

Glad Tidings

of the Kingdom of God

1588



Reading Among the Ruins - page 3
The Heavens Declare the Glory of God - page 8
God's Authentic Word - page 11

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Glad Tidings

of the Kingdom of God

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

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Reading Among the Ruins

Taking a book outdoors to read in the open air is a pleasure for many of us. Indeed, reading certain books in specific places can really heighten our enjoyment, especially if the story and the setting are connected.

Our front cover shows the ruins of an abbey in England, where to read your Bible would be an experience of contrasts. Among the ruins of a large man-made building, which ceased to be used in 1539, we can hold in our hand the unchanging, indestructible word of God.

The Bible was compiled over more than 1500 years and was completed nearly 2000 years ago. Yet today it remains relevant, explaining the world in which we live and telling us about the wonderful future for the world.

The first five books of the Bible were compiled by Moses, who lived about 1500 BC. So when these earliest scriptures were being written down, Egypt was at the height of its power and building projects such as the pyramids were under way. The Acropolis in Athens had not been started and Jerusalem was a Canaanite village called Jebus.



The New Testament was written in the first century AD, so at the time of the Roman Empire. As these writers were at their task, the Caesars ruled, the Colosseum in Rome was being planned and London was a remote Roman outpost. When we look at the buildings from this time, we see ruins which fascinate us because of their age and the history they embody. Yet as these were in their prime, the final pages of the Bible were being written.

Divine Commentary

Today's world of high-speed global travel, of instant communication and technological sophistication bears little resemblance to those early times, but the Bible is still with us and remains the vital guide for life. In fact, it has provided commentary from God's viewpoint throughout history. As Pharaohs, emperors, powers and empires came and went, the Bible often explained why, and what was God's plan for the world.

For example, Babylon was a great empire which was invaded and defeated by Medo-Persia in 539 BC. The prophet Jeremiah explained that this was happening because of the Babylonians' cruelty when they had taken Israel into captivity:

For behold, I will raise and cause to come up against Babylon, an assembly of great nations from the north country, and they shall array themselves against her; From there she shall be captured. Their arrows shall be like those of an expert warrior; none shall return in vain... Because you were glad, because you rejoiced,

you destroyers of My heritage (Jeremiah 50:9, 11).

The Jewish exile of that time ended under the Medo-Persian Empire. Over 150 years previously, another prophet, Isaiah, had foretold that God would elevate this nation for His purpose, even naming the leader who would send the Jews back to Israel:

Thus says the LORD to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have held — to subdue nations before him and loose the armour of kings... For Jacob My servant's sake, and Israel My elect, I have even called you by your name; I have named you, though you have not known Me (Isaiah 45:1, 4).

These are just a few examples of the many Bible descriptions and prophecies which show not only that it is always current, but also how God is in control of world affairs.

Remarkable Preservation

The Bible's survival over thousands of years is something of a miracle in itself. We can compare the text we have today with very old copies and see that we have exactly the same message that was written down so long ago. The oldest New Testament manuscripts date back to just after the time of the Apostles (e.g. the Rylands Fragment of John's Gospel has been dated to 125 AD). We have copies of the Old Testament which date back to a similar period (e.g. the Dead Sea Scrolls, which date from 300 BC to 100 AD) and in both cases the text is what we find in the Bible we read today.

Since those times there have been many opportunities for the Bible to be

corrupted or to disappear altogether, but this has not happened. The Jews are passionate about the Old Testament writings, copying it carefully over and over again ever since each part was written, to preserve it and keep it accurate. This care for God's word has continued, despite the Jews having been scattered throughout the world.

The New Testament writings spread quickly by land and sea, thanks to the communications network of the Roman Empire, so it was impossible for its opponents to stamp it out. Ever since, there have been individuals prepared to stand up for the Bible, to make sure it could be read and shared. When mechanical printing was invented, books could be reproduced quicker than ever before and the first major book to be printed was a Bible. In many countries we remember men and women who dedicated their lives and even died, to translate the Bible into local languages and allow everyone to read it for themselves.

Our Benefit

People come and go, but the Bible is always there to guide and help. The apostle Peter makes this contrast, quoting words from the prophet Isaiah about the frailty of the human race:

All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, but the word of the Lord endures forever (1 Peter 1:24–25).

We really are privileged to hold such an amazing book in our hands. It explains the dramatic events of the past, and more importantly it offers us a future in the Kingdom of God.

Editor

A Remarkable Bible

This month's cover photograph shows Bury St Edmunds Abbey, birthplace of a rare and beautiful Bible, known as 'The Bury Bible'. At a time when many people regard the Bible as unimportant, it is refreshing to remember that it was once considered the most important book in the world – a book that was to be adorned and adored.

A Major Undertaking

Today, at the flick of a switch, we can access any part of the Bible on computer, and it is easy to take that facility for granted. It takes some effort to identify with a time when not only was there no computer technology, but no printing at all! Imagine too, a time when reading and writing were skills available to only a minority of people, in an age when all texts were produced by hand.

We can try to picture what it was like to face the huge task of writing out the whole Bible by hand. Add to this the extraordinary skills needed to illustrate this book so beautifully and we can still only begin to appreciate the work of someone called Master Hugo who, around the year 1135 AD, set about creating 'The Bury Bible'.

This Bible was created in the Benedictine monastery of Bury St Edmunds when it was at the height of its power in the 12th century. It was one of the largest monasteries in Europe and fabulously wealthy. This period is well documented, including an important diary written by Jocelyn de Brakeland, who gives a comprehensive picture of everyday life within the abbey.

In the 12th century, Abbot Anselm enlarged and beautified the abbey not

only with buildings but also with artefacts and books. We know there was a library of around one hundred books, which was a huge number for the day when we consider that they were all hand-written. This 'scriptorium' must have been one of the busiest in the country. Abbey records tell us that "Hervey, the Sacrist, commissioned a large Bible for his brother the prior and had it beautifully illustrated by Master Hugo".

Hugo's title of 'Master' makes it probable that the abbey hired him. He must have been well paid, for his materials included 350 Scottish or Irish calfskins, one for each page, and expensive colours for illustration



Depiction of Hannah's story from the Bury Bible

including gold and lapis lazuli – the latter only found in Afghanistan. This Bible was probably written between 1130 and 1135 and took two years to produce. Three scribes worked alongside Master Hugo, who is the earliest recorded professional artist in England.

The Treasured Bible in Use

The Bible was a wonderful work of art and an abbey treasure but how was it used? It was probably placed in the church for public reading and also displayed on the feast of St. Edmund. As was customary, it may also have been read aloud at mealtimes since it was referred to as a Refectory Bible in the 15th century.

We do not know which parts of the Bible were read. Nor do we know how much of the Latin text was understood by those who heard it read aloud. We do know that it was used regularly and that it was highly respected.

After the dissolution of the abbey, at the time of Henry VIII, the treasures were distributed far and wide. The Bible came into the ownership of Matthew Parker who became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1559. Upon his death, the Bible was given to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge where it has remained in The Parker Library ever since. Of the original two volumes only the Old Testament survives. It is not accessible to the general public but, in recent years, a facsimile edition has been published, allowing us to see a marvellous example of a Vulgate Bible. Art historians class it as a masterpiece of the English Romanesque period. Master Hugo has been likened to a British Michelangelo, because of the quality and beauty of the artwork he produced.

The Bible's Real Power

How things have changed! Today anyone can get and read a Bible. Unlike the majority of people in the Middle Ages we are not dependent on highly selective readings and interpretations in a language we do not understand. From the 12th century onwards people have marvelled at the artwork in illuminated manuscripts, but we can marvel at the illumination of God's word and the fact that it has been preserved through the ages.

Even more than this, it declares a way of life for all mankind. This makes the Bible, whichever language, translation or version we read, both powerful and valuable. The advice of the apostle Paul to the young man Timothy is as relevant now as it was in the first century:

You must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:14–17).

Valerie Saberton

Images from The Bury Bible by permission of the Master and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge

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IN PRŒBATIONE PROBĀ:



Depiction of the prophet Jeremiah and the Babylonian attack on Jerusalem from the Bury Bible

The Heavens Declare the Glory of God

Few sights are as truly marvellous as that of a starlit sky on a clear night. Seeing the myriad twinkling lights across the heavens makes us conscious of our insignificance – what are we, compared with the immeasurable vastness of space? Nothing!

With 21st century technology we know so much more than our predecessors about the wonder of what is out there, but people from long ago have looked and marvelled, just as we should.

Hymn of Praise

Psalms 19 is a hymn of praise, written centuries ago by a Hebrew hymn-writer, or Psalmist, who wanted to express his belief and understanding that nature, in every aspect, is the handiwork of God.

He had only to look upwards, for it seemed to him that this truth was something the heavens were always declaring. Every one of his thoughts led to God, and he had only to think of God to marvel at His wisdom, power and goodness towards mankind. So, he wrote:

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard (Psalm 19:1–3).

At the time when this was written, many people believed that these heav-

enly bodies were gods, thus they worshipped the sun, moon and stars. However, God taught Israel that all things were made by Him, and that it was not the stars that governed people's lives: He did! In fact, the wrong practices of misguided nations were expressly forbidden. This is what the prophet Jeremiah said:

Thus says the LORD: "Do not learn the way of the Gentiles; do not be dismayed at the signs of heaven, for the Gentiles are dismayed at them. For the customs of the people are futile" (Jeremiah 10:2–3).

In those days, a natural event – like an eclipse of the sun – was regarded as an omen of terrible disaster to all nations. But, guided by their scriptures, the Jews knew better. They could look at these frightening phenomena with confidence, not because they understood how they happened, but because their Creator had taught them that they occurred in the natural world and were not to be feared.

Star-Gazers

That didn't mean that the Jews took no notice of changes in the skies. As we have already seen, they saw the starry heavens as a revelation of God's almighty power and His total control of the universe He created. It is clear from the many Bible references to the heavenly bodies, that their movements made a deep impression on the Jewish writers.

They noted the daily progress of the sun, rising in the east, moving slowly upwards to its height in the midst of heaven, and passing down unflinchingly to set in the west. For them, such a cycle of movement was expressive of the way a strong man might run a race – steadily and without haste. Here is the Psalmist again:

In them [the heavens] He has set a tabernacle for the sun, which is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoices like a strong man to run its race. Its rising is from one end of heaven, and its circuit to the other end; and there is nothing hidden from its heat (Psalm 19:4-6).

Night revealed a different order, more majestic still, as each star moved in its appointed path, some in small circles around the poles, others in long curves across the sky. That majestic procession once was used as the figure of a great army going into battle:

The kings came and fought, then the kings of Canaan fought in Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo; they took no spoils of silver. They fought from the heavens; the stars from their courses fought against Sisera (Judges 5:19-20).

For the discerning Israelite, what happens in the heavens was expressive of how God marshals His forces on earth, to achieve His will and to fulfil His purpose.

Understanding Observers

It would be a mistake to think that the Jews looked heavenwards and made up myths and legends about the stars, or the constellations. With the guid-



ance God provided, they were far more knowledgeable and perceptive. In contrast to the man-made superstitions about the shape of the earth and how it is supported, Job declared that God "stretches out the north over empty space; He hangs the earth on nothing" (Job 26:7).

The purpose of the various heavenly ordinances – the sun, moon and stars – is given right at the beginning of God's revelation to man, when God said:

Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs and seasons, and for days and years (Genesis 1:14).

- ❖ the sun marks out the days,
- ❖ the moon by her changes marks the months,
- ❖ the sun and stars mark out the seasons and years.

These are divinely appointed divisions of time and men learnt to associate the appearance of certain stars or groups with a particular season. Thus God asked Job:

Can you bind the cluster of the Pleiades, or loose the belt of Orion? (Job 38:31).

The rising of these two groups of stars at a specific time in relation to the sun heralded the coming of spring and winter respectively. In the next verse, Job was also asked:

Can you bring out Mazzaroth in its season? Or can you guide the Great Bear with its cubs? (v32).

It is thought that ‘Mazzaroth’ refers to the twelve constellations – the zodiac. These words declare that man is totally powerless to influence or move those heavenly bodies, each in their turn, so that the earth passes through its successive seasons. The might of the all-powerful Creator is required to control and direct the natural processes upon which all life depends.

Spiritual Significance

References to the stars also occur to emphasise number, height and expanse. God once made a promise to Abraham which directed his gaze to the heavens:

He brought him outside and said, “Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them”. And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be”. And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness (Genesis 15:5–6).

Elsewhere the height of heaven is taken as a fitting symbol for the dwelling place of God:

Is not God in the height of heaven? And see the highest stars, how lofty they are! (Job 22:12).

The Psalmist expresses the mercy and forgiveness of God in similar terms:

For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us (Psalm 103:11–12).

If people from long ago could gaze up into the heavens and find spiritual significance as they gazed, what do we make of it all?

Do we look upwards and wonder about how all that happened, thinking that it all just came about with no divine action? Do we look outwards and wonder if life has evolved on some other planet, and hope that they might make contact? Or do we draw the conclusion that all we see is evidence of design, and that presupposes a Designer?

This stargazer finds the sight of the night sky a wonderful declaration of the works of God and believes that a consideration of all His created wonders can help our appreciation of the way in which God has revealed Himself and His purpose with man. Here's an ancient testimonial that is recommended to modern readers:

You alone are the LORD; You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all things on it, the seas and all that is in them, and You preserve them all. The host of heaven worships You (Nehemiah 9:6).

We should worship Him too!

Jenny Banyard

God's Authentic Word

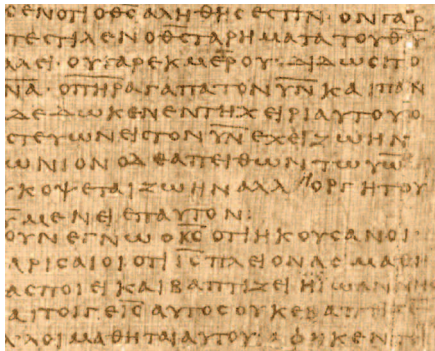
Many of us come to a point in our lives when we face the question of whether the Bible really is the Word of God. If we are going to build our lives upon it, we need to know whether the Bible is a sure foundation. Here are a few pointers which help us acknowledge that it is truly God's living and authentic word.

Its Age

Being ancient is not in itself a proof of being genuine, but if we held in our hands a very old book we would probably treat it with respect. The Bible is a collection of very ancient writings. The first five books were written by Moses some 3,500 years ago; the remainder of the Old Testament books were written (in Hebrew) over 400 years before Christ and were translated into Greek in the 3rd century BC.

Manuscript Evidence

The New Testament, so intricately linked with the Old Testament, exists in manuscripts called the 'Codices Vaticanus, Sinaiticus and Alexandrinus', written from about 300–450 AD. Other



ancient texts contain sections of the New Testament, some dating back to the 2nd century AD. In 'The Story of the Bible' 1964, Sir Frederic Kenyon states that the total number of New Testament manuscripts "runs now into the neighbourhood of 5,000". Also, there is evidence of translation into other languages from as early as the 2nd century AD.

In comparison, it is interesting to note that available manuscripts of classical literature are usually accepted without question. However these number from as few as 10 copies, dating between the 10th and 15th centuries AD, many years after their authors' deaths. The earliest Virgil manuscript is dated 350 years after his death; of Livy it is 500 years; Horace is 900 years; Plato, 1,300 years; Herodotus, 1,500 years; and Euripides, 1,600 years.

Early Writings Quoting the New Testament

In addition to the Bible manuscripts themselves, early church leaders wrote about and quoted the New Testament. These include Clement (95–96 AD); Ignatius, Polycarp, Justin Martyr and Irenaeus (all 2nd century AD); and Origen (3rd century AD). These references prove that the New Testament was in circulation by this time.

The existence of early writings disputing the New Testament is also proof that it existed as a published work and that its claims were understood. The Roman emperor Julian (331–363 AD) referred in detail to things said and recorded in the New Testament. The

philosopher Porphyry (c.233–304 AD) wrote opposing some parts of the Gospels, Acts and Isaiah. Celsus, another philosopher (2nd century AD), quoted Scripture extensively and scorned the New Testament teaching on resurrection.

Christian Suffering

Early Christians suffered terrible persecutions, torture and death because of their faith. They consistently professed the beliefs of the Bible and most refused to deny their faith. This is evidence that the Bible, and the New Testament in particular, was available to them.

The facts of these sufferings are thoroughly recorded by early independent historians like Tacitus (born c.52 AD), Suetonius (75–160 AD), Juvenal (born c.55 AD), Pliny the Younger (born 62 AD), Martial (c.38–104 AD), Epictetus (born c.50 AD) and Marcus Aurelius (121–180 AD).

Unity Despite Diverse Writers

The Bible writers came from many different walks of life. Moses was brought up in Egypt as a prince; David and Solomon were kings; Daniel was minister of state in Babylon; Ezra was a priest and scribe; Amos a herdsman; Matthew a tax collector; Luke a physician; Peter and John were fishermen.

They could not have collaborated, for they lived at widely different times. David wrote about 400 years after Moses; Isaiah about 250 years after David; Matthew more than 700 years after Isaiah and 400 years after Malachi, the last of the Old Testament writers. One feature that unites them is their claim that their message came to them from God.

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THE BOOKS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

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Diverse though the writers were, they wrote harmoniously about the most difficult of subjects, such as:

- ❖ Creation
- ❖ the attributes of God
- ❖ the relationship of God with men
- ❖ the great purpose of God with the earth and man
- ❖ the moral condition of man as God sees it
- ❖ the history and destiny of Israel
- ❖ prophecy

The great range of the Book of Psalms alone comprises history, prophecy, worship and moral guidance, these being entirely consistent with all the other Bible writings. And the Psalms is just one of the 66 books which make up the Bible.

The New Testament writers treat the Old Testament with complete confidence. The Oxford University Press *'Helps to the Study of the Bible'* (c.1900) lists 277 directly quoted Old Testament passages in the New Testament, 103 indirect or partial

quotations, and 120 references to Old Testament incidents. Bagster's *Treasury of Scripture Knowledge* lists more than 2,000 references back to the Old Testament from the New Testament book of Revelation alone.

The 'Ring of Truth'

Many Bible writers record events or situations which we would naturally prefer not to remember. This provides further evidence that God was the ultimate author.

- ❖ Moses foretold Israel's disobedience to God and he recorded his own sins.
- ❖ The Book of Judges records Israel's corruption, idolatry and stubbornness.
- ❖ The Psalmist describes Israel as stubborn and rebellious.
- ❖ David dwells on his own great sin.
- ❖ Matthew records the apostles' lack of faith and their forsaking of Jesus at his arrest, as well as Peter's denial of Christ.
- ❖ John records Thomas's unbelief.
- ❖ Paul describes how he persecuted the early church, and foretold how the very church he was then trying to build would depart from the teaching of Christ.

The writers also showed selfless love for others and for God's purpose. Moses pleaded to God for Israel when they were disobedient and were in danger of rejection by Him: he was prepared to forego personal benefits and give his own life if that would save Israel. Paul states that he would have forfeited his own life if that would have saved his own nation, who were then

persecuting him. All the writers give an exalted view of God's love, and mankind's duty to respond with love.

God and Man

Uniquely, the Bible shows man as he is, morally weak and mortal, but does not degrade him. He is God's creation, and is given the opportunity to qualify for the gift of immortality, for the service and glory of God. The Bible has a consistent sense of holiness, dealing with issues from a Divine perspective, and with the proper relationship between God and man observed. The distance between sinful man and the perfect God and Creator is never forgotten.

The Bible writers always represent sin (disobedience to God) as evil, dishonouring God and deserving punishment. Sin is the breaking of God's law and brings death: sin is never treated lightly or the subject of humour; it is never encouraged and never condoned.

Nature as the Work of God

Sunshine and rain, crops for food, the seasons, the whole range of living things and the universe itself are always attributed to God, the Creator. Psalm 104 is a good example of this.

You Who laid the foundations of the earth, so that it should not be moved forever, You covered it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains... He sends the springs into the valleys; they flow among the hills. They give drink to every beast of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst. By them the birds of the heavens have their home; they sing among the branches.

He waters the hills from His upper chambers (Psalm 104:5-13).



The Evidence of Prophecy

In the 19th century, a highly qualified scientist is reported as saying, “Heavier-than-air flying machines are impossible”, and “Radio has no future”. Whilst developing his jet engine, Frank Whittle was told by the Professor of Aeronautical Engineering at Cambridge, “Very interesting, Whittle, my boy, but it will never work”.

The Bible, however, contains positive prophecies which could only be made by God. The Old Testament, completed hundreds of years before Jesus was born, contains numerous prophecies about him that are recorded in the New Testament as having been fulfilled. ‘Helps to the Study of the Bible’, cited above, lists 176 such prophecies, ranging from his birth to his resurrection, and then on to his second coming, which is shortly to be realised.

Bible prophecy includes the destiny of cities, nations and empires, such as the demise of Nineveh, Babylon, Tyre and Egypt. The historical sequence of the four powerful empires of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome are clearly forecast by Daniel. Bible prophecy about the Jews is a subject in itself, but do read Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, which accurately

predict Israel’s history through the ages. Only God could make forecasts like these.

Conclusion

These are amongst the great amount of evidence that the Bible is truly the Word of God. Other proofs for consideration include its internal ‘undesigned coincidences’; its wonderful preservation by a disobedient nation, oppressed by enemies and suffering many adversities; and its survival despite efforts to destroy both it and those who embraced it. Archaeological discoveries have confirmed its accuracy and reliability.

The Bible also describes our own times so precisely in ways that show it has Divine authority. Jesus said:

There will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; men’s hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near (Luke 21:25-28).

God’s Kingdom is coming soon, nothing is more sure! We can be confident in the Bible and build our life on the firm foundation. Faith will grow with prayerful reading; and humble readers can prepare themselves for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, to complete God’s purpose to fill the earth with His glory.

Derrick Banyard

The Amazing Love of the Good Shepherd

'The Lord is my shepherd' is a favourite hymn for many people. It is based on Psalm 23, which was penned by King David, and is especially meaningful as he was originally a shepherd himself.

However, our modern way of life prevents us from fully understanding these words. While there is at least one shepherd who reads this magazine, most of us are unfamiliar with shepherding and we are even less knowledgeable about what it was like in Bible times.

The Life of a Shepherd

There is a shepherd in the English Lake District who writes about his work. The methods he uses are thousands of years old, and so are similar to those described in the Bible. Here are some of the points he makes:

- ❖ Despite its romantic image, shepherding is very hard work.
- ❖ The routine is determined totally by the needs of the sheep.
- ❖ Some activities – like shearing – are financially loss-making but beneficial for the sheep.
- ❖ The shepherd finds conditions in which the sheep will thrive.
- ❖ He goes out in all weather conditions, risking his own safety, to protect them.
- ❖ He is especially vigilant when they are lambing, and in caring for lambs or orphans.

- ❖ He knows ewes and lambs individually by their characteristics.
- ❖ He bought a ram against the advice of his fellow-shepherds because, he saw the potential and benefit to his flock.

Shepherds in Bible Times

In the days of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) shepherding was important work, but later it became a menial job for the working class. It was certainly not easy. Shepherds spent a lot of time outside watching their sheep and protecting them from weather, wild animals or thieves. They made sheepfolds to protect the sheep and ensured that the entrance was guarded. They regularly counted their flock and it was, and still is, common for the shepherds to have names for individual sheep.





Shepherds had to make sure that the sheep had enough food. At certain times of the year in Israel this was not easy, as the sun scorched the land and there was little green grass. It was also important to locate suitable watering places such as pools or wells, where the sheep could drink without fear. This also appears in the Psalm:

He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters (Psalm 23:2).

The shepherd would not take his flock to new pastures until he was sure they were all present, and in the Middle East he always led them rather than driving them in front of him.

When several flocks were being separated the sheep recognised the voice and distinctive call of their shepherd. Such was the dedication of shepherds. Unlike modern western shepherds, they worked alone without tractors or a sheepdog, however difficult or dangerous the situation.

The Divine Shepherd

These descriptions are very poignant when we read the Bible, and see them

practised by the Jewish shepherds. More importantly God describes His people as sheep so teaches us about Himself.

He criticises Israel's false leaders for misleading them and not protecting them spiritually (look at Ezekiel 34:1-16). In contrast, He promises to look after His sheep Himself. The prophet Isaiah also promised that there would be a faithful and dedicated shepherd for Israel:

He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those who are with young (Isaiah 40:11).

The Good Shepherd

Jesus said that he was the good shepherd, who made the ultimate sacrifice for his sheep.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep. But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep. I am the good shepherd; and I know my sheep, and am known by my own. As the Father knows me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep (John 10:11-15).

He also described the response of his true flock.

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. But



he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice (John 10:1-4).

The good shepherd had a dedication to and passion for his sheep. Jesus was provided by God to be this caring, reliable leader.

Against this background we can never, ever, say that God does not care about us. He has done absolutely everything to offer us salvation:

In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins (1 John 4:10).

Despite the efforts of the most conscientious shepherd, some sheep do die, especially when they wander away from the rest of the flock. Similarly, if we do not obey the Shepherd's voice we put ourselves in eternal peril. Let us remember what the Shepherd has done, and still offers to do, for us and resolve to listen to him and to follow him.

Anna Hart

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What a Surprise!

Readers will be familiar with the great uncertainty involved in predicting the future, even in the short term. However, this does not deter people from trying to predict the outcome of national government elections; or more recently, the UK referendum on membership of the European Union.

Both the referendum and the last UK General Election gave outcomes that were unexpected. Companies that specialise in predicting outcomes using opinion polls and mathematical modelling got it quite wrong!

God Sets the Course of History

A long time ago, God spoke through the prophet Daniel to warn Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar that he was at risk of divine discipline, which would be designed to teach him that:

The Most High rules in the kingdom of men, gives it to whomever He will, and sets over it the lowest of men (Daniel 4:17).

Nebuchadnezzar experienced a period of madness imposed by God, and then finally acknowledged God's supremacy as well as His right to act as He sees fit in dealing with His creation, including the people in it.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom is from generation to generation... He does according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand or say to Him, "What have You done?" (v34-35).

Indeed, it is reasonable to expect both that the Creator will have a purpose and that He will accomplish it. The remarkable thing is that He does so while allowing men and women to exercise their free will.

This is illustrated in the history of the nation of Israel when God punished them through the invasion of the Assyrians. God described the invaders as "the rod of His anger" sent against "an ungodly nation" (Isaiah 10:5,6). This was not how the king of Assyria saw things. God said of him:

He does not mean so, nor does his heart think so; but it is in his heart to destroy and to cut off not a few nations (v7).

The king did not take God's view into account, but his free choice was going to achieve God's purpose. Having done so, God then removed him from power:

It shall come to pass, when the LORD has performed all His work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, that He will say, "I will punish the fruit of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his haughty looks" (v12).

God is Still at Work

God is still at work among the nations today, working out His purpose. Consequently, those unexpected events and sudden changes in the course of history happen because God is at work, carrying out His purpose. He has revealed through Daniel that He intends to establish His kingdom upon earth in place of man's rulership.

In the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever (Daniel 2:44).

Readers may also remember Jesus' words in the prayer he taught his disciples: "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).

While it is a long time since God spoke to Daniel and Jesus gave his prayer, this does not mean it will not happen. God works on a much bigger time-frame than our lifespan. Part of the delay is because God is merciful. As Peter says in his second letter:

The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering to us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).



God's Word is Powerful

The power of God's word to accomplish His purpose is described by the prophet Isaiah:

For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me

and be void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it (Isaiah 55:10).

God's word is revealed in the Bible and merits our attention – earlier in the same chapter God says:

Incline your ear, and come to Me. Hear, and your soul shall live (v3).

If we do not take advantage of God's generous offer of eternal life, then we will perish when we die. So it is not surprising that the chapter has this appeal:

Seek the LORD while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon (v6, 7).

As Jesus said, we must take great notice of God's word: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" (Matthew 13:9).

Eric Marshall

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