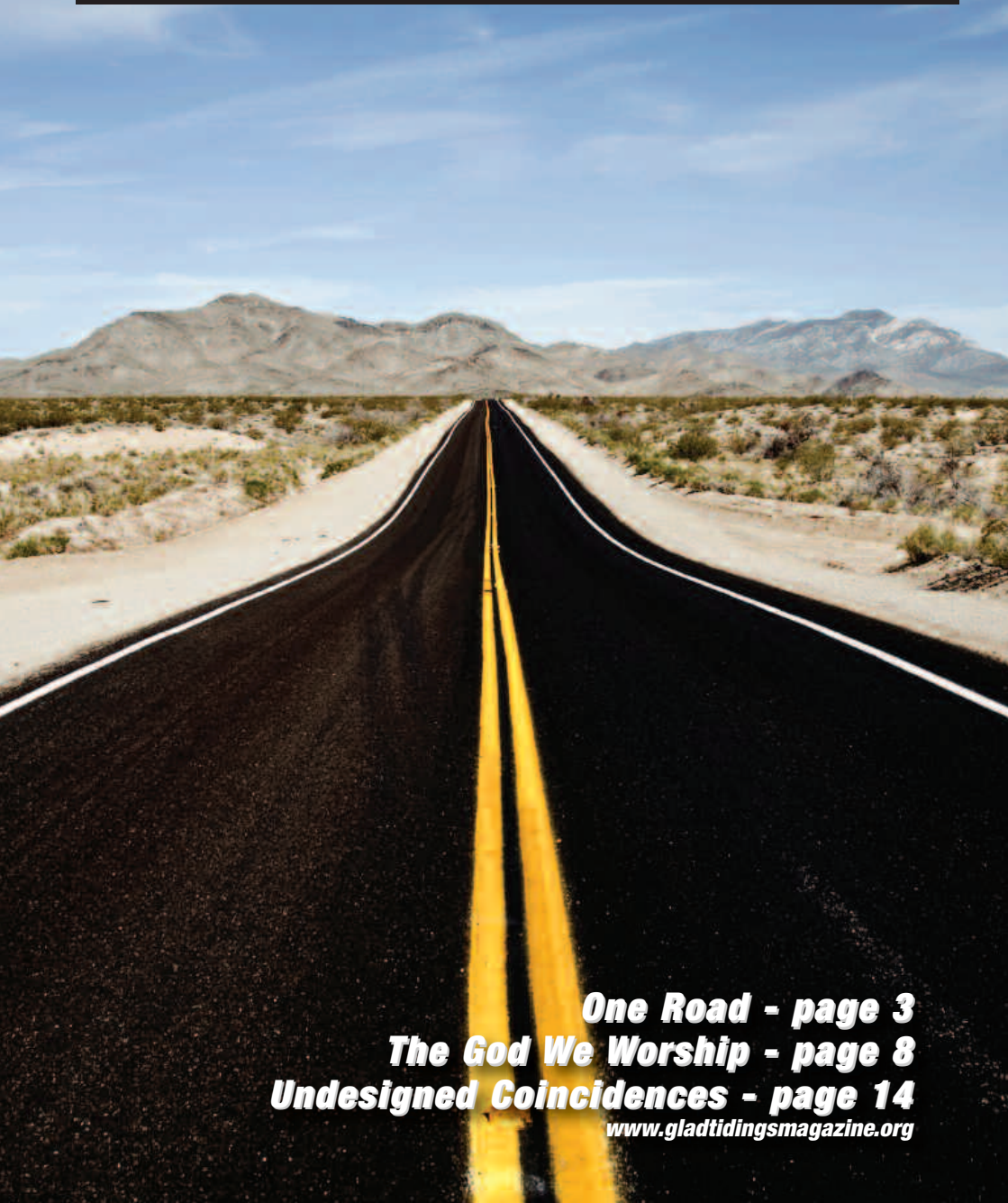


Glad Tidings

of the Kingdom of God

1589



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Undesigned Coincidences - page 14

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Glad Tidings

of the Kingdom of God

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One Road

“Will you NOW ask for directions?” his wife hissed through gritted teeth, “we’ve been lost for half an hour now!”. He gave in and brought the car to a stop by three locals. They scratched their heads sagely and one fiddled with his pipe.

“It’s a little way,” suggested the first. “Just take this lane for a mile, turn left at the bridge and follow that little road until you reach a fork. Go right then the road follows the course of the river until you get to the village you want.”

“No!” countered the pipe smoker, “That will take much too long. Turn round and take the motorway for two junctions, then follow the signs to the village, it’s easy.”

The third man grunted. “You won’t find it. There’s roadworks on the motorway and they have taken down the signs. Turn at this roundabout and take the main road.”

Life Directions

The story sounds like part of a film or convoluted joke, but it really does reflect the messages we get from religious people in today’s world. Different opinions, different viewpoints, whether they are talking about ‘coming to God’ or reaching His kingdom. You may hear it said that “there are many ways to God”, or as one broadcaster put it, “we are all climbing the same mountain from different sides”.

This is not only confusing, it is dangerous. Reading between the lines, what they mean is ‘I will come to God on my own terms, how I want to’. Can this be right?

God has put a lot of effort into leading men and women to Him: He

sent men and women to guide and lead; He had His words written down in the Bible; and He sent the Lord Jesus Christ to show us what He is like, to teach us about how He wants us to live and to die for us.

God is very interested in how we approach Him and how we prepare for His kingdom.

A Single Route

Jesus was very clear in his teaching. He is the way to God:

I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6).

Most assuredly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who ever came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture (John 10:7–9).

This does not leave room for doubt, and we can be sure that Jesus was deliberate in this. If we want to be part of the Creator’s family, then we do so through the work of His Son. In fact, Jesus had strong words for those who twisted God’s ways and suggested that they ‘knew better’:



Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in (Matthew 23:13).

Jesus' followers, who preached and wrote after his ascension to heaven, described Jesus as the one way to God. Consider these words from Paul:

Therefore, as through one man's [Adam's] offence judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one man's [Jesus's] righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one man's obedience many will be made righteous (Romans 5:18–19).

Taking That Path

Having established this, how do we actually go about putting it into practice? What are the steps along the single path to a relationship with God, and the promise of a place in His kingdom?

First, we need to put in effort, to take time to read the Bible and develop our faith in God. This means belief that He will fulfil His plan and promises, and a personal trust in His provision and care for us as individuals.

Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him (Hebrews 11:6).

Having made the right start, we need to be baptised, immersed in water, to show our allegiance to God and to sym-

bolically wash away our sins, starting a life of new hope and new priorities.

He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned (Mark 16:16).

Therefore we were buried with him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4).

None of these Bible passages suggest that the steps are optional or negotiable, and Jesus had this to say about the humble attitude with which we must do all of this:

Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it (Luke 18:17).



The Bible has plenty of direction about how we go on to live as part of God's family, following Jesus' example and living a life of love to God and our fellow human beings. Let's not be distracted by man-made philosophy, but spend our time reading God's word and preparing for the kingdom with which He will soon fill the earth.

Editor

God Works Through Gideon

It is fascinating to look at characters who are mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments, and Gideon is a good example. In Hebrews 11 we have a list of people from the Old Testament who were considered to be full of faith, and towards the end of the chapter we read:

What more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah... who through faith... out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens (Hebrews 11:32–34).

Divine Punishment

Gideon lived in Israel during the time of the Judges, and life was very difficult. He belonged to one of the families in the tribe of Manasseh, and they were under attack from the Midianites, who were swarming over the border from the east (Judges 6:1–6). The invaders covered the land from Mount Tabor in the north (pictured),



down to Gaza on the southern Mediterranean coast. To give you some idea, it takes over an hour to drive the length of this area today.

The Midianites were well known to the people of Israel and they had a common ancestor, Abraham. The reason for this crisis was that Israel had been worshipping idols, mainly Baal, and so God caused the Midianites to plague Israel.

The people of Israel made homes in dens and caves, to hide. The Midianites would let the Jews sow their crops, wait until they were ready to be harvested, and then invade the land with their camels and flocks, destroying everything, so that the Jews were starving. They left no food for people or animals, and Judges 6:5 tells us that they destroyed the land. This went on for seven long years!

Divine Intervention

Eventually, “Israel cried out to the LORD because of the Midianites” (Judges 6:7). God responded by first sending a prophet to speak to Israel, explaining the reason for their predicament.

Then He sent an angel to Gideon, while he was threshing wheat near a winepress, to hide it from the Midianites. This tells us a lot about the serious conditions in Israel at this time. You would never normally thresh at a winepress. In order to thresh, you need a large open, flat rock,

where you can beat the grain with a flail, and the breeze can blow the remaining chaff away. A winepress however is built into a wall or a sheltered cliff, comprising two containers one above the other, often hollowed out of the rock itself.

The angel greeted Gideon with the words *“The LORD is with you, you mighty man of valour!”* (v12). This seems curious given that he discovered Gideon hiding his wheat from the Midianites, but shows that God has the full picture. Gideon even sounded rather timid, saying *“How can I save Israel?”* (v15).

Gideon prepared an offering of a young kid and presented it to the angel. Touching it with his staff, the angel caused fire to come up out of the rock and consume the offering, showing that God accepted it.

Divine Instructions

Through the angel, God told Gideon to destroy his father’s altar to Baal, to sacrifice one of his bullocks, and to cut down the grove of trees that housed the shrine. Gideon was terrified of his father and neighbours, so taking ten servants he destroyed the altar at night rather than in daylight. Then, as instructed, he offered the bullock to God, using the wood he had cut down as fuel.

In the morning there was an uproar: the altar to Baal was demolished, the grove of trees had been cut down, and the bullock had been offered on the altar to the true God. Who could have done such a thing?

The men went to Gideon’s father, and demanded that he send his son out to face the mob. He answered them: *“Let the one who would plead for him be put to death by morning! If*

he [Baal] is a god, let him plead for himself” (v31). That is how Gideon got his secondary name, Jerubbaal, which means, “Let Baal plead”.

Divine Signs

Maybe the Midianites and their confederates heard of this trouble, for now they came in force against Israel. Gideon blew a silver trumpet and assembled an army. Then he prayed to God, asking for a sign that He would really save the Jews through Gideon.

I shall put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor; if there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that You will save Israel by my hand, as You have said (v37).

In the morning, Gideon wrung a bowl full of water out of the fleece. Was this just coincidence? Gideon asked God that on the following night the sign would be reversed, with dew on the ground only, and not on the fleece: this is exactly what happened.

So Gideon assembled his army, but God said:

The people who are with you are too many for Me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel claim glory for itself against Me, saying, ‘My own hand has saved me’ (Judges 7:2).

God wanted there to be no doubt that Israel were saved by His power. So 22,000 men went home, leaving just 10,000 to fight the battle.

But this was still far too many for God. Gideon must take the men to a stream to drink, separating the ones who bent down and lapped the water with their tongue like a dog, from those

who scooped the water out of the stream with their cupped hands to drink. Three hundred drank from their hands, and these were those who were to go into the battle.

We are given no reason why the choice was made in this way. Maybe God was choosing the men who were alert to the dangers of an ambush, or it may possibly have been a means of rejecting those who were used to bowing down to idols such as Baal. Either way, there were only three hundred men left. God was very clear:

“By the three hundred men who lapped I will save you, and deliver the Midianites into your hand” (v7).

In the end, Israel were outnumbered by 450:1, just as much later, when Elijah faced the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (see Judges 8:10 and 1 Kings 18:22).

Divine Deliverance

Gideon was still nervous, so God told him to take his servant and go down to the camp of the Midianites. There Gideon and his servant heard a Midianite soldier recounting a dream to his fellow-soldier: a round cake of barley bread rolled into the Midianite camp, and knocking into a tent, completely flattened it. The man attributed this to Gideon coming and destroying the whole camp. Thus encouraged, Gideon praised and thanked God and went back to the army. He explained that God had indeed given the Midianites into their hands, and they would succeed.

Gideon divided his army into three companies of one hundred men, telling them to watch him, and copy what he did. He gave each man a

trumpet, and a flaming torch, which they hid inside a clay pitcher until the vital moment.

They crept to the edge of the Midianite camp in the dark at about 10pm. Following Gideon’s example, they broke their pitchers so that the light blazed, blew furiously on their trumpets, and shouted at the top of their voices:

The sword of the Lord, and of Gideon! (v18).



In the panic and confusion that followed, every Midianite turned his weapon on his fellow, and there was a complete rout. The Midianite army just ran away, confused and disorientated by the power of God Himself.

The whole army ran and cried out and fled (v21).

God had worked through Gideon to save His people and to demonstrate His power beyond any doubt.

It is interesting to see that the prophet Ezekiel echoes this, saying that in a major battle when the Lord Jesus returns, *“Every man’s sword will be against his brother” (Ezekiel 38:21)*. God will defend His people again, on that future day.

Peter Hale

The God We Worship

*It is the LORD your God you shall
fear.*

*Him you shall serve and by His
name you shall swear.
(Deuteronomy 6:13)*

*Exalt the LORD our God;
worship at His footstool!
Holy is He!
(Psalm 99:5)*

*God is spirit,
and those who worship Him
must worship in spirit and
truth.
(John 4:24)*

*Then I fell down at his feet to
worship him,
but he said to me,
"You must not do that! I am a
fellow servant with you and
your brothers who hold to the
testimony of Jesus.
Worship God."
(Revelation 19:10)*

This short series has looked at some of the Bible teaching about God, but it is important to recognise that this is not an academic study, of literary or philosophical interest. What the Lord God wants of His creation is that they should worship Him. Not because they are compelled to, or have no other choice, but because that is what they wish to do above all else. The enacted parable between Hosea and his adulterous wife Gomer demonstrated the feelings of the Lord God for Israel very clearly. It showed the love God has for His people, and His strong desire that they should worship Him.

In the Old Testament

The four quotations alongside this article show that the Lord God is to be worshipped, but they also show He must be worshipped in the correct way. That way is for Him to decide, and not for us. Just before the nation of Israel went into the land of Israel after forty years wandering in the wilderness Moses spelt this out for them. He was quite specific.

You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. You shall tear down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and burn their Asherim with fire. You shall chop down the carved images of their gods and destroy their name out of that place. You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way.

But you shall seek the place that the LORD your God will choose out of all your tribes to put His name and make His habitation there. There you shall go, and there you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, your vow offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock (Deuteronomy 12:2-6).

Moses was explaining to the people of Israel that there are ways in which it is acceptable to worship God, and ways which are not acceptable. Those principles apply still today. The requirements to offer sacrifice as under the Law is no longer there, but God must still be worshipped in the right way, a way which is reverent and fitting.

In the New Testament

What is meant by worship? In the New Testament about five different Greek words are used, mainly having to do with obedience, reverence and respect. The apostle Paul put it like this:

The secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you (1 Corinthians 14:25).

Another instance involving the Apostle Paul occurred when he was speaking in Philippi. We learn of a woman called Lydia.

One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened

her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul (Acts 16:14).

There is clear approval of Lydia's behaviour here. She was a worshipper of God, and her heart was opened to the preaching of Paul. This was the way she responded to the message of salvation, her worship of God was acceptable. Lydia shows above all else that hearts must be opened to God.

The Apostle Paul set out the need for correct worship when he spoke in the Areopagus at Athens. He had



seen amongst all the shrines and altars in that city one with this dedication, "To The Unknown God". He took this as his starting point and preached the truth about the God of the Bible to the sophisticated thinkers of the city, who gathered to hear him.

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything (Acts 17:24-25).

Paul goes on to show what God really wants from His creation:

That they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward Him and find Him. Yet He is actually not far from each one of us, for 'In Him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we are indeed His offspring' (v27–28).

The apostle established the need for us all to worship God.

The Worshipper's Response

Paul had concluded his command for correct worship like this:

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent, because He has fixed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom He has appointed; and of this He has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead (v30–31).

Paul was telling the Athenians that correct worship of God is an imperative, and that remains true today. Most of those who heard Paul did not take much notice, it was just one more of the talks they heard, and maybe enjoyed, but which had little impact on their lives. Some did, perhaps realizing that this was something different.

And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, "We will hear you again on this matter." So Paul departed from among them. However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them (Acts 17:32–34).



And Us?

What Paul said is still true. The day is still fixed for God to judge the world, and He will do so by the Lord Jesus. Jesus will return, not to be rejected but to judge the world and to rule as its king.

If we are wise, then we will learn from the positive teaching of Paul. We should follow the advice we find given in Revelation:

Fear God and give Him glory, because the hour of His judgment has come, and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water (Revelation 14:7).

Mark Sheppard

Bible Quotations from the English Standard Version

Concluded

The Ten Commandments in the 21st Century - 1

Where the Ten Commandments Came From

In countries with a Christian tradition, most people have heard of the Ten Commandments, even if they cannot recite all of them. Most people who have heard of them would also agree that they are a good thing. But not many people could tell you where they come from, or how we should think about them in the 21st Century. In this series, David Pearce examines the Ten Commandments and how they apply to Christians today. We begin by finding out when they came into existence.

The Creation of a Nation

In the book of Genesis we read many chapters about Abraham. God promised him a big family, like the stars in the sky for number. Four hundred years later, this promise had come true. There were thousands of Israelites – all of them descended from Abraham. However, life was not good for them, as they were slaves in Egypt. God had told Abraham this would happen, but that one day they would return to the land where Abraham lived, the land of Canaan.



Around 2500 BC, God sent ten plagues which struck the land of Egypt, damaging every aspect of Egyptian life, and Pharaoh was eventually persuaded to let the Israelites go. They left Egypt with Moses as their leader, and after crossing the Red Sea, they came to Mount Sinai in the desert. It was the beginning of their life as an independent nation.

A Nation Needs Laws

All nations need laws to make life safe and comfortable. For example, if I decide in the UK that today I will drive on the right side of the road instead of the left, before long there will be a nasty accident. We have to have rules that everybody must keep, or there will be chaos. If I decide that my neighbour has a better car than mine, and go out with a big knife and kill him so that I can take his car, that will also lead to trouble. His wife's family might grab a gun and come and shoot me to avenge his blood, and soon there will be civil war. We have to have laws to stop bad people doing evil things, and to protect the vulnerable members of society.

When the people of Israel stood at the foot of Mount Sinai, the only laws they knew were those of Egypt, where the worship of idols was widespread. They needed new laws of their own. Even back in the time of Abraham, there had been rules which came from God, and Abraham taught them to his family (see Genesis 26:5, 18:19). Now they needed to be made permanent,

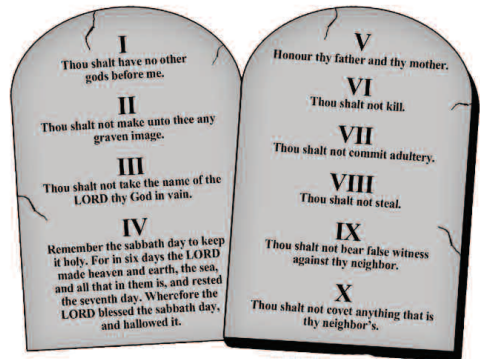
and new laws added which would suit the Israelites' new life as a farming community, settled in their own properties, rather than nomads living in tents with sheep and goats.

So, God called Moses up to the top of Mount Sinai, to receive the new laws. We call them the Law of Moses, but really it is the Law of God given through Moses. There were hundreds of commandments; some were about everyday life, such as who you could or could not marry, what to do if you found a lost item, and what to do if someone had a contagious disease; some were about taxes, to pay for the priests, who administered the laws. There were also religious laws about sacrifices to God, and holy days, and worship.

All national laws need to state what will happen if someone breaks a law – the penalty if he is found guilty. So did the Law of Moses – it laid down penalties for criminals who broke the law – burglars, murderers and adulterers. These rules cover many pages in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. So, what are the Ten Commandments? Really, they are a brief summary of the whole body of laws, reduced to ten lines.

A God-Given Summary

Why did God need a summary of His laws? God was prepared to be Israel's God, and look after them, and bring them to the Land of Promise, but first they must solemnly agree to keep His laws. So Moses made the people wash and put on clean clothes, and assemble before the mountain. On top of it, the presence of God was shown by clouds, fire and earthquake. They were going to enter into an agreement with God, which is called a covenant.



Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:5-6).

Now there followed the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:1-17. These words were a summary of the covenant. In the following chapters, Moses recited all the words of the law and wrote them down (see Exodus 24:3-4). Moses made a sacrifice and sprinkled the blood on the altar and on the people; from that day onwards, they were God's special people.

But suppose 100 years went by, and all those people were dead. How would anyone in Israel know they were bound to God by a covenant? The answer is, the Ten Commandments, the summary of the Law, were written down on tablets of stone which were kept inside the Ark of the Covenant (see Deuteronomy 10:3-5). There they provided a permanent reminder of the covenant that had been made. A copy of the written law as recited here by Moses in Deuteronomy was also kept alongside the Ark of the Covenant (see Deuteronomy 31:26).

We have a similar system in modern cultures. If we make a solemn agreement, say a marriage, or the purchase of an apartment, which is an agreement between two people, there is a written contract, signed by the two parties, which is kept in a public registry office so that if there is a query in the future, the document can be produced and the names of the witnesses produced.

It is interesting that ancient Hebrew is very compact when written down, because there are no vowels, only consonants, so a minimum of space was required – two tablets of stone written on two sides were plenty to fit in the Ten Commandments.

Do They Apply Today?

As we have seen, the Ten Commandments were an essential part of the Law of Moses, which was the national law of the Jewish people. But to Christians, rather than Jews, does the Law of Moses apply today?

This question was asked early in the history of the church. The Apostle Paul had baptised many Gentiles (non-Jews), and some of the Jewish believers insisted these Gentile Christians must be made to keep the Law of Moses. So, a special meeting of the believers in Jerusalem was held to decide this question. The main finding was that Gentiles did NOT need to obey the whole Law of Moses.

For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well (Acts 15:28-29).



So can we forget about the Ten Commandments? The answer is no; they are still important commands for a Christian. Nine of them can be found directly in the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles in the New Testament.

What Jesus said was that keeping the Ten Commandments is not enough. If we want to be saved, we must do even better. As disciples, it is not good enough to say we have never committed a serious crime. We have to be positively good towards other people. We have to show love, even to our enemies.

There are lots of valuable lessons we can find as we study the Ten Commandments, and see how the New Testament applies them to Christians.

David M. Pearce

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The Reliability of the Gospels - 5

Undesigned Coincidences

In earlier articles we have looked at evidence to help us to see whether the Gospels were a reliable record of the events they describe. We have seen that the detail of people, places and customs described in the Gospels matches the findings of archaeology. We saw that the language used in the Gospels was exactly what we would expect when looking at the time and location where the events took place.

In this article we compare different accounts and look at 'undesigned coincidences' as a guide to the accuracy of the Bible.

Suppose that you were writing an account of some event that you had seen. You would include the main story of what happened, but you might also include minor details of some of the things that you saw which were only incidental to the main events. If the account was accurate then these details would all fit together consistently. On the other hand, if you were inventing the account, or had a poor memory, or were reporting what someone else had told you in a general way, these details would be either absent or inconsistent.

The point here is that an undesigned coincidence would be almost impossible to invent. It would take a great deal of effort on the part of any writer, and as no-one looked for them until the nineteenth century, a first century writer would hardly be likely to put in the effort required. The presence of undesigned coincidences is therefore a guarantee that the text is an accurate record of the events it describes.

Features of an Undesigned Coincidence

For a set of details to count as an undesigned coincidence the following conditions must be present:

- ❖ The account or accounts must contain several details that can be compared.
- ❖ The details must be independent of one another.
- ❖ The details must be trivial, so that they are not a major part of the original account.
- ❖ The details must fit together to make a back story.
- ❖ This back story must be independent of the main narrative; usually it will also be trivial.

There are many coincidences which fulfil these conditions, they are found throughout the Bible. In this article we are only going to look at a few examples taken from just one episode in the Gospels.

Feeding the Five Thousand

The Feeding of the Five Thousand is a particularly fruitful place to look for undesigned coincidences as it appears in all four Gospels, which means that there are plenty of comparisons to be made. This was an occasion when Jesus fed five thousand men and an unknown number of women and children by multiplying the only food available – someone's packed lunch.

Grass

Three of the four accounts mention in passing that at the feeding of the five thousand there was a considerable amount of grass on the ground.

He commanded the multitudes to sit down on the grass (Matthew 14:19).

He commanded them to... sit... on the green grass (Mark 6:39).

Now there was much grass in the place (John 6:10).

The grass is a tiny detail which would easily pass unnoticed, and would mean nothing in most of the world. But in the Eastern Mediterranean there is a problem with grass. In the summer the weather is very hot and dry and the grass withers and goes brown. In the winter it doesn't grow. It is only in the spring, about Passover time, that grass grows without irrigation. And in John's Gospel we read:

Now the Passover, a feast of the Jews, was near (John 6:4).

The feeding of the five thousand took place during the short period when grass would flourish, and three of the writers note the grass being there. At the feeding of the four thousand, a similar miracle which took place at a different time of year, the ground is mentioned but no grass (Matthew 15:35; Mark 8:6).

Barley

The Passover took place as the barley harvest began. A fairly poor family, which had not been able to store much grain over the winter, would be forced

to eat bread made from barley around the time of Passover. At the feeding of the five thousand, the bread available was made from barley, not the more usual wheat. The record tells us this detail:

There is a lad here who has five barley loaves (John 6:9).

Philip and Bethsaida

As a final point, when Jesus first decides to feed the multitude, he asks Philip "Where shall we buy bread, that these may eat?" (John 6:5). There is a reason that Jesus chose Philip – he came from Bethsaida: "Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter" (John 1:44). In Luke's Gospel we find that the feeding of the five thousand took place not far from Bethsaida (Luke 9:10). John does not mention where the miracle took place, and Luke does not mention where Philip came from. Again, the details of the account match, but not in an obvious way.

Conclusion

The presence of irrelevant details in a narrative suggests a good memory. But where the details are insignificant and match other, independent, insignificant details, we have extremely good evidence that the accounts are not only detailed but also accurate. This is what makes an undesigned coincidence.

For a list of 50 undesigned coincidences in the Gospels alone, visit www.biblethink.org.uk

John Thorpe

A Dual Personality?



What's in a name? The name 'Didymus' (Greek for 'twin') stuck to Thomas (John 11:16, 20:24). It may have referred to his family status, but it equally fitted his disposition. He had a dual character. Within his personality, damaging and uplifting forces were just about equally poised.

This fine balance or human nature is not unfamiliar to us. Robert Louis Stevenson elaborated on it when he wrote about the two-in-one Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The Apostle Paul stresses the same characteristic see-saw between human impulses and depicts the struggle between good and evil in every heart:

For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice (Romans 7:19).

We cannot ask honestly or hopefully to be helped to overcome temptation unless we ourselves have honestly and firmly determined to do the best we can to keep away from it. If you have no head for heights it is common sense to keep away from the cliff edge or a precipice. Everyone's heart is a battleground in this sense. Our desires to do

good and our tendencies to do evil are perpetually opposing each other. Likewise, Thomas was swayed by his doubts and his love of Jesus. His head and his heart would frequently have been at variance.

Doubting

It was as natural to Thomas to harbour unbelief as it is for others to cherish hope. There are some unhappy individuals who seem constitutionally unable to look on the bright side. They cannot see the blue sky for clouds.

After the death of Jesus, we can imagine how swiftly Thomas may have discredited the testimony of every witness who claimed to have seen the risen Lord.

He could not accept the evidence of Mary Magdalene. She was (to him) a hysterical woman from whom 'seven devils' had been cast out; she was utterly unreliable.

It was reported that "*The Lord is risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!*" (Luke 24:34). Yes, but everybody knew Simon Peter. No-one doubted he meant well, but he was rash, headstrong and impulsive, a man of action, not thought. He was, Thomas reckoned, incapable of making cool, calculated judgements. As for John, everyone knew he was a dreamer, his flights of fancy could easily lead him astray.

We can imagine that Thomas prided himself on his superior judgement. He could not be deceived. Even when the other disciples together had met the risen Jesus, Thomas was ready with the cynical answer:

Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe (John 20:25).

For more than a fateful week doubting Thomas remained aloof from his friends. The Bible does not tell us how he passed the time. Maybe he often yielded to melancholy and brooded in solitude. His doubts would be gnawing away at his love for Jesus.

Seeing is Believing

Sometimes on a stormy day, after being obscured for hours, we have seen the sun burst through the clouds and set in incomparable splendour. So it was with Thomas, the man with the twin personality. His love, dimmed for a time by the pall of melancholy, found its resurgence when Jesus appeared to him in person and every last vestige of doubt was dispelled. Thomas then made his great confession to Jesus, who gave this blessing:

Thomas, because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed (v27).

The Blessing of Belief

This is the message of hope for us. Here we are, often perplexed, maybe defeated by our doubts, dreads and sins. Yet Thomas's experience can inspire us to overcome.

Jesus is described as *"the resurrection and the life"* (John 11:25), and the Gospel records are *"...written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name"* (John 20:31).

And so we come back to our opening question: what's in a name? In the name of Jesus, we read, is life.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16).

The promise of Jesus to Thomas brings this priceless gift nearer to us, who have not seen Jesus in person. The name of Jesus sums up the things he came into the world to do – and which only he can do. He's the saviour who alone can deliver us from the grip and consequences of sin.

Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

Belief in the saving work of Jesus and his name can give us great confidence and hope, in whatever circumstances we may find ourselves.

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honour, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith – the salvation of your souls (1 Peter 1:6–9).

Claud Lamb

Would Christ Recognise Our Christianity?

Adrian was a school teacher who was busy marking his pupils' examination papers. "Oh no!" he cried out loud, "I was so careful to emphasise the correct way to do this but hardly anyone has got it right. You would think that I hadn't even mentioned it in the lessons. If I hadn't taught it then I might be able to understand why they get it so wrong. The problem is that they believe what they want rather than what I tell them."

Such is the common frustration of a teacher – pupils do not always heed the expert's teaching, however clear it may be. Unfortunately, the same problem plagues religious belief. We all like to believe things that we find pleasant or even natural, and it can be extremely difficult to change such long-standing beliefs.

Some of Jesus' Teaching

Jesus repeatedly quoted the Old Testament scriptures and obviously believed them, regarding them as his guide for all aspects of life. He stated his belief in one God – the God of Israel as revealed in the Old Testament:

Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one'" (Mark 12:29).

And he affirmed that God is greater than Jesus himself:

I am going to the Father, for my Father is greater than I (John 14:28).

Jesus taught that baptism is essential for people who want to be saved:

He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned (Mark 16:16).

Sadly, he also warned that when he comes back there may not be much true faith on the earth (Luke 18:8), and that unbelievers and apparent believers who have not followed his teachings will be refused a place in God's kingdom on earth (Matthew 8:10–12; Matthew 25:31–46; Luke 13:24–30).

Jesus often spoke about the Kingdom of God; indeed, it was central to his message:

I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because for this purpose I have been sent (Luke 4:43).

It is then mentioned more than 25 more times in Luke's gospel record alone.

Jesus taught his believers how to view God, life and material possessions, and how to treat other people – both in his words (Luke 6:20–38) and by his example. Jesus emphasised the importance of Israel in the purpose of God (e.g. Matthew 5:35; 15:24; 19:28, John 4:22 and many of the parables), while also teaching that both Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) could be saved only through him:

I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6).

The Disciples Believed Jesus

Some of these ideas were initially foreign to many of the Jews who did not properly understand their Old Testament scriptures. In fact, they preferred their own ideas and interpretations, refusing to believe that Jesus was who he said he was, and certainly rejecting what he said. However, the somewhat amazing claims made by Jesus were vindicated when – contrary to expectations – he was raised from the dead to eternal life and then taken up into heaven.

They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear openly (Acts 10:39–40).

His disciples were so utterly convinced by these events that they risked and often gave their own lives for these beliefs and the teachings of Jesus. They caused a revolution in religious thinking, first in Israel and then throughout the world.



They firmly believed that Jesus was the Son of God and the Messiah (the Christ) promised by the Old Testament prophets – which was indeed what Jesus himself had preached (see Matthew 16:15–17).

Jesus is the focal point of Christianity. His resurrection is evidence

that he is the Son of God (Romans 1:4), a pattern for Christian life (6:4–9), a guarantee of the believer’s resurrection (8:11) and a fundamentally important doctrine (10:9). The apostles preached this fervently, while adhering to the other messages preached by Jesus.

What About Us?

Do we believe these things? Are they what our church leaders teach? Do we pick and choose which parts of the Bible we read? Do we study both the Old Testament and the New Testament? Are God’s promises and His standards the things we talk about? Do we take our beliefs exclusively from the Bible? Are we familiar with what Jesus actually taught and are we trying to do as he said?

Or do we think that nowadays we know better than Jesus? This would be a very bold and dangerous claim, yet many today assert they have superior knowledge to that of the Son of God, stating that when he preached, the world was less sophisticated.

Jesus warned about ‘*blind leaders of the blind*’ (Matthew 15:12–14). We can be led astray by very appealing music, paintings, traditions and false beliefs. We are told in Acts about the Bereans, who “*searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so*” (Acts 17:11). They carefully checked the teachings of the Apostles against the Bible, and were commended for it. This is critically important for us too.

Adrian the teacher did not recognise his teaching in his pupils’ answers. We should all ask whether Jesus would recognise his teachings in our modern, personal Christianity.

Anna Hart

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