the land of Canaan.
2. Abraham's descendants to become a great nation.
3. Through one of Abraham's descendants all nations to be blessed

1. ABRAHAM'S DESCENDANTS TO POSSESS THE LAND OF CANAAN

The land to which God eventually led Abraham was called Canaan in ancient times. It is an area which at the present day roughly coincides with the modern states of Lebanon, Israel, Syria and Jordan at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea (see Genesis 15 v 18). When Abraham reached Canaan God said to him, "Unto thy seed will I give this land" (Genesis 12 v 7).

The promise was repeated later, "For all the land which thou seest, (Canaan) to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever" (Genesis 13 v 15).

Note particularly the addition of the words "to thee" and "for ever." If it were not for these two important factors, we might understand the promise as referring to the conquest and possession of Canaan by the Israelites in ancient times as recorded in the book of Joshua. This was, however, only a partial fulfilment because, first, the promise was to Abraham, as well as his descendants, and, secondly, possession was to be enjoyed for ever.

On the first point, the Bible reveals that while in Canaan, Abraham was like a Bedouin of modern times and that when his wife died he had to buy a piece of land in which to bury her. Finally he died, not having received the promised inheritance of the land (Acts 7 v 2-5).

On the second point, it is clear that neither Abraham, or his descendants, the nation of Israel, who have spent a great part of their national existence exiled from Canaan, have obtained possession of it for ever.

THE RESURRECTION PROVIDES THE ANSWER

Clearly then, the complete fulfilment of this promise must still be future. It requires no lesser event than the resurrection of Abraham and of his true descendants, whom the Bible defines as those who are like Abraham in showing faith and obedience to God's commands. After the resurrection they, as immortal beings, will take possession of Canaan for ever (Matthew 8 v 11). These facts will become clearer as the other promises are considered.

2. ABRAHAM'S DESCENDANTS TO BECOME A GREAT NATION

This promise is found throughout the record of Abraham's life, and has, to a large extent, been fulfilled as the Bible shows (Genesis 12 v 2; Genesis 13 v 16; Genesis 15 v 5; Genesis 22 v 17).

The Book of Genesis records that Abraham's son Isaac and his grandson Jacob (whose name was changed to Israel) became the original ancestors of the nation of Israel. They lived in Canaan until Jacob, in the time of famine, took his family into Egypt. The book of Exodus tells how Jacob's descendants increased into a nation of more than two million and became enslaved by the Egyptians. About 1,500 BC God sent Moses to free them and lead them to Canaan. The book of Joshua, Moses' successor, tells how the twelve tribes of Israel conquered Canaan. Later books of the Bible describe how Israel developed until, about 1,000 BC it became a great and prosperous kingdom, during the reigns of David and Solomon.

THE NEW TESTAMENT EXPLAINS THE PROMISE

The Bible shows that after the death of Solomon, Israel declined and was eventually exiled from Canaan because the people were, generally speaking, faithless and disobedient to God (Deuteronomy 28 v 15-68). It is in the New Testament that we find a wonderful exposition of the promise to Abraham. In the letter to the Romans the apostle Paul makes it clear that "they are not all Israel, which are of Israel: neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children" (Romans 9 v 6-7).

This introduces an important principle briefly referred to in the consideration of the first promise. The great nation which was to be descended from Abraham was not to be composed of faithless natural descendants but of those who showed a similar faith to Abraham. In each generation they have been few, but when they are raised from the dead, when Jesus returns to the earth, they will be gathered together into one great nation. Then Abraham will see his

immortal descendants, praising God for their salvation, forming "a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindred's, and people, and tongues" (Revelation 7 v 9). Thus the promise will be fulfilled in a far more wonderful way than it was in the past.

3. THROUGH ONE OF ABRAHAM'S DESCENDANTS ALL NATIONS TO BE BLESSED

However, mankind has not yet received the greatest of all blessings with which this promise is concerned - the deliverance from the universal curse of sin and death. The Bible reveals that there is a time coming when, "All the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord" (Numbers 14 v 21).

There is little room for God's glory while man fills the earth with violence and oppression and while sin and death remain. A great change is obviously necessary to bring about this wonderful time of blessing, which we read of in many Bible prophecies (Psalm 72; Isaiah 32). However great the change, its realisation is certain! This is the message of the gospel (good news) which is taught throughout the Bible. Few realise that the promise made to Abraham 2,000 years before Christ, is the foundation of the gospel!

"And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen (nations) through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed" (Galatians 3 v 8).

JESUS CHRIST - ABRAHAM'S DESCENDANT

The central figure of the gospel and therefore of the promises to Abraham is Jesus Christ. He is pre-eminently the descendant of Abraham. The New Testament opens with these words, "The book of the generation of Jesus Christ...the son of Abraham" (Matthew 1 v 1).

It goes on with a genealogy which traces Jesus' descent from Abraham and this theme is found throughout the New Testament. Paul points out in his letter to the Galatians that one particular descendant is referred to in the promise and that this one is Jesus: "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ" (Galatians 3 v 16).

Jesus is revealed as more than just a natural son of Abraham; in the same letter it is stated that "they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham" (Galatians 3 v 7).

When we remember the Bible definition of faith as belief and obedience to God (the very opposite of sin), it is clear that Jesus was the greatest of all Abraham's many sons. He alone of all the human race could truly say to his adversaries without fear of contradiction, "Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?" (John 8 v 46 NIV). The supreme message of the New Testament is that Jesus by his faith overcame sin and thus "abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Timothy 1 v 10).

THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO ALL NATIONS

In Old Testament times the message of salvation (the gospel) was the privileged possession of the nation of Israel, but they failed to respond to the demands of faithful obedience to God. Then Jesus came and sent his apostles to preach the gospel of salvation to every nation (Mark 16 v 15).

Many see this as the fulfilment of God's promise that all nations should be blessed in Jesus Christ, Abraham's descendant. It was, however, only a step, although a great one, in God's

unfolding plan to fill the earth with His glory. Jesus knew that relatively few would accept this wonderful message, because it involves entering the narrow gateway of faith; and now, 2,000 years later, the preaching of the gospel has not brought about the blessing of all nations.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD ON EARTH

Nevertheless this glorious time is coming! Jesus Christ will return to the earth to raise all who are responsible, including those who have "put on Christ" and who therefore have become heirs of the promises to Abraham (Galatians 3 v 27-29).

At that time the blessing of Abraham will come upon all nations through his descendant Jesus Christ (Gal. 3 v 14). Jesus will be king over all the earth and the Kingdom of God will be established, ushering in a time of blessing such as the world has never seen. For this all Christians are taught to pray to God: "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6 v 10).

SUMMARY

- A promise of ultimate deliverance from sin and death was made immediately after Adam and Eve's fall.
- God's plan of salvation is revealed in the promises He made to the faithful.
- The record of the Flood demonstrates that few will be saved.
- The findings of archaeology confirm the accuracy of the Bible.
- God made great promises to Abraham because of his faith.
- None of these promises has been completely fulfilled.
- The promises point to Jesus Christ, who overcame sin and death.
- Jesus Christ can save from eternal death all those who, like Abraham, believe and obey God.
- The promises will be fulfilled when Jesus returns to the earth to establish the Kingdom of God.
- The Kingdom of God will bring a time of blessing to the earth, which will then be filled with God's glory.

PASSAGES FOR BIBLE READING

Genesis 6, 12, 13, 15, 17, 22; Deuteronomy 28; Psalm 72; Isaiah 32 John 8; Acts 7; Romans 4; Galatians 3; Hebrews 11.

Study 6 - The Lord Jesus Christ

This Study will consider the Lord Jesus Christ - the centre of the purpose of God. "Thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1 v 21). 'Christ' is really a title and means 'anointed', therefore specially chosen. Jesus was THE CHRIST just as John was spoken of as THE BAPTIST.

GOD'S PURPOSE IN THE BEGINNING

In the last Study it was shown that God planned in the very beginning, in Eden, to provide a Saviour - one who would overcome the power of sin. The Study showed that the one who would bring such blessing upon the human race would be in the line of Abraham. Mary recognised that her son was the one promised and in her Song of Rejoicing she sang,

"My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour... He hath holpen his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy; as he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever" (Luke 1 v 46-47, 54-55).

OTHER PROMISES

The prophet Daniel spoke of the time when the Messiah would appear. The prophet Micah wrote of the place of his birth. Matthew records the visit of the wise men to Herod. Notice how many times Matthew records that events happen in fulfilment of the words of the Old Testament prophets (Matthew 1 v 22; Matthew 2 v 5 & 15).

It was God's purpose from the beginning to send Jesus and, when the right time came, God's purpose was put into effect. John wrote, "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth" (John 1 v 14).

WHY DID JESUS COME?

A well-known verse quoted before in these Studies says, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3 v 16).

Jesus was given to the world by God in a very real sense. The angel Gabriel had appeared to Mary to tell her she was to have a son. Mary asked how this was possible as she was a virgin. The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1 v 35). This, too, had been the subject of prophecy as Matthew records (Matthew 1 v 22-23).

SACRIFICE

You may know that in Old Testament times, animals were sacrificed as a continual reminder of the consequence of sin and of a way of deliverance. The man who offered, recognised that death was the result of sin, and sometimes he had to associate himself with the death of the animal as a sign that he recognised this principle (Leviticus 1 v 3-4). Paul wrote, "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6 v 23).

In the Letter to the Hebrews, three points about sacrifices are made very clearly:

1. The sacrifices in Old Testament times provided a reminder of the principle that sin brings death - a principle established in the beginning (Hebrews 10 v 3).
2. As the animals had done no wrong, they only represented the teaching, "For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect" (Hebrews 10 v 1).
3. The sacrifice of animals could never take away sin. "For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins" (Hebrews 10 v 4).

The Bible makes it clear that what the sacrifice of animals could never do, Jesus was able to by giving his life as a perfect sacrifice:

"But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God" (Hebrews 10 v 12).

A NEW BEGINNING

The Bible shows that as Adam brought sin and, therefore, death into the world by his disobedience, so Jesus by his perfect life, "brought life and immortality to light" (2 Timothy 1 v 10).

Because Jesus lived a perfect life, when he died it was "not possible" that he should remain dead (Acts 2 v 24). God raised him from the dead.

The contrast between the effect of Adam's disobedience and the effect of the obedience of Jesus is referred to many times: "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous." "That as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 5 v 12, 19, 21).

As we follow the pattern set by Adam, so we can be related to the pattern set by Jesus. We can be related to the life he came to bring: "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15 v 22).

FAITH NEEDED

Study 4 explained that man naturally is mortal and dies and that faith is needed to relate him to the life that God has offered. That Study pointed out that this has only been made possible by the work of Jesus:

"The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6 v 23).

So the salvation that God offers is conditional, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish ..." (John 3 v 16). This is why the Son of God was called Jesus: "He shall save his people from their sins" THE WORK OF JESUS NOW

After his resurrection Jesus ascended to heaven. At his ascension, two angels declared he would return again:

"This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1 v 11).

Peter said that Jesus would remain in heaven until the "restitution of all things" (Acts 3 v 19-21).

Jesus will return to fulfil the rest of God's purpose in him. Meanwhile, he is a mediator - one who is in between God and man. He is described as a High Priest who can intercede for us to the Almighty:

"There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2 v 5).

The Letter to the Hebrews explains that because Jesus lived his life on earth and was made in every way "like unto his brethren" (Hebrews 2 v 17) he can understand how we feel and can be sympathetic to our needs:

"For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4 v 15-16).

SUMMARY

- Jesus was born by the action of the Holy Spirit upon the virgin Mary. He was, therefore, the Son of God.
- The name 'Jesus' means 'Saviour', and it was the purpose of God from the beginning to provide a way of escape from the natural consequences of man's sin.
- The wages of sin is death. The sacrifice of animals provided a regular reminder of this principle, but could never "take away sins".
- Jesus provided the perfect sacrifice.
- Jesus is now in heaven where he is able to be a merciful High Priest because he understands from his own experiences.
- God has promised to send Jesus Christ back to the earth to complete His purpose in him when he comes to be King.

PASSAGES FOR BIBLE READING

Matthew 1 v 18-25; Luke 1 v 26-38; Luke 2; Matthew 2; John 1 v 1-14; Romans 5

Study 7 - The Promises of God

God promised Abraham that in him and his seed (descendant) all families of the earth would be blessed. Study 5 showed that the one descendant who would bring blessing to the earth was Jesus. This is the subject of clear teaching in the New Testament (Galatians 3 v 16).

Abraham is used as an example of faith, and we are told that if we want to show our faith we must live our lives as Abraham did, trusting God and being obedient to His will.

The nation of Israel, who descended from Abraham, were slaves in Egypt. They were led out of Egypt by Moses after ten terrible plagues had forced the Egyptians to recognize that there was a God in heaven who was in control of world affairs. The Book of Exodus (the name means 'departure') tells us about these events.

At last the nation of Israel settled in the land of Canaan where Abraham had lived. Their first king was Saul, and the second was David, who wrote many of the Psalms.

THE PROMISE TO DAVID

In the Psalms David says that God had made a special promise to him. "The Lord hath sworn in truth unto David; he will not turn from it; Of the fruit of thy body will I set upon thy throne" (Psalm 132 v 11).

David, when his kingdom was established and the nation was at peace, wanted to build a temple, or a house of worship, for God. The prophet Nathan was sent to David to tell him that although God did not want him to build a house, God would establish David's royal house, and one in his royal line would rule over his kingdom for ever.

"And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build an house for my name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever. And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever" (2 Samuel 7 v 12-13 & 16.).

There are three important points in these verses:

1. The promise did not refer to Solomon, David's son, because God said that the "throne of his kingdom" would be established for ever. Although Solomon was noted for his riches and for his wisdom, he certainly did not reign for ever. In verse 14 Nathan the prophet tells David that God would be the father of this great king who would come in his line. "I will be his father, and he shall be my son" (2 Samuel 7 v 14).
2. The king would rule on David's throne (2 Samuel 7 v 12).
3. God declares that He will bring it to pass (2 Samuel 7 v 12).

THE TEACHING OF THE PROPHETS

The same points are emphasized throughout the Bible. Read the following passage from the book of the prophet Isaiah which is often quoted at Christmas time and see the same three points.

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting

Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this" (Isaiah 9 v 6-7).

The same points are stressed:

1. "Of his government ... there shall be no end."
2. "Upon the throne of David and upon his kingdom."
3. "The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this".

JESUS WAS THE ONE PROMISED

There is no doubt as to who the great king in the line of David will be.

The angel Gabriel appeared to Mary before the birth of Jesus and told her, "He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end" (Luke 1 v 32-33).

Notice the same three points again -

1. The kingdom would be established for ever.
2. He would rule on David's throne.
3. God would bring it to pass.

MARY'S SONG OF REJOICING

Later in the same chapter Luke records a wonderful song of rejoicing in which Mary praised God for His promises. A remarkable feature of it is that although the angel told Mary that the child would be born to fulfil the promise God made to David, Mary thanked God for the promise that He had made to Abraham. She must have realized by her understanding of the purpose of God that both of these promises would be fulfilled in the same individual.

"He hath holpen his servant Israel...as he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever" (Luke 1 v 54-55).

THE KINGDOM

There can be no doubt that the kingdom which Jesus came to proclaim was a real kingdom on the earth. He would be the king and his followers would also have positions of rulership. Jesus told his disciples "When the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matthew 19 v 28). It was the purpose of God in the beginning to fill the earth with His glory and with peace:

"As truly as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord" (Numbers 14 v 21).

This will happen when Jesus returns to the earth as King.

One of the main points that Peter made in his address on the Day of Pentecost was that Jesus was the great descendant of David that God had promised. Peter referred to the Psalm we have

already quoted to show that David looked forward to the establishment of the Kingdom with Christ as king:

"Men and brethren, let me freely speak unto you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his sepulchre is with us unto this day. Therefore being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne" (Acts 2 v 29-30).

The apostle also explained that the resurrection of Jesus was a sure sign that the promise God had made to David would be fulfilled. "This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses" (Acts 2 v 32).

Peter said that David understood that the time would come when the Almighty would say to the Lord Jesus Christ, "Sit thou on my right hand, until I make thy foes thy footstool". The apostle then said, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2 v 34-36).

GOD'S GUARANTEE

Paul summed up the wonderful hope which the Bible offers when he was speaking to the people of Athens:

"He hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead" (Acts 17 v 31).

SUMMARY

- In the Bible God has revealed His purpose with the earth.
- Abraham and David were told by God that the one through whom this purpose would be fulfilled would be in their line.
- Jesus was the one promised.
- He will rule the world in righteousness when the kingdom of God is established.
- This hope, based on the foundation of Old Testament teaching, was contained clearly in the message of Jesus and the apostles.

PASSAGES FOR BIBLE READING

Isaiah 11; Acts 2; Romans 4; Isaiah 35; Psalm 132; Luke 19

Study 8 - The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

The word RESURRECTION means 'rising up from the dead'. It is translated from the Greek word 'anastasis' in the New Testament which means 'rising up' or 'standing again'.

The resurrection of Jesus from the grave is an undeniable fact of history. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the focal point of the whole purpose of God with the human race. The Christian faith is built round it, Christianity exists upon the basis of Christ's resurrection from the dead. This was the driving force in the lives of the disciples in the 1st century AD.

MAIN TOPIC OF THE APOSTLES' TEACHING

When the apostles chose another to take the place of Judas, they chose one, Matthias, who they said must be "a witness with us of his (Christ's) resurrection" (Acts 1 v 22).

The apostles were imprisoned because "they taught the people, and preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead" (Acts 4 v 2).

Paul was put on trial over the question of, "the hope and resurrection of the dead" (Acts 23 v 6; Acts 24 v 21).

The letters of the New Testament are full of teaching about the resurrection of Jesus and its importance for all of us. This was emphasized by the apostle Paul when he said:

"If Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain ... ye are yet in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15 v 14 & 17).

WHY DID GOD RAISE JESUS?

Earlier Studies have shown the work of Jesus as a sacrifice for sin (Hebrews 9 v 26). Study 4 explained how Adam brought sin and death to mankind by his disobedience to God's commands. In contrast, Jesus kept all God's commandments and lived a perfect life. Study 6 dealt with this. The death of Jesus, however, could have no force at all as an effective sacrifice, if he had not been raised from the dead. Jesus, "made of a woman, made under the law," (Galatians 4 v 4) came under the same condemnation of death that we have inherited from Adam. He personally was free from sin, therefore death could not hold him, "death hath no more dominion over him" (Romans 6 v 9).

GOD'S LOVE AND JUSTICE

The righteous principles of God could not allow such a man, who had perfectly kept His laws, to remain subject to the law of sin and death. The apostle Peter tells us,

"God raised him to life again, setting him free from the pangs of death, because it could not be that death should keep him in its grip" (Acts 2 v 24 NEB).

Study 3 showed how it was through the absolute justice of God as well as through His love for man that Jesus rose from the dead:

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3 v 16).

WAS RESURRECTION A NEW BELIEF IN THE FIRST CENTURY AD?

We learn from the Bible that a rising again from the dead was the hope of the faithful in the ages before the time of Jesus. This is why Jesus said, "Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad" (John 8 v 56).

Peter quoted the words of David, King of Israel: "I foresaw the Lord always before my face... therefore did my heart rejoice, and my tongue was glad; moreover also my flesh shall rest in hope...He (David) seeing this before, spake of the resurrection of Christ" (Acts 2 v 25-26 & 31 compare Psalm 16 v 8-11).

David also said, "As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness" (Psalm 17 v 15).

THE RESURRECTION - A FULFILMENT OF GOD'S PROMISES

As Study 5 pointed out, Abraham and David expected to be raised from the dead to enjoy the promises of God. They were not alone in this hope.

Job said, "I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God" (Job 19 v 25-26).

Isaiah said, "Thy dead men shall live, together with my dead body shall they arise. Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust ... and the earth shall cast out the dead"(Isaiah 26 v 19).

Daniel was told that "Many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake" and that he personally would rest in the sleep of death and "stand in thy lot at the end of the days" (Daniel 12 v 2 & 13).

The apostle Paul confirmed that this was the hope of those before Jesus:

"I continue unto this day ... saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come: that Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people" (Acts 26 v 22-23).

CHRIST THE FIRST TO RISE TO EVERLASTING LIFE

The Bible clearly shows that Jesus was the first to rise from the dead to immortality. Paul wrote,

"Our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Timothy 1 v 10).

IS RESURRECTION THE ONLY HOPE OF IMMORTALITY?

The life and immortality that Jesus has brought to light is the hope of a rising up from the dead, to stand on the earth.

Peter declared plainly that, "David is not ascended into the heavens" (Acts 2 v 34). We have seen that this was not David's hope. God had promised that he would see Christ sitting on his (David's) throne in Jerusalem (Acts 2:30).

As Paul explained in his speech in Athens, referred to in Study 7, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead was an assurance from God that Christ would rule the world in righteousness, at an appointed date in the future (Acts 17 v 31).

RESURRECTION - THE TRUE HOPE

Martha was a follower of Jesus. We can see clearly her hope of a future life. When her brother Lazarus died, Jesus said to her, "Thy brother shall rise again" "Martha replied, I know that he (Lazarus) shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day". Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live" (John 11 v 23-25).

WILL ALL BE RAISED?

The scriptures tell us that, "The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6 v 23).

Those who do not seek God or who have no desire to serve Him, or understand His purpose through Jesus Christ, will not obtain the gift of God. The Bible plainly teaches that,

"The man that wandereth out of the way of understanding shall remain in the congregation of the dead" (Proverbs 21 v 16).

"Man that is in honour, and understandeth not, is like the beasts that perish" (Psalm 49 v 20).

"They are dead, they shall not live; they are deceased, they shall not rise" (Isaiah 26 v 14).

PROPER UNDERSTANDING NECESSARY?

In contrast to those statements, Jesus gives us hope by saying,

"This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17 v 3).

If we want to become related to God's purpose we must have understanding. We must know the true God and possess a proper understanding of His Word. With this knowledge and a belief of the truth of these matters, we can take the next step of BAPTISM into Christ which will be dealt with fully in Study 11. Paul points out the importance of baptism to the true believer who wants to obtain resurrection:

"Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection" (Romans 6 v 3-5).

CHRIST THE FIRST TO RISE - OTHERS TO FOLLOW

Jesus was the first to rise from the dead to immortality. We read again, "Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept" (asleep in the grave [1 Corinthians 15 v 20]).

The first fruits are the first results of the harvest, a sign of many more good things to come. Paul uses this figure of the harvest to show the order of resurrection: "But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming" (1 Corinthians 15 v 23).

SECOND COMING OF CHRIST TO RAISE THE DEAD

The second coming of Christ is bound up with the resurrection in the last days. Paul wrote of, "Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick (living) and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom" (2 Timothy 4 v 1).

Paul also wrote:

"But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep (in death), that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent (go before) them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first" (1 Thessalonians 4 v 13-16).

RESURRECTION AND JUDGMENT

When Daniel was told that, "many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake", he was also told that, "some" would "awake" to "everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Daniel 12 v 2). This speaks of the assembling together of the raised, and those living at the return of Christ, for judgment and of the possibility of rejection by Jesus. Jesus taught the same:

"Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation" (John 5 v 28-29).

All responsible people (those with knowledge) must appear at the judgment seat of Jesus Christ. Those who trust in God, with a knowledge of His love and mercy, who have tried to please Him and follow the example of His beloved Son will, in the mercy of God, receive the gift of eternal life in that day.

Jesus speaks to all of us when he says, "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live" (John 11 v 25).

SUMMARY

- The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a fact.
- The resurrection of Jesus is the main teaching in the New Testament.
- Jesus was raised because of his perfect character. Therefore the righteousness and justice of God brought him out of the grave.
- The hope of resurrection has been the hope of all the faithful before and after the first advent of Jesus.
- Eternal life is not ours now, for there would be no need for God to promise it, or for it to be a matter for hope.
- Man has no natural immortality; if he had, Christ had no need to be a sacrifice to bring salvation to mankind.
- Resurrection after death is the only hope of obtaining immortality.
- Not all will be raised; those without understanding will remain in the grave.
- Understanding, belief and baptism are necessary to be related to Christ and resurrection.

- Christ was the first to rise to immortality; we can be like him if we follow his example.
- The resurrection and judgment will take place when Jesus returns to the earth.

PASSAGES FOR BIBLE READING

Psalms 49; Mark 16; 1 Corinthians 15; Isaiah 26; Acts 26; John 11

Study 9 - The Return of Jesus Christ

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is an historical fact on which the hope of all mankind depends. As certain as the fact of the resurrection, is God's promise that His Son will return to the earth. After Christ was raised from the dead he ascended to heaven and angels gave his disciples this assurance:

"This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1 v 11).

THE PURPOSE OF CHRIST'S RETURN

In the Lord's prayer Jesus taught his followers to pray for the establishment of God's kingdom, on earth:

"Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6 v 10).

At this time the words of David will be fulfilled:

"The righteous shall inherit the land, and dwell therein for ever" (Psalm 37 v 29).

Christ is to return to the earth to establish God's kingdom by overthrowing the present human systems of government. He will rid the world of wickedness and fill the earth with God's glory as the divine solution to all its present problems.

For this reason the apostle Paul, in the first century AD, encouraged Titus to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts and rather to "Live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ" (Titus 2 vs. 12-13).

WHEN WILL CHRIST RETURN?

God, from the beginning, appointed a particular day when Christ would return to judge the earth. Paul spoke of this:

"Because he (God) hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead" (Acts 17 v 31).

Christ, in his preaching, made it quite clear that, although God's plan was made, and events would follow a set pattern, not even he knew the exact time of his return. In Mark chapter 13 Christ told his hearers of his return and gave them some indications as to the events which must precede it, after which he said,

"Then shall they see the Son of man coming in the clouds, with great power and glory" (Mark 13 v 26).

"But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father" (Mark 13 v 32).

CHRIST TO RETURN UNEXPECTEDLY LIKE A THIEF

Most people today find the idea of Christ's returning to the earth amusing, not to be considered seriously in view of the apparent permanence of our existence. The apostle Peter warned that men would think like this:

"There shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, and saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation" (2 Peter 3 vs. 3-4).

So we are given the assurance that God is not slow in fulfilling His promises, but that this world-shattering event will take place at the time that He has appointed for it:

"But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night" (2 Peter 3 v 10).

Read the first 10 verses of 2 Peter chapter 3 to follow the full argument put forward by the apostle.

As Christ pointed out, the precise hour of his coming is not known to anyone except God, and cannot be worked out from the scriptures.

"For in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh" (Matthew 24 v 44).

This teaches us that faith is required by believers in Christ's return, for only God knows the specific day when this will happen. To those who are not looking for this event, his appearance will be as unexpected as that of a thief in the night.

IS THERE NO INDICATION WHEN CHRIST WILL RETURN?

The disciples were interested in this question and asked Christ privately whilst they sat on the Mount of Olives, "Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?" (Matthew 24 v 3).

Christ's reply to this question, and many other passages of Bible prophecy, clearly show the likely time period when this return will be fulfilled. These signs of the times have been given to encourage Christ's followers, that they may be ready for him.

SIGNS OF CHRIST'S RETURN

1. THE SIGN OF NOAH

In his answer, Jesus reminded his disciples of the Bible account of the days before the flood, as similar circumstances would be seen in the days just before his return:

"As things were in Noah's days, so will they be when the Son of Man comes. In the days before the flood they ate and drank and married, until the day that Noah went into the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away. That is how it will be when the Son of Man comes" (Matthew 24 vs. 37-39 [NEB]).

For the background to the times of Noah, read Genesis chapter 6 where it shows plainly why God destroyed mankind, and saved only eight people. Such wickedness was evident in the thoughts and deeds of men and God saw that "the earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence" (Genesis 6 v 11).

The press, internet, radio and television daily reflect the similarity between the violent, Godless world of Noah and the violent, Godless world of our times. They reflect in many instances the apostle Paul's description of men in the last days prior to Christ's return:

"The final age of this world is to be a time of troubles. Men will love nothing but money and self; they will be arrogant, boastful, and abusive; with no respect for parents, no gratitude, no piety, no natural affection; they will be implacable in their hatreds, scandalmongers, intemperate and

fierce, strangers to all goodness, traitors, adventurers, swollen with self-importance. They will be men who put pleasure in the place of God" (2 Timothy 3 vs. 1-5 [NEB]).

A careful consideration of each descriptive word of the Bible prophecy will show that these descriptions fit our age more than any before.

2. THE JEWISH SIGN

Jesus also spoke a short parable as an additional sign to tell his disciples when he would return;

"Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh:" Matthew 24 vs. 32.

The prophet Jeremiah gives us a clue to the identification of the fig tree as he uses the same symbol in chapter 24 when he refers to the people of Israel (read also Joel chapter 1v7). We must look, then, for the symbolic fig tree, Israel, "tender and putting forth leaves".

This refers to the regathering of the Jews from all parts of the earth where they were scattered by God (Luke 21 v 24; Deuteronomy 28 vs. 25,32-34,37,64-66). Many people today are witnessing the Jewish people in Israel "putting forth leaves" as they continue to build their country since its establishment as a State in 1948 and the capture of Jerusalem in 1967.

The same event was prophesied by Ezekiel in the first 14 verses of chapter 37. This time the Jewish nation is likened to a collection of bones. The prophet saw a valley of dry bones:

"These bones are the whole house of Israel: behold, they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost" (Ezekiel 37 v 11).

Then the bones come together, are covered with flesh; breath is put into Israel and they live,

"And shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land."

"I will take the children of Israel from among the heathen, whither they be gone, and will gather them on every side, and bring them into their own land" (Ezekiel 37 vs. 14 & 21).

So we see in figurative language Israel being brought into the land as promised by God, a young nation sprouting forth as a budding tree. What follows this regathering?

"I will make a covenant of peace with them...and will set my sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore" (Ezekiel 37 v 26).

The Jewish sign heralds the establishment of God's kingdom.

The exciting aspect of this prophecy is that we can see God's hand at work as the Jews return and build up their land, and we are warned, "When ye shall see all these things, know that it (margin 'he') is near, even at the doors" (Matthew 24 v 33).

JESUS' PROPHECY CONCERNING ISRAEL

Jesus made very clear predictions both as to the immediate future of his nation, and as to its long-term destiny. The leaders of the nation failed to see the hand of their God stretched out to them. He had sent them His only son as their Messiah, and they demanded his death. Just prior to his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus and his disciples stood on the mount overlooking Jerusalem, and the beauty of the temple caused the disciples to exclaim in wonder; but Jesus saw only the punishment to be meted out to his people:

"As for these things which ye behold...there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down." "And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled" (Luke 21 vs. 6 and 24).

This prophecy received fulfilment in AD 70 when the Roman Empire sent an army, under Titus, to put down a rebellion. The city of Jerusalem was destroyed and the ground was actually ploughed over. Deuteronomy chapter 28 was further fulfilled, and the scattering of the nation was complete. No Jew was permitted to remain in the land. In AD 135 a decree was issued expelling the surviving Jews from Judaea. The name of Jerusalem was changed to Aelia Capitolina.

There followed centuries of downtreading for the land and its people. The 'Diaspora', or dispersion, became fact. The Jewish prisoners captured in innumerable wars were scattered about the world as slaves. Those fortunate enough to escape this fate became merchants and traders. The Jew was everywhere except in Israel - so thoroughly did God fulfil His word. Settlements were to be found throughout the world, but God had decreed no comfort for them - and persecution and anti-Semitism became their way of life. For 2,000 years the land and its people were very effectively crushed and a miracle would be needed to revive them. But that miracle had been promised by God through many of His prophets. In 1967 the Israelis captured Jerusalem, and for the first time in 2,000 years Jerusalem came under Israeli control

ISRAEL REBORN

Nothing could be clearer than the prophecy spoken through Jeremiah:

"...Behold, I will gather them out of all countries, whither I have driven them in mind anger, and in my fury, and in great wrath; and I will bring them again unto this place, and I will cause them to dwell safely" (Jeremiah 32 v 37).

God had said He would give them a new heart and spirit to bring about the revival, and the amazing truth is the way the nation seemed to gather inspired strength and courage. For 2,000 years of captivity the Jews had been weak and unresisting. God had taken away their will and their ability to fight. But when the time came for the prophecies concerning their restoration to their land to be fulfilled, then this new spirit came into the nation. They waged a war to ensure they took possession of their land - and Britain, the occupying power, was only too pleased to hand over. Then, against all odds, the nation became a fighting machine to defeat the combined strength of the Arabs and Egyptians. 650,000 Jews faced 40,000,000 Arabs and, as of old, God led His people to victory. So what the prophets had declared would happen, came to pass. Ezekiel chapters 36 and 37 contain a most remarkable prophecy which establishes beyond all doubt the overriding control of God in the affairs of nations. The prophet was given a vision in which God foretold the regathering of the nation back to their land, there to become a great army:

"For I will take you from among the heather (nations), and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land...A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you...and ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers" (Ezekiel 36 vs. 24,26,28).

Then, in the vision of the valley full of dry bones that became a valley filled with a mighty army, God gave further reassurance: "They stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army...I shall

place you in your own land...I will take the children of Israel...and bring them into their own land" (Ezekiel 37 vs. 10,14,21).

Since 1948 nearly six million Jews have returned to Israel - the next major event will be Christ's return to establish his Kingdom in Israel and thence throughout the whole world.

3. THE SIGN OF NEBUCHADNEZZAR'S DREAM

Study 3 dealt fully with this dream. The interpretation by Daniel showed the course of world history. After the break-up of the Roman Empire we find ourselves today represented by the feet of the image, with nations some strong (iron) and some weak (clay), not able to join firmly together. Daniel continued:

"In the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom" (Daniel 2 v 44).

This shows that there will be no further world empire, until the final event which will complete the fulfilment of Daniel's prophecy. Paul, the apostle, confident in the absolute fulfilment of the prophecy up to his time, was able to encourage the believers at Colosse because he knew of the certainty of Christ's return:

"When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory" (Colossians 3 v 4).

4. THE SIGN OF GENERAL WORLD UNREST

Christ also told the disciples of the time just before his return when there would be general unrest and fear among people because of the trouble facing all nations:

"There shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken" (Luke 21 vs. 25-26).

Christ is speaking in figurative language of ruling powers, with the sea and waves representing people (e.g. Isaiah 57 v 20). This sign gives a picture of the peoples of the earth roaring, using their collective voice to exert power over events and situations, and to shake the security of rulers. The prevailing mood is of distress among the nations, which makes thoughtful people fearful of the outcome of all the world's disturbances and problems.

Surely the picture presented could be the caption for a survey of the current world situation!

Once again, Christ tells us that when world events are like those described by him, we must expect his return: "then shall they see the Son of man coming" (Luke 21 v 27).

The establishment of the Kingdom of God upon earth lies at the centre of His purpose, as we have seen. It requires the return of Jesus Christ to the earth to fulfil all the promises of God. Jesus himself spoke - in prophecy - about the events which would precede his return to earth.

5. THE COMING WORLD CONFLICT

We saw in what has become known as the 'Mount Olivet Prophecy', Jesus first warned of the overthrow of the Jewish state. In fulfilment of prophecy, the Romans ruled over the land of promise, and the Jews were a vassal state. Jesus knew that before long the Romans would execute the plan of God and disperse the people of God throughout all the world:

"They shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations; and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled. And there shall be signs..." (Luke 21 v 24).

The disciples of Jesus had asked about the signs of his coming and of the end of the world, or age. Jesus set out very clearly the signs which would prevail and which would lead up to his return in "power and great glory":

"And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of man coming with power and great glory (Luke 21 vs. 25-27).

The Jews' return to their own land and the restoration of Israel as a home for the Jewish people in 1948 is a fulfilment of prophecy already remarked upon earlier in this Study. In the decades that have followed there have indeed been signs in "the heavens" and among those symbols of the ruling powers of the nations, the sun, moon and stars. There is perplexity as to how the problems of the world can be solved by human government. Wars are continuous - they never cease and there seems no way out. This, said Jesus, would be another sign of his impending return. The prophets of Israel have long spoken of the circumstances affecting Israel and ALL nations, just prior to the coming of Christ, in times known as "the last days" or "the latter days". Consider the following example:

"Son of man, set thy face against Gog, the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal, and prophesy against him, and say, Thus saith the Lord GOD..." (Ezekiel 38 vs. 2,3).

Careful reading of this chapter leaves us in no doubt that this group of nations - including Persia (Iran), Ethiopia and Libya (Ezekiel 38 v 5) - are to be compelled by God to attack the land of Israel. For example, in verse 8 we read this:

"...in the LATTER YEARS thou shalt come into the land that is brought back from the sword, and is gathered out of many people, against the mountains of Israel, which have been always waste: but it is brought forth out of the nations..." (Ezekiel 38 v 8).

This federation of nations is centred upon a power which is situated to the north of the Holy Land, and it is interesting to note that Israel, both in the past and at the present time, has needed to look carefully to the security of her NORTHERN borders. The Syrians, of course, are a current threat in that direction, just as the Assyrians were some 2,500 years ago.

At that time God, speaking through the prophet Ezekiel concerning this 'northern' aggressor, said:

"And thou shalt come from thy place out of the NORTH parts, thou and many people with thee...And thou shalt come up against my people of Israel, as a cloud to cover the land; it shall be IN THE LATTER DAYS" (Ezekiel 38 vs. 15,16).

The identity of this federation to be gathered against Israel in the very near future is not difficult to assess. Gog, Magog, Meshech and Tubal are acknowledged by students of ancient history to be descendants of one of the sons of Noah, namely Japheth.

Persia (Iran), Ethiopia and Libya, for the most part antagonistic to Israel, are well known to us today, and the prophet Ezekiel, speaking with the authority of the Most High God, tells us they

will be joined with the descendants of Japheth, the 'LATTER DAY' occupiers of the "north parts". Directly to the north of Israel is Syria, one of Israel's many Arab enemies. Further north, through Armenia, we come to the troubled, now largely independent, states of the former USSR. We note with interest the high Islamic following that there is among this group of nations.

Now it would be foolish for students of prophecy to dogmatize on the outcome of Bible prophecy. God alone has the right to determine the outcome of His plan for the world, a plan, remember, which will be consummated in the establishment of God's Kingdom upon earth - the Millennium, or thousand year reign of Christ upon earth. If we are true students of God's Word, then we are also watchmen. Christ's warning to his followers was that they should watch! - "Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come" (Matthew 24 v 42).

As we survey the world scene, what do we see? We see Israel, returned to their land in fulfilment of such prophecies as Ezekiel chapter 37. We see hostility towards Israel on every border. The Arab (Islamic) nations are truly confederate against God's people, and have tried to push them into the sea:

"They have said, Come, and let us cut them off from being a nation; that the name of Israel may be no more in remembrance" (Psalm 83 v 4).

A more detailed study of Psalm 83 will repay the earnest student of Biblical prophecy, particularly the modern identity of the nations mentioned in this intriguing Psalm. They are the old enemies of Israel's early history and they find a territorial identity with the current enemies of God's people

The northern aggressor of Ezekiel chapter 38, in association with the clearly identified nations who currently have no time for "the land brought back from the sword", are amongst those whom GOD will bring in a final conflict against Jerusalem:

"For I will gather all nations against Jerusalem to battle" (Zechariah 14 v 2).

"For behold in those days and at that time, when I shall bring again the captivity of Judah and Jerusalem, I will also gather all nations, and will bring them down into the valley of Jehoshaphat..." (Joel 3 vs. 1,2).

We are left in no doubt that this is the day when God will intervene in man's affairs once again and will cause HIS will to be done on earth:

"Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision: for the day of the LORD is near..." (Joel 3 v 14).

"The LORD also shall roar out of Zion, and utter his voice from Jerusalem; and the heavens and the earth shall shake: but the LORD will be the hope of his people, and the strength of the children of Israel. So shall ye know that I am the LORD your God dwelling in Zion, my holy mountain: then shall Jerusalem be holy, and there shall no strangers pass through her any more" (Joel 3:16-7)

These, then, are the times which will see the return of Christ, the future ruler of the earth. These prophecies, and particularly those of Joel and Zechariah, together with the great prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, present to us GOD'S PLAN. As watchmen, we seek to analyse every step forward in this plan. For every step FORWARD brings even closer that day of final conflict, known in the Bible as ARMAGEDDON, resulting, in the words of Zechariah:

"...the LORD shall be king over all the earth: in that day shall there be one LORD, and his name one" (Zechariah 14 v 9).

CHRIST'S RETURN A FACT

The Signs of the Times make up an unmistakable pattern of the shape of things to come. The preliminaries for God's intervention are almost complete and Jesus Christ is at the door, ready to take the world by surprise.

Seeing the signs and knowing their meaning, can we afford to remain unmoved by them? We can be like those who foolishly close their minds to these things and do nothing. The return of Christ will come to such like a thief in the night.

Alternatively, we can regard the signs and heed the warning before it is too late. Jesus said, "when these things BEGIN TO COME TO PASS, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh" (Luke 21 v 28). Instead of being downcast by present conditions, we can look up and see the need for redemption, through Christ our Redeemer. We can be wise and seek sanctuary in the Christ-Ark, before the "great day of God Almighty" engulfs the wicked.

It is in our power to treat this subject as of great importance, remembering that it involves our life and destiny. The Bible offers us the hope of eternal life and a place in God's Kingdom - a Kingdom where Christ will reign in righteousness and peace; not a 'reign of grace in the heart', but a literal kingdom upon earth.

The wise will reach this conclusion:

- (a) that the coming of Christ is a vital matter
- (b) that the warning from God's Word should not be ignored
- (c) that our present life gives no lasting satisfaction
- (d) that belief of the Gospel (good news) of the Kingdom of God and baptism into the saving name of Christ are imperative.

It is for us, individually, to decide if we desire to "abide the day of his (Christ's) coming", when he shall "discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not" (Malachi 3:18).

SUMMARY

- The return of Jesus Christ is a fact.
- This return was promised by the angels at his ascension.
- Jesus is to return to establish God's kingdom on earth.
- Only God knows the exact day appointed for Christ's return.
- Clear signs indicate Christ's return is imminent.
- The days of Noah are comparable to our own.
- The restoration of the Jews in Israel is a living sign.
- We live in the final phase of Nebuchadnezzar's vision.
- World unrest precedes Christ's return.
- The hostility of Israel's neighbours.

PASSAGES FOR BIBLE READING

Ezekiel 37; Ezekiel 38; Acts 3; Acts 1 vs. 1-12; Luke 21; 1 Thessalonians; 2 Thessalonians 1

Study 10 - The Gospel

In this Study we shall bring together many of the facts which we have learnt in earlier Studies.

The English word "gospel" comes from two old English words, "god spell" meaning "good news", or, as it is sometimes used in the New Testament, "glad tidings". This is a good translation of the Greek word 'enaggelion'.

THE CENTRE OF CHRIST'S TEACHING

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all tell us that Jesus went throughout the land of Israel preaching the gospel - the good news - of his coming kingdom.

"And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the Kingdom." (Matthew 9 v 35)

"Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God." (Mark 1 v 14)

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor." (Luke 4 v 18)

"God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." (John 3 v 16)

"Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth." (John 18 v 37)

THE DISCIPLES TAUGHT THE GOSPEL

When Jesus had told the good news to the disciples, he sent them out to teach others. "And he sent them to preach the kingdom of God, and to heal the sick." (Luke 9 v 2)

After his death and resurrection, Jesus told the disciples to go on with the same work, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." (Mark 16 v 15-16)

From these last words we see that we need to know, believe and obey the gospel in order to receive salvation.

THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

Because of this, the apostle Paul wrote,

"I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek." (Romans 1 v 16)

We need to understand clearly the good news that Jesus and the apostles taught. Paul wrote again,

"Though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed." (Galatians 1 v 8)

WHAT DID THE DISCIPLES UNDERSTAND BY 'THE GOSPEL'?

The disciples went out preaching the good news of the kingdom of God before the crucifixion of Jesus. What did this 'good news' mean to them? When two of them spoke to Jesus after his resurrection, they told him,

"Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, which was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people...We trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel." (Luke 24 v 19 & 21)

Just before Jesus ascended to heaven, "they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1 v 6)

They expected Jesus to set up the kingdom of God there and then. It was such good news that they wanted it immediately. Jesus told them that the time had not yet come. "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power." (Acts 1 v 7)

GOD'S PROMISES

As the disciples watched Jesus ascending, two angels stood by them and told them,

"This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven." (Acts 1 v 11)

This promise is the repeated theme of the apostles' teaching as we read it in the Acts of the Apostles, and their letters. They looked for the return of Jesus to fulfil all of the promises which God had made concerning His kingdom.

For, although the word 'gospel' is only to be found in the New Testament, the good news of the kingdom of God is the basis of all God's promises from the beginning.

THE GOSPEL IN EDEN

In the beginning, after Adam and Eve had disobeyed God's commandment, we remember His words to the serpent,

"I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel." (Genesis 3 v 15)

This was the good news, that the power of sin and death would eventually be destroyed. This was the work that Jesus came to do. Look up Hebrews 2 v 14-15.

THE GOSPEL TO ABRAHAM

We have studied God's promises to Abraham. The apostle Paul wrote, "The scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed." (Galatians 3 v 8)

When Jesus returns, he will raise Abraham from the dead, and all God's promises to Abraham will be fulfilled in every detail.

These promises were confirmed to Isaac and to Jacob, and they too will be raised from the dead at the return of Jesus, and will receive places of honour in God's kingdom. (Matthew 8 v 11)

THE GOSPEL TO DAVID

The good news of God's kingdom was told to David through the prophet Nathan - read 2 Samuel 7 v 12-16.

"I will set up thy seed ... I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever ... thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever".

Although the Israelites later forsook God, He did not forget His promises. We find them over and over again in the Psalms of David, and in the writings of the prophets. God, through the prophet Ezekiel, spoke to Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, "I will overturn, overturn, overturn it (the kingdom): and it shall be no more, until he come whose right it is; and I will give it him". (Ezekiel 21 v 27)

When Jesus came, the angel renewed the promise to Mary,

"He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest;: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end." (Luke 1 v 32-33)

THE GOSPEL TO US

This is the good news of God's kingdom that comes to us in the Bible message. Jesus will soon be back on earth to set up God's kingdom. Read Matthew 25. The three parables in this chapter teach us to watch, to work, to reflect the love of Christ if we too would have a part in God's Kingdom.

1. Parable of the ten virgins Those who prepared themselves and kept a close watch were invited into the marriage feast but those whose oil had run out found the door closed.
2. Parable of the talents The use of our abilities will be recognized by Jesus and he will reward those who have used their knowledge and opportunities while they could.
3. Parable of shepherd dividing the sheep The Good Shepherd recognizes his sheep and understands their efforts. He knows those who have tried to help their fellows and accepts such assistance as being done to him.

WHAT MUST WE DO?

We have to repent, to change our ways, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel." (Mark 1 v 15)

"Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord; and he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you." (Acts 3 v 19-20)

"And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent: because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained." (Acts 17 v 30-31)

We need to follow Jesus - to change our hearts and minds - to be reborn through baptism, and our next study will teach us what that means. This, too, is necessary,

"For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ ... And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." (Galatians 3 v 27-29)

This is the gospel, the good news of the kingdom of God. We, like the disciples, long for it to be fulfilled soon. This is why we pray, as Jesus taught his followers, "Thy Kingdom come".

"Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so in earth. Give us day by day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins; for we also

forgive every one that is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." (Luke 11 v 2-4)

SUMMARY

- The word 'gospel' means 'good news'.
- The good news of the coming kingdom of God was the main theme of the teaching of Jesus and his disciples.
- Knowledge, belief of, and obedience to, the gospel are necessary to gain salvation.
- The gospel is taught throughout the Scriptures, in Old and New Testaments.
- The good news is still preached to us.
- We can gain a place in God's kingdom if we hear, understand and obey the gospel message.
- We have to make a positive response to the call of the gospel just as Abraham and all the faithful servants of God in the past did.

PASSAGES FOR BIBLE READING

2 Samuel 7; Psalm 96; Isaiah 55; Acts 9; Psalm 1

Study 11 - Baptism

In our last Study we saw that belief and understanding of the gospel, followed by obedience to God's commands, were essential to salvation. We read the words of Jesus after his resurrection, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." (Mark 16 v 15-16) We see at once, then, that Scriptural baptism can only take place when a man or a woman is able to understand and obey the word of God. Then it is an essential condition of our acceptance with God.

We have the example of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, who was a 'good' man by any standard (see Acts 10 v 2), yet God told him to send for Peter, "he shall tell thee what thou oughtest to do." (Acts 10 v 6) Peter came, and taught Cornelius about Jesus.

"He commanded us to preach unto the people, and to testify that it is he which was ordained of God to be the Judge of the quick and dead. To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins."

One thing still was necessary,

"And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord." (Acts 10 v 42-48)

From this and the other records in the Acts of the Apostles it is plain that God has laid down three essential conditions for salvation: knowledge, belief and baptism. (Read Acts 2 v 37-38, 41; Acts 8:35-38; Acts 16 v 25-33)

BAPTIZE

This English word has been taken directly from the Greek word 'baptizo' which means to dip, plunge, or completely immerse in liquid. It is used in Greek in the art of dyeing. In order to dye material, it has to be completely dipped into the dye, so that the material is wholly changed in colour.

BAPTISM

The use of this word throughout the New Testament makes it clear that sprinkling or pouring water is not sufficient. Scriptural baptism requires a complete immersion in water. So we read of Philip when he baptized the Ethiopian eunuch, "They went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him." (Acts 8 v 38)

We read also of John the Baptist, that he baptized in Aenon near to Salim "because there was much water there." (John 3 v 23)

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BAPTISM

If we read the New Testament carefully we shall find that baptism has a four-fold significance.

1. Washing away, cleansing

"Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord." (Acts 22 v 16)

"Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God?... And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus." (1 Corinthians 6 v 9-11)

We find the same symbol used even in the Old Testament, together with the figure of a change of colour. "Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well ... though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." (Isaiah 1 v 16-18)

2. Association with the death and resurrection of Christ

As we are completely covered by water in the act of baptism, we symbolically die, and as we rise from the water, we symbolically rise to a newness of life. In this we associate ourselves with the death and resurrection of Jesus. The apostle Paul writes of this:

"Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection." (Romans 6 v 3-5)

In baptism we undergo a figurative resurrection to newness of life, a change of outlook which is an essential part of our obedience to God.

Jesus said, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." (John 3 v 5)

Paul also wrote to the believers at Colosse of baptism,

"Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead. And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses." (Colossians 2 v 12-13)

3. We are united by baptism into Christ

We are united by baptism into Christ and so related to Christ and to the promises which God made through him,

"For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit." (1 Corinthians 12 v 12-13)

"Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham." "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ." ... "For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." (Galatians 3 v 7, 16, 26-29)

Paul writes again of the change which takes place at baptism,

"Ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: but now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ" "Now therefore ye are no

more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God." (Ephesians 2 v 12-13, 19)

4. A change of masters - a call to separation

Read 2 Corinthians 6 v 14-18; I John 2 v 15-17

God is not pleased with the idolatry of the world. Men and women naturally are the servants of sin. When we are baptized we change our service:

"... henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin ... Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof... Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness? But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness." (Romans 6 v 6-7, 11-12, 16-18)

In baptism we begin a new life of obedience to God which relates us to the promised gift of God.

"Now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 6 v 22-23)

We reject utterly man's way, the way of the world. In baptism we turn unto God's way, obeying the gospel - "the power of God unto salvation."

THE EXAMPLE OF NOAH

This is what Noah did. The world of his day was filled with violence and wickedness. Noah built an ark, and when the rest of the world were destroyed by the water of the flood, Noah and his family entered the ark and were saved.

"In the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water. The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 3 v 20-21)

The judgment of the wicked when Christ returns will be sudden and final as it was in the days of Noah. As Noah in the ark was saved, so we, if we are 'in Christ' shall be saved. We have seen that the way to be in Christ is through knowledge, belief, baptism and continued obedience.

HOW IMPORTANT IS BAPTISM?

Many feel that provided that they change their way of life for the better there is no need to submit to this act. How wrong they are, how ineffective all their efforts to do right. Consider the case of Naaman the Syrian. (2 Kings 5 v 1-27) Elisha the prophet, a man of God, told him to wash in the river Jordan to cure his leprosy. At first he refused, but when his servant persuaded him to obey the specific detail given by God, he was cured at once.

If we obey the word of God as closely as we can, we too can be cured and start afresh. But we may wonder about subsequent mistakes and sins, that is those committed after baptism. As we have seen earlier, in baptism we are associated with the death of Jesus Christ and this event

was a once-and-for-all-sacrifice for sin, and those things which we do wrong in our new life in Christ are forgiven by prayer through our new-found Saviour. When we repent and ask for God's forgiveness, all our sins and errors are blotted out from the record and therefore we can go forward daily confident that if we try to do right, God has promised to mercifully forgive us.

God has offered us this wonderful opportunity through His Word. Do you yet feel the need to start your life again? With your experience of the mistakes you have made and the desire to erase some of the dark patches of your previous life, here is a unique opportunity to start again, not this time on a life that leads to the grave but on the road to immortality and the glorious kingdom of God. God's way is the only way by which you can be reconciled to your Maker.

This is the importance of baptism. It is an essential act of obedience, an essential part of God's way of salvation.

SUMMARY

- Baptism should only follow a full understanding and belief of the gospel.
- Baptism requires a complete immersion in water.
- In the act of baptism -
 - (a) our sins are symbolically washed away
 - (b) we are associated with the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ
 - (c) we are united in Christ, and so related to God's promises through Christ
 - (d) we change masters, serving God instead of serving sin, and separate ourselves from the world.
- As Noah was saved by entering the ark, we must enter Christ through baptism in order to be saved from the coming judgments.
- Baptism is essential for salvation.

PASSAGES FOR BIBLE READING

Genesis 6, 7 and 8; Mark 16; Acts 8; Acts 22

Study 12 - The Kingdom of God

When Christ returns - and an earlier Study has shown this will be soon - his first work will be to raise the dead.

"Many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake." (Daniel 12 v 2)

"For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first." (1 Thessalonians 4 v 15-16)

The judgment will follow, and the reward of everlasting life will be given to the righteous who will then help with the government of the kingdom of God.

The Bible promises that the reign of Christ will see the end of the evils which at present corrupt the world.

CONDITIONS IN THE KINGDOM

There will be no oppression (Psalm 72 v 4) and no more war,

"And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." (Isaiah 2 v 4)

The reign of the King will be righteous and just.

"He shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears: but with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth." (Isaiah 11 v 3-4)

Sickness will be controlled and the curses of illness and disease will be removed,

"Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing." (Isaiah 35 v 5-6)

Many countries today suffer famine and thousands of people are dying daily from hunger. In that day there will be no famine. Springs of water in the desert will enable crops to grow where they cannot today.

"In the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert. And the parched ground shall become a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water." (Isaiah 35 v 6-7)

"There shall be an handful of corn in the earth upon the top of the mountains; the fruit thereof shall shake like Lebanon." (Psalm 72 v 16)

Finally, death itself will be destroyed

"Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death." (1 Corinthians 15 v 24-26)

"And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away." (Revelation 21 v 4)

It is clear why this teaching about the kingdom of God is called the Gospel - we have learnt that the word means 'Good news.'

SALVATION

After his resurrection, Jesus sent his disciples out with these instructions, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." (Mark 16 v 15-16)

It will be seen that baptism must follow a belief of the gospel. The verse continues - "He that believeth not shall be damned.'

On the day of Pentecost the apostle Peter spoke about the resurrection of Jesus and the hope of his Second Coming. The people who heard the address were moved by what they heard, and asked what they should do. They were told to repent and be baptized. To repent means, to change your mind - to make a fresh start.

"Then they that gladly received his word were baptized ... And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers." (Acts 2 v 41-42)

Notice the same order - understanding and belief (that is, faith), followed by obedience in baptism. Then follows a continued effort by the believer to live his life in a way that pleases God.

Then the baptized Christian, who is spoken of as "risen with Christ", can wait confidently for the coming of the Lord.

"If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory." (Colossians 3 v 1-4)

FORGIVENESS

If, during the time of this waiting for Christ, the Christian does wrong, he knows that Jesus is a sympathetic advocate on his behalf, because he knows what temptation is like. In the Letter to the Hebrews, we are reminded that our High Priest was tempted in the same way as we are, although he was able to resist and did no sin. (Hebrews 4 v 15) The Christian can be confident that his prayers will be heard.

"Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4 v 16)

THE GIFT OF GOD

We cannot manage by our own effort. It is only by the love and the mercy of God that we can obtain salvation through Christ. So the apostle Paul wrote, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: It is the gift of God." (Ephesians 2 v 8)

"The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 6 v 23)

THE NEXT STEP

You have now completed the twelve Studies of this stage of instruction. You have read in these Studies a brief outline of what the Bible teaches about God and His purpose with the earth. You may be like some of the people of Athens, who listened to Paul and "when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter." (Acts 17 v 32) In other words, they had been glad to listen, but were not very interested in continuing their studies.

You may be like the people of Berea that the apostle visited, who "searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so." (Acts 17 v 11)

To whichever group of people you belong, the purpose of God will still be fulfilled. Peter wrote that in the last days people would scoff at the idea of the return of Christ. Peter said that they mocked at the preaching of Noah, but when the appointed day came, the rain began. In the same way, whether people take notice or not,

"The day of the Lord will come" (2 Peter 3 v 9-10).

A SPECIAL MESSAGE FOR YOU

The apostle concludes this letter by saying that, as you know this, "What manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness?" (2 Peter 3 v 11)

This question must be left to each individual student to answer. We trust that you will "be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless." (2 Peter 3 v 14)

PASSAGES FOR BIBLE READING

Isaiah 65 v 17-25; Isaiah 66 v 1-2; Romans 13; Ephesians 2; Ephesians 5; Colossians 3; 2 Peter 3