

WORDS THAT MATTER

A study of some key Biblical words

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Introduction

Every human activity has its own technical terms: footballers talk of 'off-side' and 'penalties', and car mechanics speak about 'big ends' and 'tuning'. Similarly the Christian faith has its 'technical terms' for particular aspects of Christian belief. Some of these are words not in common use, others are words which have special meanings. Some modern translations of the Bible try to avoid those which are not in everyday use, but this can make for awkward reading. Instead of 'righteous' the Good News version uses phrases such as 'right with God' which may be helpful at the start, but not if the reader wants to understand more. Other Bible words have a meaning which is different from its meaning in secular use. An example is the word 'atone' (see chapter 2), so it is important to understand what it means in the Bible.

For this reason, it is helpful to for those who want to understand the Bible better to try to understand the meaning of these 'technical terms'. This book aims to explain some of them, words which are connected with the most important aspect of Christian faith - our relationship with God. We shall see in chapter 1 that we are cut off from God because of our sin, and all the words discussed describe how the guilt of our sin can be removed.

All these words have similar meanings, but each one has its distinctive emphasis, and so each will be studied separately. This approach is rather like the style of painting where the artist lays different colours beside each other. Then when you stand back from the painting, you get a very different effect from what you would see if the painter had mixed the colours on his palette before he applied them to the canvas. Because the paints are kept separate, each colour can make its own separate contribution to the whole effect. So each chapter will bring out the particular significance of the word being studied.

Start with the Old Testament

The Bible claims to be a record of how God revealed the truth about himself, how we can have a relationship with him, and how he wants us to live. This revelation came gradually, starting with the Old Testament and finishing in the New.

This is why the writers of the New Testament quote frequently from the Old Testament showing that their teaching is not new, it is based on that of the Old Testament. Even Jesus made it clear that he had not come to do away with any essential element of Old Testament belief, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them" (Mat.5:17). The main disagreement he had with the Jewish Teachers of the Law was that he said they had distorted the true meaning of what God had taught through Moses.

Hebrew and Greek words

This is why any study of a Bible word must start with its use in the Old Testament, and then go on to its use in the New Testament. The Old Testament was written in ancient Hebrew, the language kept alive by Judaism, and now revived and modernised in the State of Israel.

The New Testament was written in ancient Greek, a language which was used throughout the whole of the Eastern Mediterranean region. But most of the writers of the New Testament were Jews whose religious language was the Hebrew of the Old Testament. So when we want to know the basic meaning of a particular New Testament word, we need to ask ourselves first, "What was the Hebrew word in the mind of the writer?" To find this out, we can look at the Greek translation of the Old Testament made in the Second Century B.C. called the Septuagint. The situation in New Testament times was rather like that in the English-speaking countries of Africa or the Caribbean where they speak English, but some of the words are used with a different meaning to what they have when they are used by an English person. So the meaning of a word in New Testament Greek may not be the same as its meaning in the Greek spoken in ancient Greece.

But there is also evidence that New Testament writers such as Paul were influenced by Greek culture and thought. It is one of the attractive features of the Bible that it contains such a variety of styles of writing, each writer gives a different aspect of Christian belief.

For the benefit of the non-specialist, reference to the original Greek or Hebrew words will only be made where necessary. Transliterations will be put in italics, and to pronounce these correctly, a specialist book must be consulted. Also, because the meaning of Hebrew words is mainly in the consonants, only the roots of Hebrew words may be given which are usually just three consonants; verbs, nouns and adjectives are all derived from one root.

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The approach adopted in this book is to accept the different books of the Bible as what they claim to be, a record of how God revealed himself in various ways. Our task is not to question the truth of what is clearly taught, but rather to try to find out what it means. Also, we can believe that there is a unified message, despite the variations in style of the different authors. So a complete picture of what is taught in the Bible is found by reading all the books.

Sometimes I have referred to views which are definitely contradictory that of the Bible, otherwise, I have not made many references to the views of other people. This does not mean that I am not aware of these other views, nor that I consider my interpretation to be the only possible one. I have adopted this approach as it makes the book easier to read.

Unless otherwise stated, all biblical quotations are from the New International Version.

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This book has a practical aim. The apostle Paul in his epistles follows a doctrinal section with a practical application. So it is no use understanding a doctrine unless it has an effect in our lives. The questions at the end of each chapter are to help you to think of the implications of each topic. May this book help you understand God better, and to realise more what he has done for you, so that you may serve him more effectively.

* * * *

Acknowledgements.

Reference has been made to the following specialist books:

Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, Brown Driver and Briggs, Oxford 1906
Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, Grimm, ed. Thayer, Edinburgh 1886
International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, ed. Bromily, Erdmans 1988
Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, Erdmans 1986
Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Erdmans 1964
Theological Word Book of the Old Testament, ed. Harris, Moody Press

The following books are recommended for further reading:

Tyndale series of Bible Commentaries, Inter-Varsity Press
"The Bible Speaks Today" series of biblical expositions, Inter-Varsity Press
The New Bible Dictionary, Inter Varsity Fellowship 1996
The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross, L. Morris, Tyndale Press 1955
The Atonement, L. Morris, Inter Varsity Press 1983
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ch.1 The Problem - Sin

One of the sad facts of life is that human beings have great difficulty in living in harmony with each other. These days we are only too aware of the tensions within families and between people of different cultures who happen to live close together. We have gained a vast store of scientific understanding about the operation of the natural world, and have made great technological progress to use the world's natural resources. But history shows that we have not improved in our social relationships, indeed our technological advances have only resulted in the invention of more terrible forms of destruction.

One related problem is the lack of respect for those in authority. When somebody such as a teacher or a policeman does wrong, some people are quick to point out their human failings, they have difficulty in separating the person from the office they hold. Teachers have authority to maintain discipline in a school, and this is necessary to provide a suitable environment in which pupils can learn. Police and judges have authority to uphold the laws of the land in order to maintain social harmony. An authority structure is necessary for harmony among any group of people.

The origin of sin

The starting point of Christian belief is that we have another dimension to life, a relationship with the God who made us. In the Bible, we read that God created everything including human beings, and this means that he is the one to tell us the principles which should govern our behaviour, he is the Supreme Authority over us. In Gen.1:26 we read "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness'". We were made to have a relationship with God, and with the moral capability of knowing the difference between right and wrong.

Then when God created Adam and Eve, he said to them, "you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen.2:17). To eat of that fruit would mean that they would be acting independently of God, challenging his authority by seeking after a "knowledge" for which they were not ready. Sadly, they gave in to the temptation and took the forbidden fruit. The essence of sin is to reject God's authority by disobeying whatever commands have been revealed.

The result of sin

We see the effect of this disobedience first in their attitude to each other. Immediately they felt the need to wear clothes, a symbol of the barrier that had come between the two of them. Then they wanted to run away from God, their relationship with him had been broken. This was what God had meant when he said "when you eat of it (the forbidden fruit) you will surely die" (Gen.2:17), they did not die physically, it was spiritual death. This is why Paul in the New Testament says, "sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin" (Rom.5:12). Then the curses that God pronounced on them were that from then on their daily lives would bring hardship and sorrow (Gen.3:16-19). Finally, they were driven out of the garden to prevent them from eating of the tree of life; sinful man cannot live for ever independently of God.

The essence of sin is to reject God's authority by disobeying whatever commands have been revealed. This results in a broken relationship between the sinner and God, and this relationship can only be restored when the guilt of the sin is removed by the sinner being forgiven.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is not as easy as some suggest. It is not enough to say "if you love a person sufficiently, you will be willing to forgive them any wrong they do to you." When two people are friends and one of them wrongs the other, reconciliation can only happen if both are willing for friendship to be restored. The person who does the wrong must apologise, and the other must accept this apology and forgive.

In the same way, God cannot forgive sin unless the person repents. But when God forgives us, it is not quite like forgiveness between equals, sin is rejecting the authority of our Creator God, breaking the laws he gave us. So when a person repents, God cannot just say "I

forgive you" for that overlooks the seriousness of sin.

We can compare it to the situation in a school. A school is a miniature society, school rules are necessary for harmony in school life and to make sure that the children work to the best of their ability. When a rule is broken, punishment must be enforced, otherwise the rule loses its meaning. The best run schools are those where discipline is enforced so that pupils respect the rules and are happy in a secure environment. Similarly in our legal system, the individual deserves a fair trial, but society is equally insistent that justice is seen to be done, and if the person is found guilty, a just sentence must be imposed. This is why a way of forgiving the sinner must be found which upholds God's justice

Jewish law

When God delivered the Jews from slavery in Egypt through Moses, he told them that he was choosing to reveal himself to them, "out of all nations you will be my treasured possession" (Ex.19:5). He also gave them commands to regulate their daily lives, these are recorded in the books of Exodus to Deuteronomy. With the privilege of being chosen as God's people went the responsibility of living according to the laws that he had given them. These covered all aspects of life, moral, civil and religious; God was to govern all areas of their lives. He gave them directions as to how they were to worship him, and laws to govern their social behaviour. When there was a legal dispute for which no law had been given, Moses had to seek direct guidance from God, as in Num.36:5 where, after a problem had been brought to Moses, we read "Then at the LORD's command Moses gave this order to the Israelites".

Judgment on sin

The Law also prescribed the penalties that were to be carried out if a law was broken. Judgment was necessary to uphold the law. Sometimes we read that God himself carried out the sentence, especially for national sins. This was the result of the special relationship between God and the Jews; he was pleased when they obeyed his laws, but when they disobeyed, he showed wrath by executing judgment.

The wrath of God

Some people have difficulty in understanding what the Bible means by the wrath of God. It is important to understand that this is not personal annoyance but a deep concern that the people he created are doing wrong. We do well to be angry when a terrorist bomb destroys innocent civilians or when a child gets away with bullying others. In the same way, when the Bible speaks of God's wrath, it shows his distress at the fact that man is breaking the laws he has made, for these laws are for our good, and breaking them causes disharmony between people and between us and God. God's wrath means his judgment on sin, this is not the outworking of an impersonal justice, but the action of a personal God.

God wants us to enjoy the benefits of doing right, so when he gave his laws to the Jews he also warned them of the consequences of disobeying them. In the book of Deuteronomy we read that Moses told the people that disasters would come on them if they disobeyed God's commands. Then the surrounding nations would say, "The LORD's anger burned against this land, so that he brought on it all the curses written in this book" (Deut.29:27).

Much later, God told the Jews through Jeremiah that because of their sin, "My anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place, on man and beast, on the trees of the field and on the fruit of the ground, and it will burn and not be quenched" (Jer.7:20). In fact it was the Babylonians who devastated the land, but the destruction they caused was to be seen as actions of God in judgment on the people because they had broken his laws.

There is a world of difference between this description of God's righteous anger and the unpredictable nature of the gods of other nations in Bible times. These had to be placated in different ways, and sadly the worshipper could not always be sure how the god would react when an offering was made. If we compare this with the detailed regulations given in the Old Testament we can see that God wants us to approach him in worship, and has shown us how we can do this.

New Testament teaching

When Jesus came, he upheld the moral teaching of the Old Testament. He said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them" (Mt.5:17). But he showed them that behind the detailed laws given through Moses are universal principles by which all should live.

Paul points out that those who do not know about God's laws still have a natural sense of right and wrong which he describes by saying "the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness" (Rom.2:15). Sin is acting against whatever law a person has received.

Jesus also taught about judgment. He warned the towns that rejected his disciples' preaching that God's judgment on them would be even more severe than that on Sodom, "I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town" (Luke 10:12). A whole chapter in Matthew (ch.23) is devoted to harsh words against the hypocritical teachers of the law who made themselves out to be so virtuous. He described them as a "brood of vipers ... condemned to hell" (v.33), and predicted that they would show their true nature by persecuting the teachers he was going to send. Many of his parables teach of future judgment, such as the parable of the Weeds where all who do evil will be thrown "into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt. 13:42).

Writing to the Christians in Rome, Paul says "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (Rom.1:18). He goes on to show that such rejection of God's truth leads to a descending spiral of human depravity. Much of the suffering in our world is the direct result of man's ignoring God's laws, and this is not an impersonal principle of cause and effect, instead Paul repeatedly says "God gave them over" to various forms of depravity (v.24,26,28).

He also speaks of a future judgment when we will be judged according to how much of God's truth has been revealed to us, "All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law" (Rom.2:12). "This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ" (v.16).

The book of Revelation is full of grim images of judgment, similar to that of the Old Testament, such as "the great winepress of God's wrath (14:19). The final picture is a "lake of fire", and anyone whose name is not "found written in the book of life" is thrown into it (20:14,15). God's purposes can only be fully achieved when evil has been removed.

So we see that the New Testament emphasises God's judgment as much as the Old, the only difference is when this judgment takes place. Usually judgment in Old Testament times was some obvious disaster to provide a visible deterrent, and also because there was no clear teaching about life after death. In the New Testament, part of God's judgment is the depravity that results from habitual sin, but there will also be a final judgment after death. In this life people always have a chance to repent.

God's mercy

We must not take these references to God's wrath in isolation, frequently we read that God is "slow to anger". On Mount Sinai, God revealed himself to Moses as "The LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness ... Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished" (Ex.34:6,7). Both sides of God's nature must be kept in balance, sometimes he judges, sometimes he holds back judgment to give people a chance to repent.

The prophet Micah says "You do not stay angry for ever but delight to show mercy" (Mi.7:18), and Jeremiah, sitting in the ruins of Jerusalem could say "he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men" (Lam.3:33). God also told Ezekiel "I take no pleasure in

the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live" (Eze.33:11). Isaiah quotes God as saying, "In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you" (Isa.54:8).

The love of God

Some people have great difficulty in reconciling the passages which speak of God's love and mercy with those that speak of God's justice and wrath. This is partly because the word `love' has come to mean so many different things today. When the Bible speaks of love, it is what God shows, not what we think he should do. The proof that God loves us all is seen in the fact that he has provided a means of forgiveness, and the cost he bore in providing this.

Also, because God loves us, he does not force his forgiveness on us, it is offered for us to receive it by faith. This is why there is still so much sin and evil in the world. God allows this state to continue till the day when he will remove all that opposes him. At present, people have a chance to repent and find his forgiveness.

* * * *

The Bible looks on sin both from a personal and from a legal point of view. God made us to have fellowship with himself, but when we sin against the laws he has given us, this cuts us off from him. He is justly angry when we deliberately do what we know is wrong. We can also look at the situation by analogy with a family, a school, or the law of the land. Sin must be judged if right and wrong are to have any meaning. In Old Testament times, certain events were said to be God's judgment as a warning, so that people could learn the consequences of wrong doing. Now we know there is to be a final judgment when all who have ever lived will be judged. But God has also shown love and mercy in providing forgiveness of sin, we can choose whether to accept or reject this offer.

The problem is, how can God forgive sin and still uphold the principles of justice? The rest of this book seeks to answer this question.

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Questions for thought and discussion

1. What does it mean to forgive a person who has wronged you but is unrepentant?
2. Are some of the social problems of today due to a lack of emphasis on the discipline of children, and a lack of respect for the law among adults?
3. In our legal system, should the punishment be made to fit the crime?

Chapter 2 Atonement

Secular meanings: ancient and modern

In modern English, the word 'atone' means 'to make amends' for some wrong done. So for example, we say that somebody who has served his time in prison has atoned for his crime. But this is certainly not its meaning when it is used in the Bible.

When the King James Version was being translated, the word 'atonement' meant to restore harmonious relations between two people who had quarrelled. It made them 'at one', being based on the old word 'onement' which meant 'harmony'. This is why on the one occasion that the word 'atonement' is used in the New Testament in the King James Version (Rom.5:11), it is translated 'reconciliation' in the N.I.V. But reconciliation is what results from atonement, and this word is discussed in chapter 6.

In the Bible, the word has a different meaning.

Bible use

We first meet the word 'atonement' (Hebrew *kpr*) in the Bible in connection with the regulations for sacrificing animals that God gave to Moses. Today, when Muslims openly slaughter a sheep on their Sheep Feast, many in England find it repulsive. But we need to realise that in Bible times, people of all religions believed that their god wanted them to kill animals on certain occasions, and usually all or part of the animal was then burnt on an altar.

So we can understand that the detailed regulations found in the books of Exodus to Deuteronomy were not telling the Jews to do something completely new, instead, an existing practice was given a special meaning. They were told they could offer an animal on occasions such as giving thanks to God, or if somebody was being set apart for a particular task such as that of priest.

If somebody committed a serious offence such as murder, or deliberately and persistently broke the laws that God gave through Moses, the death penalty was prescribed. Such a person did not deserve to live among God's people. But if a person unintentionally broke a particular regulation (and there were many of these!), he was told to kill an animal and burn it on the altar. Leviticus chapter 4 lists various kinds of animals to be killed for different classes of people, and at the end of each regulation we read words such as "In this way the priest will make atonement for the man's sin, and he will be forgiven" (e.g. v.26). This means that, before sin can be forgiven, atonement must be made. And the various rituals were prescribed to show that it was God who was saying how atonement could be made.

Four ways of understanding the word 'atone'

In the Old Testament, we find four separate ways of understanding how atonement works, but they all have the same result, the removal of the guilt of sin.

1. As a Covering

The Hebrew word 'to atone' can also mean 'to cover' in the ordinary sense of the word. In Gen.6:14 this word is used to describe how Noah covered the ark with pitch. So we can picture atonement as being the act of covering sin in the same way that modern 'liquid paper' is used to make a correction.

The writer of Ps.32 understood forgiveness in this way for he wrote, "Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered" (Ps.32:1).

(In Hebrew poetry, often the same thing is said in two different ways on two adjacent lines, so this quotation shows that the writer thought of forgiveness and covering sin as meaning the same thing.)

2. *Washing away*

Some claim that the Hebrew word 'atone' comes from a word meaning to 'wash away', or 'obliterate'. This fits in with the fact that in the Old Testament, ritual washings were prescribed for the removal of all forms of ceremonial defilement which prevented them from worshipping God.

The picture of washing away sin is illustrated in the prayer David prayed after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba and then repented,

"Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin" (Ps.51:2).
"Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow" (v.7).

3. *Taking away*

We find yet another illustration of atonement in Lev.10:17. Moses, speaking about a sin offering that was being offered for the people says, "it was given to you to take away the guilt of the community by making atonement for them before the LORD". So when sin is atoned for, we can say the guilt is carried away.

This idea is illustrated in a ceremony performed on the Day of Atonement, as described in Leviticus 16. A goat was chosen, and the high priest had to lay both his hands on its head and "confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites - all their sins - and put them on the goat's head" (Lev.16:21). The high priest was acting on behalf of the whole nation, confessing their sin and symbolically transferring it to the goat. Then this goat was led away into the wilderness so that "the goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place" (v.22), showing that their sin had been taken away. The Day of Atonement is still observed by Jews today, (they call it Yom Kippur) and it is regarded as one of their most important festivals.

4. *A ransom price*

There is a word which is usually translated 'ransom' which is closely linked to the word 'atone'. The owner of a dangerous bull was liable to be put to death if it killed anybody, but a ransom could be paid instead (Ex.21:30). We also read that when a census was taken, a poll tax had to be levied, "each one must pay the LORD a ransom for his life at the time that he is counted". This is so that "no plague will come on them when you number them" (Ex.30:12).

In these examples, the word 'ransom' means the price which must be paid to save a life which is threatened. So we can also look on atonement as the price to be paid for sin to be forgiven, and we saw in chapter 1 that death is the ultimate penalty for sin.

All these four pictures have the same result, the sin is not overlooked for the guilt of the sin is first removed.

Understanding Old Testament sacrifices

The details of the Old Testament regulations for sacrifice may not mean much to us today, but there are two parts of the ritual which do have a particular significance.

First, when a person brought an animal as a sin offering, he was told to place his hand on its head (e.g. Lev.4:4,15,24,29,33). This suggests that the person's guilt was being transferred to the animal. And we have just seen that on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest acting on behalf of all the people laid his hand on the head of the goat and confessed the people's sin which the goat would then take away symbolically.

The second detail concerned the blood of the animal, for blood was considered to have special significance; it was the symbol of a life given up in death. We read in Lev.17:11, "the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar". When an animal was slaughtered for sacrifice, its blood had to be collected. Sometimes the Israelites were told to pour it out and sometimes to sprinkle it. This taught the people that all life was to be held in respect, and also that atonement could be made at the cost of the death of an

animal.

Because of the special significance of blood in the ritual of animal sacrifice, often the word 'blood' is used throughout the Bible to refer to death, whether of an animal in sacrifice, or of a person killed.

This is also why Jews never eat blood. They still make sure that the blood is completely drained out after an animal is slaughtered. Only such meat is considered "kosher", fit for a Jew to eat.

Atonement and forgiveness

The main disadvantage of any religious ritual is that it can hide a wrong attitude of mind. Today it is possible to attend a communion service, to say the correct words, to partake of the bread and wine, but to receive no spiritual benefit. So in Old Testament times, we read that the Jews were offering animals for sacrifice in the belief that God simply wanted them to perform the outward action. But in their private lives there was violence, oppression of the poor by the rich, and also they also made sacrifices to other gods to ensure things such as the success of their crops and the fertility of their animals.

So prophets such as Isaiah and Hosea told the people that their sacrifices were useless. What God wanted was a right attitude to him and to their fellow-man. Isaiah gave the people this message from God:

"I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.
Stop bringing meaningless offerings!
Your incense is detestable to me." (Isa.1:11,13)
And in Hosea 6:6 God says,
"I desire mercy, not sacrifice,
and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings."

What was wrong was not the principle of sacrifice, but that the people thought that they could perform the ritual to appease God, and then live as they pleased. We will see in the next chapter that sin is not only breaking religious regulations, but also breaking God's moral laws.

In Isaiah 55:7, God promises to pardon freely the wicked man who forsakes his evil ways and turns to him. Jeremiah has a similar message from God to the people of Judah that when "each of them will turn from his wicked way; then I will forgive their wickedness and their sin" (Jer.36:3). In Ezekiel 16, after a long chapter in which God condemns the Jews for their idolatry, he promises, "Then, when I make atonement for you for all you have done, you will remember and be ashamed" (v.63). Here it is God himself who promises to make atonement, there is no mention of them having to offer any sacrifices.

New Testament teaching on atonement

At the start of the New Testament, we read that John the Baptist came with a message similar to that of the Old Testament prophets. He called on the people to repent, promising judgment if they did not. He told those who listened that only a changed life would prove that their repentance was genuine (Lk.3:11-14). Then he baptised them as a symbol that their sins were washed away. This continued the Old Testament custom (mentioned already) of washing all or part of the body to symbolise the removal of defilement which prevented them from worshipping God.

When Jesus started preaching, he also assured people that sin could be forgiven, saying that what was needed was faith in his power to bring forgiveness. When a "sinful woman" anointed his feet, he saw that she had repented and believed that Jesus could forgive her, so he gave her this assurance, "Your sins are forgiven" (Lk.7:48), "Your faith has saved you" (v.50). This was something new, he was claiming the authority to pronounce that a person's sin was forgiven.

He made this more clear when four men brought a paralysed man for him to heal. Not only did he heal the man, but he said to him "Son, your sins are forgiven" (Mk.2:5). We also read that

he said this when he "saw their faith" (Mk.2:5); it was five peoples' faith that was active in this case! The religious leaders who were listening challenged his authority to pronounce such forgiveness, so he made the bold claim that "the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (v.11). Then he healed the paralysed man as proof that he had this authority.

One of the first hints we have in the New Testament that a new means of atonement was to be revealed comes from words spoken by John the Baptist. One day he saw Jesus passing by and he told his followers, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). A lamb was one of the animals which were offered as sacrifice, and we have seen that atonement can be looked on as the means whereby sin is taken away. So here is a promise that Jesus will be able to take away the sin of anybody in the world, whether Jew or Gentile.

At the Last Supper, Jesus said words which show that his death would be the means whereby sin could be forgiven. As he took one of the cups of wine he said, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt.26:28). We have seen that in the Old Testament, the mention of blood meant death, so Jesus was saying that he was about to die to bring forgiveness of sin.

The New Testament view of Old Testament sacrifices

After Jesus' death, Jewish Christians began to realise that the animal sacrifices prescribed in the Old Testament were no longer needed. This is one of the themes of the Epistle to the Hebrews, and it also helps us today to learn something from the rituals commanded in the Old Testament. The basic principle is stated in Heb.9:22, "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness". The main disadvantage of the Old Testament system was that the same sacrifices had to be "repeated endlessly year after year" (10:1) "because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (v.4). However, Christ was "sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people" (9:28). He represented both the animal that was sacrificed, and the high priest who offered this sacrifice, for he "offered for all time one sacrifice for sins" (10:12). Therefore, "there is no longer any sacrifice for sin." (10:18). The main reason that animal sacrifices were prescribed for sin was that they prepared people to understand why Jesus had to die as the only real sacrifice which can atone for sin. But after the death of Jesus, animal sacrifices were no longer necessary, the symbol had been replaced by the reality.

The New Testament words for atonement

Those who translated the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek had a problem finding suitable Greek words for 'atone' and 'atonement'. On most occasions, they translated them by words which were used for placating angry gods. Now in both the Old Testament and the New we read of God's wrath or anger at human sin, and we saw in chapter 1 that we must not think of this in the sense of personal annoyance, rather it is like the attitude of a judge when a serious crime has been committed and judgment must be passed on the person convicted. And it is God who prescribes the means of atonement, there is never any question of people having to think up a way of appeasing God.

In the King James Version, the words for 'atonement' are sometimes translated by the word 'propitiation', which means something done to make somebody 'propitious' or favourable. Now while this word implies that God's wrath against our sin is turned away, we must not think that we can do anything to placate God.

In the R.S.V., the word 'expiation' is used in place of 'propitiation'. This has a similar meaning, the means of appeasement or averting evil, or the removal of guilt. But the word 'expiation' says nothing about the person who is being appeased, whereas in the Bible it is always God who provides the means of atonement. There is never any suggestion that there are moral standards which exist independently of God. Sin is breaking God's law, and it is God who has provided the means of forgiveness.

The main disadvantage the words 'propitiation' and 'expiation' is that they do not make the connection with the Old Testament teaching on atonement. For this reason, it is better to use

words such as "atonement" or "atoning sacrifice".

Occurrences of the word 'atonement' in the New Testament

The Greek words for 'atonement' do not often occur in the New Testament, but where they do, they teach some very important things about how the death of Jesus provides atonement for sin. In the epistle to the Hebrews we read that Jesus acted as a high priest, he shared our human life, and understands our weaknesses. In 2:27 we read that he was made like us "in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people." This is explained more clearly later in the epistle where it is said that his death was the one sufficient sacrifice for sin (see above).

In 1 John 4:10, the writer emphasises that God took the initiative in providing atonement for sin. "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." It was because God loved us that he provided a means of atonement for sin. This does not conflict with passages which speak of God's wrath. Love and wrath can both be shown by one person; wrath is God's attitude to wrong doing, but in his love he has provided a means of forgiveness. And the extent of God's love is shown by the price he was willing to pay to provide the means of forgiveness.

1 John 2:2 adds that atonement is available to all, it says of Jesus, "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world". Also, in ch.2:1, we read that Jesus now "speaks to the Father in our defence", the one who gave himself as an atoning sacrifice. It is he who turns away the wrath of God due to us because of our sin, there is no question of our needing to appease God.

In Rom.3:25 we read that "God presented him (Jesus) as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood". Here again the use of the word "blood" shows that atonement is made by Jesus' death. Also, we receive forgiveness by faith, not by doing any act of penance or any other 'good deed'.

* * * *

We have seen that, before God can forgive sin, atonement must be made for that sin. This can be understood in several ways, it can mean that the sin is covered, or that it is washed away, or carried away, or that a ransom price has been paid. Also, when atonement is made, the wrath of God against the sinner is turned away. This must not be regarded in any sense as appeasement, for it was God who prescribed sacrifices to atone for sin in Old Testament times. But there could be no atonement unless the person truly repented of his sin.

Although we do not need to offer animals in sacrifice any more, the Old Testament regulations are of value in teaching us how seriously we must take the question as to how we approach a holy God. Now we understand that Christ's death is the reality to which the symbolism of sacrifice pointed.

Since Bible times, Christians have come to use the word 'atonement' to mean all that is connected with the death of Jesus and forgiveness of sin. This wider meaning of the word is discussed in the final chapter of this book.

* * * *

Questions for thought and discussion

1. How would you explain to a non-Christian that God cannot just forget that we have sinned, but has to provide a basis for forgiveness?
2. Is there any sense in which we can make amends for our sin against God?

Atonement

3. What value, if any, to a Christian is a detailed study of the system of Old Testament sacrifices?
4. A sacrifice was something given to God. This is completely different from the modern meaning which is a `hardship'. Look up these New Testament references to sacrifice to see what we can give to God in place of animal sacrifices:
Rom.12:1, Phil.2:17, 4:18, Heb.13:15.

Chapter 3 Righteousness and Justification

In British culture, we make a distinction between private moral standards and public legislation. The law of the land only legislates against moral behaviour which is considered to be a danger to society, such as causing physical harm or grossly offending public taste. For this reason, in our everyday language, we make a distinction between legal terms such as 'justice', and moral words such as 'righteousness'.

On the whole, there is a considerable difference in people's minds between the legal and the moral approach to a situation. This is partly due to imperfections in our legal system, and also to the fact that ours is a secular society with widely differing views as to what is morally right and wrong. This may be one reason why some people object to thinking of God as a judge, because the realm of impartial justice is far removed from that of personal relationships.

But in Old Testament times, no such distinction was made. God gave the Jews civil laws to regulate their social life, moral laws to govern their private lives, and religious laws to govern their worship. There was no rigid separation between legal justice and personal righteousness. One Hebrew word covers all three areas of life, so it is sometimes translated 'righteousness' and sometimes 'justice'. Linked with this is the word 'justify'.

Basic meanings

The basic meaning of the Hebrew word for 'righteous' is 'hard', 'straight', or 'conforming to a standard', and in the Bible, it is God who sets the standard.

Because God's laws cover every aspect of the life, we see that this word is applied to weights and measures, and here the N.I.V translates it as "honest". The Jews are commanded to "use honest scales and honest weights" (Lev. 19:36), and the reason given is the same as the reason given for obeying many other laws for right moral behaviour, "I am the LORD your God". This phrase occurs many times in that chapter, God is asserting that he is the one who tells them the standards they are to live by. There is a similar command given in Deut. 25:15, and here the motive is "so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you". Good behaviour benefits the whole society!

In Eze. 45:10, this command is repeated, "you are to use accurate scales". Ezekiel has just seen a vision of a new temple, and has prescribed the sacrifices that were to be offered in it. God was teaching him that it is as important to be honest in business as it is to offer the correct sacrifice.

Legal applications

The same word is used in legal situations; in Lev. 19:15, the people are told to "judge your neighbour fairly" (K.J.V. "in righteousness"). In Deut. 16:20, judges are commanded, "Follow justice and justice alone", the word is repeated to emphasise how important it is.

In Ex. 23:7, it is used to describe a person who is innocent, so the word is translated "honest", "do not put an innocent or honest person to death". Isaiah condemns those who "acquit the guilty for a bribe, but deny justice to the innocent" (K.J.V. "take away the righteousness of the righteous from him") Isa. 5:23.

Moral aspect

The book of Deuteronomy records Moses' final words to the Jews before they entered the land of Canaan which God had promised them. He reminded them that God had given them laws to govern their behaviour, to show them what righteousness meant in practice; "if we are careful to obey all this law before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness" (Deut. 6:25). When they kept the law, it should not just be doing right for its own sake, but to show their fear or reverence of God, "The LORD commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the LORD our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive" (v. 24).

In Eze.18:5-9 we have an comprehensive list of what a righteous man should and should not do, it includes such things as avoiding pagan worship as well as upholding social justice, all actions which are described as "what is just and right" (v.5), ways in which a person could show he was righteous.

The result of being righteous

In Ps.15 we find another list of things a righteous man does, it includes speaking the truth and avoiding doing harm to his neighbour. He is one "whose walk is blameless" (v.2), meaning that no moral fault can be found in him. Only that sort of person is fit to dwell in God's sanctuary, in other words to have a right relationship with God. For those who would truly worship God, a right life is far more important than correct ritual.

Noah is described as "a righteous man" and this is further explained by saying he was "blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God" (Gen.6:9). (To "walk with God" means that he had a close relationship with God.) So the word 'righteous' describes a person's character as shown by the fact that he does what is right in all aspects of life, and it is such a person who pleases God.

The reward of the righteous, and judgment on the wicked

One theme which is emphasised throughout the whole of the Old Testament is that God judges people according to their deeds. In Deuteronomy chapters 27 and 28 we read of various blessings which will come to those who obey God, and the disasters that will happen to them if they disobey. This is the result of the covenant relationship that God entered into with the Jews, which is studied in chapter 8.

In the Psalms and the book of Proverbs there are many references to the righteous, and often their destiny is contrasted with that of the wicked. Psalm 1 is one example; after describing various features of the lives of righteous and wicked men, the conclusion in v.6 is

"For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous
but the way of the wicked will perish."

Ps.34 expands on the blessings the righteous enjoy,

"The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous
and his ears are attentive to their cry" (v.15)

"A righteous man may have many troubles,
but the LORD delivers him from them all" (v.19)

by contrast, v.21 assures us that "evil will slay the wicked".

These quotations are typical examples of how the Bible views a situation in "black and white" with no shade of grey. It gives general principles. The fact that none are perfect is considered later on in this chapter.

The last quotations shows that we cannot say that the righteous man will have no trouble in life, rather that he can look to God to help in times of difficulty. In the Bible there are many examples of where people experienced suffering that was not God's judgment on any specific sin. Job is the classic example of this, he contracted a very painful illness which was certainly not a judgment for doing wrong, but turned out to show that he had a true faith in God.

Jeremiah also had a problem with the fact that God did not always appear to judge the wicked, for in Jer.12:1, he says "You are always righteous, O LORD, .. Why does the way of the wicked prosper?" And Habakkuk (in ch.1 of his book) found it hard to understand why the wicked were allowed to continue to cause so much trouble in the world. They had to learn that the blessings of God may not be material, what matters first is our relationship with him.

Justification in the Old Testament

The Hebrew word which is usually translated 'justify' is related to the word 'righteous', and to find out what it means we must first see how it applies in legal situations. In Deut.25:1, God tells

judges to decide on legal disputes by "acquitting (K.J.V. "justify") the innocent and condemning the guilty". Their judgments should reflect that of God for he says "I will not acquit the guilty" (Ex.23:7). Sadly they did not always judge justly, Isaiah condemns those "who justify the wicked for reward, and take away the righteousness of the righteous from him" (Isa.5:23, K.J.V.).

In Ps.24:3 the writer asks,

"Who may ascend the hill of the LORD?
Who may stand in his holy place?"

Then he answers,

"He who has clean hands and a pure heart" (v.4)

and continues,

"He will receive blessing from the LORD
and vindication from God his Saviour" (v.5)

The word "vindication" literally means "righteousness" (as in the K.J.V.), so this passage means that somebody who has right motives can approach God because he considers him to be righteous.

Therefore in a legal situations, to justify means to acquit a person, pronouncing him innocent. Similarly, in a moral situation, to be justified means that a person is considered to be righteous, and this enables him to have a right relationship with God.

Righteousness and forgiveness

If we are truly honest with ourselves, we will be only too aware of our imperfections. In Ps.143:2, the writer says

"Do not bring your servant into judgment,
for no-one living is righteous before you".

So we need to ask, how can anybody be described as righteous if we all sin? The answer is when God forgives the sin.

In Ps.32:1 the person who has been forgiven of his sin is pronounced to be blessed or happy. Then in v.2 he is called "the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him". When God forgives somebody, it means that he declares that person innocent, as if he had never sinned, and his relationship with God is restored.

Isaiah chapter 53 is unique in the whole of the Old Testament. It predicts that a person who is described as the "Servant of the LORD" will suffer and be put to death because of the sins of others. In v.11 we read that he will provide a means whereby people can be justified,
"by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many."
and he will bear their iniquities."

The only satisfactory interpretation of this chapter is that it was fulfilled in Christ's suffering, death and resurrection. What he did was to bear the sins of "many", this is how they can be justified. This teaching is made more clear in the New Testament, after the death of Jesus.

God's righteousness

Because God created us, it is he who determines what is right and wrong, it is he who decides who is righteous and who is not. What God does is right by definition, his actions set the standard of right and wrong. This contrasts with the belief of the ancient Greeks who used to say that there were absolute moral standards independent of their gods.

In the Psalms, God's righteousness is a frequent cause for praise. In Ps.50:6 we read,

"the heavens proclaim his righteousness,
for God himself is judge."

God is righteous because, in his dealings with men, he upholds his own standards of right and wrong. In Ps.89:14 the writer says of God,

"Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne"

Then in Ps.9:8 the writer declares,

"He will judge the world in righteousness;

he will govern the peoples with justice."

The author of Ps.119 tells us that God's laws reflect his nature. A recurring theme of that psalm is that his laws, commands and statutes are righteous,

"All your words are true;
all your righteous laws are eternal" (v.160).

His laws are true in the sense that they are a reliable guide as to how God wants us to behave, and they are eternal because God does not change.

Teaching of the Jewish Rabbis

The writings of Jewish teachers after the end of the Old Testament period show that they came to believe that it is on the basis of our actions that we are judged to be righteous. These are awarded a plus or minus value according to how good or bad they are, and people who have a negative balance will be punished, though they were not certain when that judgment would take place. There may be judgment in this life, but certainly there is final judgment after death when the righteous will go to Paradise and the wicked to Gehenna. However, as they did not know the amount of credit or debit attached to each deed, there was no absolute assurance as to a person's future destiny. This is still the official teaching of modern Judaism.

For this reason, the Apostle Paul who was brought up to be a very strict Jew could say that before his conversion, "as for legalistic righteousness, (he was) faultless" (Phil.3:6). Like many other Pharisees, he always did what he believed to be right, and therefore he considered that he was righteous in God's sight.

One difficulty with the teaching of the Pharisees was that they tried to make detailed regulations to cover all situations, and lost sight of the general principles behind the laws. Jesus pointed out how ridiculous this attitude was by telling them, "You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel" (Mt.23:24)!

Justification in the New Testament

When Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, he contrasted the attitude of two men who went to the temple to pray. The Pharisee spent some time listing his good deeds to prove his piety. But the penitent Tax Collector admitted that he was a sinner, and prayed for God's forgiveness. As a result, he "went home justified before God" (Lk.18:14). He was declared righteous in God's sight, as if he had never sinned. So now we need to consider the important question which has been mentioned already, how can God be just and yet justify a sinner?

Paul's teaching in Romans

This question is answered most fully in the epistle to the Romans. At the start of the book, Paul makes it clear that all have sinned; Jews have broken the laws God gave them, and Gentiles have sinned against the standards of right and wrong in their own consciences. His argument lasts for two chapters, and includes several quotations from the Old Testament. Finally he concludes by saying that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23).

Then we read the dramatic statement, "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known" (3:21). This is no new idea coming from Paul's mind, for he adds "to which the Law and the Prophets (i.e. the Old Testament writers) testify." We receive this righteousness "through faith in his blood" (3:25), meaning that it is Jesus' death which enables us to be justified, and we receive this by faith. Also, we have not deserved this, it is "by his grace" (v.24), grace is undeserved favour.

Justification and God's righteousness

The paradox is that God acquits those who are guilty yet remains righteous! For in ch.3:26 we read "he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus." In the previous verse we read that his justice was demonstrated by the fact that "he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished". Even more extreme is the statement in ch.4:5, "God who justifies the wicked".

The reason why God can be just in justifying us is because there is a proper basis for it. It is because God has presented Jesus "as a sacrifice of atonement" (3:25), and also because Jesus has brought "redemption" (v.24, (the meaning of this word is discussed in chapter 6).

Justification by faith

Paul goes on to give three quotations from the Old Testament to support his argument.

In 4:3 he quotes Gen. 15:6, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." God had promised Abraham a son and through this son he would have many descendants. He had not done anything to deserve this promise, but had shown the right attitude to God by believing it, and it was this faith that made him acceptable to God.

The second quotation is in 4:7,8 where he quotes from Psalm 32:1,2, a passage which has already been referred to in this chapter,

"Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.

Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him."

The person whose sins have been forgiven by God can be truly be considered blessed or happy, there is no suggestion that any good deeds are needed to merit this forgiveness.

The third quotation is in ch.1:17 where Paul quotes Hab.2:4, "The righteous will live by faith." This verse is shown to be important because it is also quoted in Gal.3:11 and Heb.10:38.

The results of justification

To be justified means that God pronounces us 'not guilty'. "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (ch.8:1). In ch.5:9, we read "Since we have now been justified by his (Christ's) blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!" Here the mention of God's wrath must refer to the final judgment, as it speaks of being saved in the future.

But to be justified also affects our present relationship with him, we have that "peace with God" which comes from the assurance that God will accept and not condemn us. (ch.5:1). "We have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand" (v.2), this means that we have a relationship with God here and now which is secure because it is on the basis of his grace and not on our own efforts.

We may suffer for this faith, but this should result in a strengthening of our character (v.3,4). Then to assure us of God's love for us despite life's difficulties, we have the Holy Spirit within us (v.5).

Practical righteousness in Romans

But if there is nothing we can do to deserve our justification, what is there to stop us sinning in the future? As Paul says in ch.6:1, "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" He answers this question with an analogy from the slave market. He tells his readers that before they became Christians, they were slaves to sin, and this brought spiritual death, for "the wages of sin is death" (v.23), but now they have become "slaves to God" (v.22). We cannot say "I am justified, so it does not matter how I live", for if we consider the effect of sin, we should not want to sin any more. And so what we need to do is to consciously offer ourselves "to righteousness leading to holiness" (v.19). Here, Paul is using the word "righteousness" in the active sense, doing what is right.

In ch.7:7-25, he considers the fact that, so long as we have a human body, we shall be tempted to sin. If we truly want to obey God, our minds will tell us that the commandments of God are righteous (v.12). We want to do good, but find ourselves unable to do so because of our sinful nature (v.15), a battle rages within us (v.23). To gain victory in this battle we must look to the Holy Spirit to give us the power to obey God "in order that the righteous requirements of the law might

be fully met is us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit" (8:4). Practical righteousness for the Christian is living according to God's laws, led and strengthened by the Holy Spirit. This will also save us from legalism; we do not obey rigid and detailed prescriptions of behaviour as the Pharisees did, the Holy Spirit will guide us so that we shall know what is right in any given situation.

The teaching in James' epistle

Those who like to look for apparent contradictions in the teaching of different parts of the Bible are quick to point out that there is a verse in the epistle of James which appears to say the exact opposite of what Paul teaches about justification by faith. In Jas.2:24 we read "You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone".

But if we look at the passage as a whole, we see that James is talking about a completely different situation from what Paul was considering in Romans 1-8. First, the words "faith alone" to James mean a belief in God which does not lead to obedience. "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that - and shudder" (2:19). By contrast, Abraham's faith led to his obeying God. James quotes the same verse (Gen.15:6) as Paul, but then goes on to say that Abraham's faith was proved to be genuine when he obeyed God by being willing to offer up his son Isaac as a sacrifice. Also, in v.24, James is using the word "justified" in the sense of having done something that pleased God. God is pleased only when a person's actions prove that their faith is genuine and is not simply an intellectual belief in God.

Righteousness in the New Testament

So we see that sometimes in the New Testament the word 'righteousness' is used in the special sense of how God regards a person whose sins are forgiven. This is sometimes called 'imputed righteousness'. But more often it is used in the more general sense of a person's character as proved by their actions. And because we can only truly obey God through the power of the Holy Spirit, this sense is called 'imparted righteousness'. The context will usually make clear which sense of the word is being used.

Jesus taught his followers, "unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt.5:20). Now these were people who could not be more scrupulous in their observation of the laws that they taught people to obey. However, the disciples had to learn that Jesus was giving a deeper meaning to 'righteousness'. It is a gift we seek for as we seek God's kingdom, for Jesus said "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Mt.6:33). Also, this seeking must be so intense that it can be described as a "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Mt.5:6).

Paul often uses the word "righteousness" in the practical sense, meaning doing right. In Phil.1:11, Paul prays that the Christians at Philippi be "filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ". Fruit is a common biblical metaphor for the visible proof of genuine spiritual life. Twice Paul encourages Timothy to avoid temptation and "pursue righteousness" (1 Tim.6:11, 2 Tim.2:22). He is helped in this by the "Holy Scriptures" (our Old Testament) which are described as useful for "training in righteousness" (2 Tim.3:16, 'training' is a word which is used for the disciplining of children).

The first epistle of John gives various tests which we can apply to find out who are the true children of God. In ch.3:7 we read, "he who does what is right is righteous". What we do reveals the kind of person we are. The opposite kind of person is described in v.10. "Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God". A person who has become a child of God by receiving the Holy Spirit will show this by doing what is right. This agrees with Christ's teaching that we find in Mt.7:17, "every good tree bears good fruit".

* * * *

None of us are perfect, we all fall short of God's absolute standard of righteousness. But because Christ in his death has provided atonement for sin, our sin can be forgiven if we repent.

This means that God now regards us as righteous, we have been justified. This comes about not because we have done anything to merit forgiveness, but because of what Christ has done for us. We receive righteousness as a gift, we are accepted by God, and so can enter into a right relationship with God.

However, there is still an obligation on us to obey God, this is practical righteousness. We do not follow a detailed set of rules, rather the Holy Spirit guides us so that we can know what is God's will, and gives us the power to do what is right.

God is righteous because he has given the laws by which men live. He also is the Judge of all. At present, he delays judgment to give people a chance to repent. One day, he will judge everybody. At that judgment, there will be no condemnation for those who have received his forgiveness. However, it will be an assessment of how we have lived, and this should be an incentive to us to seek to do what is right through the power of the Holy Spirit.

To some people, the picture of God as a stern Judge conflicts with the idea of a God of love. It is only part of the truth, though a necessary part. Because God is a just Judge, he will one day remove all that opposes his final purpose for us. We balance this with his love which is shown by the price he was willing to pay to provide a means whereby sin can be forgiven so that we can be at peace with him.

* * * *

Questions for thought and discussion

1. Were people in Old Testament times justified by faith or by what they did?
2. Does the emphasis on justification by faith lessen the importance of right living on our thinking? How can we keep the balance between the two aspects of Christian teaching?
3. How can we reconcile the picture of God as a just Judge with the teaching that God is love? Can a loving God punish those who refuse to obey him?
4. What rewards does the New Testament promise to the righteous?

ch.4 Holiness

The word 'holy' is a uniquely religious word. Something which is holy is different from ordinary things by its very nature. Many religions consider their god to be remote from mortal man, only approached by elaborate rituals. In the Bible we are told that God is different from us because of his divine nature, and also because we are sinful and he is morally perfect. But in spite of this, we read that God wants us to draw near to him; one of the major themes in the Bible is how sinful man can approach a holy God.

It is important to understand that there are two families of words in the English language connected with holiness, one from Latin and one from Anglo Saxon, but they mean the same. 'Sacred' means the same as 'holy'; to 'consecrate', 'hallow', and 'sanctify' all mean 'to make holy'; a 'sanctuary' is the same as a 'holy place', and a 'saint' is literally a 'holy person'.

The holiness of God

When Isaiah had his vision of the glory of God in the temple, he heard the seraphim cry
"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty" (Isa.6:3)

(The word 'holy' is repeated three times because that is the Hebrew way of saying "most holy".)
And his favourite name for God is "The Holy One of Israel".

The holiness of God is a frequent theme of worship in the Old Testament. In the 'Song of Hannah' we read of God's uniqueness,
"There is no-one holy like the LORD" (1 Sam.2:2).

In Ps.29:2, people are called to "worship the LORD in the splendour of his holiness". God's holiness is like a glorious adornment.

Another way of acknowledging that God is holy is to speak of his holy name,
"Let every creature praise his holy name
for ever and ever" (Ps.145:21).

To be aware of God's holiness should create in us fear (reverence) and awe, so Isaiah told the people when they were afraid of the enemy,
"The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy,
he is the one you are to fear,
he is the one you are to dread" (Isa.8:13).

The approach to a holy God

When God met with the Jews at Mount Sinai after they had left Egypt, he told them he wanted to "dwell among them" (Ex.25:8). He told Moses to erect a tent or tabernacle (KJV) as a symbol of his presence, "there ... I will meet with you" (Ex.25:22). Then Moses was given details of the construction of this Tent of Meeting, and of the sacrifices they could offer in worship. All this showed that God wants us to approach him in worship, but sinful man can only approach a holy God on the terms which he dictates.

Holy things and holy people

Everything connected with the Tent of Meeting was considered holy because it was set apart for God's use. The high priest had "sacred garments" (Ex.28:2) which were only worn when offering the sacrifices. There was special bread set out in on a table in the Tent of Meeting called the "bread of the Presence" (Ex.25:3), and only the priests could eat it. God said to Moses "It belongs to Aaron and his sons, who are to eat it in a holy place, because it is a most holy part of their regular share of the offerings made to the LORD by fire" (Lev.24:9). Moses was told to make "a sacred anointing oil" (Ex.30:25) for consecrating the priests and the Tent of Meeting, and nobody else was to make a perfume of the same formula on pain of death (v.33). Then he was told to anoint everything connected with the Tent of Meeting with this oil (Ex.40:9). After that they are described as "the most holy things" (Num.4:4), and only the Kohathites, one of the families of

Levites, could transport them.

Similarly, the temple which Solomon built in Jerusalem was set apart by God, he said he would put his Name there for ever (1 Kings 9:3), it is often called God's sanctuary (holy place) in the Old Testament.

God told the Jews that as a nation they were "holy people" (Ex.19:6). At the end of Moses' life when they were about to enter the land of Canaan, he reminded them "You are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession" (Dt.7:6). They were holy because God had set them apart from other nations to reveal himself to them.

Then out of the whole nation, certain people were set apart. In Ex.13:1, we read that God said to Moses "Consecrate to me every firstborn male". (The firstborn son was considered to be most important child, and was often given greater responsibility, so God was laying claim to their best sons.) But later the firstborn were replaced by the whole tribe of Levi, for when the Jews made a golden calf while Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving God's commands, only the Levites remained faithful to God by not joining in the idolatry. So Moses said to them "You have been set apart to the LORD today" (Ex.32:29). In Num.3:41 God explained that they were replacing the firstborn as being set apart for his service when he said "Take the Levites for me in place of all the firstborn of the Israelites". The duties of the Levites were to assist the priests when they offered sacrifices, and to take care of "all the furnishings of the Tent of Meeting" (Num.3:6-8).

Then out of the Levites, the descendants of Aaron, were chosen as priests. "Because they present the offerings made to the LORD by fire, the food of their God, they are to be holy" (Lev.21:6). Only the priests were allowed to offer sacrifices.

We can think of this setting apart of people as being like a series of concentric circles of increasing holiness: out of all the nations God set apart the nation of Israel, out of the Israelites God set apart the Levites, out of the Levites God set apart the priests, and of these, only the High Priest could enter the Most Holy Place in the Tent of Meeting where was the ark of the covenant, the symbol of God's presence.

Defilement

In Old Testament times, everything was divided into three categories; holy things, common (i.e. ordinary), and unclean or defiled. Ordinary things could become holy if they were set apart by dedicating them exclusively for God's use. But under no circumstances should unclean things come into contact with anything holy.

Some aspects of defilement were what we would regard as basic hygiene, for any bodily discharge, whether normal or abnormal, defiled a person (Lev.15). Certain animals were regarded as "unclean", and therefore could not be eaten (Lev.11). If a person came into contact with anything which was regarded as defiled, he had to perform a ritual of purification before he could join in worship again.

Because the priests came into contact with holy things, they had to be more careful about avoiding defilement. They could not attend to a dead person unless this was a close relative (Lev.21:1-4), nor could they marry a prostitute or a divorced woman (v.7). "Because they present the offerings made to the LORD by fire, the food of their God, they are to be holy" (v.6). If for any reason they became unclean, they had to wash thoroughly and remain unclean for the rest of the day; they could not eat any sacrifice while they were unclean (Lev.22:3-7). And the high priest could not even enter a place where there was a dead body (Lev.21:11), nor show the customary outward signs of mourning for the dead (Lev.21:10-15). He could only marry "a virgin from his own people, so that he will not defile his offspring among his people" (v.15).

In order to teach the significance of his holiness, there were occasions when God judged those who failed to observe the 'separation' of holy things with instant and dramatic death. When

Aaron's sons offered "unauthorised fire before the LORD" (Lev.10:1), we read that as judgment on them, "fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them" (v.2). The lesson that God was teaching them was

"Among those who approach me I will show myself holy;
in the sight of all the people I will be honoured" (v.3).

Then we read "the LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron ... tell your brother Aaron not to come whenever he chooses into the Most Holy place ... or else he will die, because I appear in the cloud over the atonement cover" (Lev.16:1,2). These words come at the beginning of the chapter where God gave the regulations for the Day of Atonement, the only day in the year when the High Priest could enter the Most Holy Place as we saw in chapter 2. Sinful man can only approach a holy God when his sin has been atoned for.

On another occasion, Korah a Levite, and two others challenged Moses' and Aaron's authority. "The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with them", they said, "Why then do you set yourselves above the LORD's assembly?" (Num.16:3). They were obviously minimising the idea of holiness. Moses' reply to the rebels was "The man the LORD chooses will be the one who is holy" (v.7). Moses was only holy because God had set him apart to speak to the nation through him. As vindication of Moses, and judgment on Korah and his followers, we read that Korah, his followers, and their families were "swallowed" by the earth (v.31-33).

Practical holiness

Because God regarded the Jews as holy people, he demanded a much higher standard of moral behaviour from them than from other nations. Lev.19 contains a list of various regulations, and at the beginning of the chapter, God tells the people "Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy" (Lev.19:2). Obeying God's laws did not make them holy, it was how they should live because they were holy. We find the same thought in Dt.28:9, "The LORD will establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the LORD your God and walk in his ways."

Many years later, the prophet Ezekiel told the people "because you have defiled my sanctuary with all your vile images and detestable practices, I myself will withdraw my favour" (Eze.5:11). He went on to tell them that they would be turned out of the land as judgment, they had not been living as God's holy people should.

Holiness is also mentioned specifically in connection with avoiding things that could defile them. A similar command to be holy occurs twice at the end of a long list of things they could not eat, described as "unclean" (Lev.11:44,45). Some of these were animals which are particularly susceptible to disease, so avoiding them was an obvious way of reducing the risk of food poisoning. They are also given very sensible advice about personal toilet arrangements in Dt.23:12-14), and the reason given is that "Your camp must be holy" (v.14). They are told not to eat carrion because "you are a people holy to the LORD your God" (Dt.14:21). Part of practical holiness is avoiding that which is unclean.

The prophet Ezekiel had some stern condemnation for the priests, "they do not distinguish between the holy and the common; they teach that there is no difference between the unclean and the clean" (Eze.22:26). To ignore these distinctions showed a disregard for God's nature, and this was a particularly serious sin as it was the duty of the priests to give a clear moral lead to the people.

One of the severest condemnations of the sins of the Jews in Old Testament times is when God said of them "wherever they went among the nations they profaned my holy name" (Eze.36:20). They were supposed to show by their actions what a holy God meant to them, instead they gave a wrong impression of God, which is described as profaning his holy name.

Holy People in the New Testament

When we come to the New Testament, we find that all Christians are called "saints", God's

holy people, whether they are Jew or Gentile. Paul tells the Christians both in Rome and Corinth that they are "called to be saints" (Rom.1:7, 1 Cor.1:2). And this is so because "We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ" (Heb.10:10).

Practical Holiness in the New Testament

The command to the Jews in Old Testament times to be holy is repeated in the New, applied to Christians. Peter tells the readers of his epistle, "Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written 'Be holy, because I am holy'" (1 Pet.1:15,16, he is quoting words which occur 4 times in Leviticus).

One problem Gentile Christians had to face was how much of the Old Testament regulations for ritual purity applied to them. Jesus stated the guiding principle for this when he came into controversy with the Pharisees. They had challenged him because his disciples did not wash their hands and arms right up to the elbow according to the prescribed ritual after they had been in the market place. In reply, Jesus stated the important principle that it is "what comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean'." (Mk.7:20). We saw that in the Old Testament, this was applied to bodily secretions, but Jesus gives a list of wrong actions that come from wrong thoughts, such as theft, murder and adultery (Mk.7:21-23). This shows that he regarded moral defilement as more serious than physical defilement.

Sanctification

In one sense a Christian is completely holy because the Holy Spirit has set that person apart. So sometimes the word "sanctified" is used to describe what happens to a person when they become a Christian. In 1 Cor.6:11 we read "you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."

But there is another sense in which we grow in holiness as our Christian character develops. In 2 Thes. 2:13 Paul tells his readers, "God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. This verse tells us that the Holy Spirit is at work throughout the life of a Christian. Both these verses use the Greek word *hagiasmos*, a word which describes the process of becoming holy.

In Rom.6, Paul says that a Christian must actively yield himself in obedience to God because we have been set free from bondage to sin, "offer them (i.e. the parts of your body) in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness (Rom.6:19). So there is a sense in which growth in holiness results from practical righteousness.

In 1 Thes.4 Paul deals with the problem of sexual impurity, a problem in the ancient world as it is a problem in the modern. This is one practical application of holiness, Paul writes "each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honourable" (1 Th. 4:4), "For God did not call us to be impure, but to lead a holy life" (v.7).

Final Sanctification

There is another Greek word which is also translated "sanctification" in English (*hagiosune*) which describes the state of being holy. In 1 Thes.3:13, Paul prays for his readers, "May he (God) strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones." Paul is clearly referring to the fact that Christians will be made perfectly holy when Christ comes again, for that is the completion of God's work of salvation in us (see chapter 10).

It is traditional for Christians to use the word "sanctification" for the work that the Holy Spirit does in the believer, bringing about growth in Christian character. So it is important to see that when the word occurs in the Bible, it can also have a past meaning, the work of God in setting us apart at the beginning of the Christian life, or it may refer to what takes place at death or when Christ will return, when this work of God in our life is completed.

Sanctification is the work of God

One thing that is stressed in the New Testament is that sanctification is the work of God. It is the Holy Spirit who sets us apart at conversion, it is He who gives us the power to lead a holy life, and at the end of our life on earth, the process will be complete. This is what Paul is speaking of in 1 Thes.5:23,24. "May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." The mention of three aspects of human nature shows that every part of us, material, mental and spiritual are involved in the process of sanctification. We cannot separate our life into watertight compartments.

Holiness and righteousness

'Holiness' has a very similar meaning to 'righteousness', and sometimes the words can occur together in one sentence. In Rom.6:19, we are encouraged to offer the parts of our body "in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness". Three verses later the same point is made, "you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life" (v.22). Here, "eternal life" means that life into which we enter at the end of our earthly life, for only then will we be morally holy.

The difference between the two words is in their background. We saw in chapter 3 that 'righteousness' is a more practical word, dealing with our character. But 'holiness' has the more religious aspect in that it deals with the nature of God, and the status that he imparts of us.

Holiness teaching

All Christians are holy in the sense that God has set them apart for his service. Some people believe that it is possible to reach a state where we are never tempted, or never sin, this is called "holiness teaching". But I find nothing in the Bible to support this view.

The apostle Paul certainly never claimed to have reached a state of perfection, for he wrote, "Not that I have already ... been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me" (Phil.3:12). His aim was "to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (v.10). For him, growth in Christian experience involved much suffering, but it was worth it for the goal of truly knowing Christ. There is never any suggestion that this goal can be reached in this life. We need to keep before us the ideal of moral purity, yet be humble enough to admit our human weakness.

Morals and Religion

There is both a religious and a moral aspect to holiness. Some people stress the religious aspect, and concentrate on the correct rituals that must be performed as we approach God. But there is a Greek word which has the double meaning of 'worship' and 'service', since it was used of the priests who served God by worshipping him. It occurs in Rom.12:1, which is why some versions translate it as 'worship' and some as 'service'. Part of our worship of God is to serve him in our daily life.

We must also avoid the opposite danger of emphasising the need for right moral standards in our lives without relating these to the holy God who gave us those standards. This is the view of the humanist, and also of those who do not accept the authority of the Bible. For them, there is no basis outside the human mind for knowing what is right and wrong, so holiness cannot have any meaning. We find both of these errors condemned in the Bible, human nature has not changed since then!

Holiness and the church

In Old Testament times, the whole nation of Israel was set apart as a holy nation, but now all Christians share the same privilege, for Paul in Eph.2:19 tells his readers that Jew and Gentile are "fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household." Then changing the metaphor, he adds "the whole building rises to become a holy temple in the Lord"(v.21). The temple in Jerusalem was a symbol of that temple which is God's people world-wide "in which God lives by his Spirit" (v.22); the church is holy because God lives in it.

Holiness

Each particular local fellowship should reflect the character of the Universal Church. Though we may be very conscious of imperfections in the particular Christian community we belong to, God sees what it should be, and that is the ideal we should aim for.

* * * *

When we say God is holy, it means he is totally separate from us, he is transcendent above all his Creation. The Old Testament lays great emphasis on the fact that God is holy, and this fact should govern the way we approach him and the way we should live.

But when Adam sinned, that introduced an extra barrier between us and God. He is now separate from us morally as well as in his nature; he is perfect, we are sinful.

People and things can be set apart for God's use, they become holy because they have been dedicated to God. In the Old Testament, a person could become holy by performing certain rituals, but along with the teaching on rituals God gave moral teaching; a person who consecrated himself to God was to be separate in his conduct as well. Some of these laws required avoiding things which are considered 'unclean' and there are practical hygienic reasons for this. But true holiness involved keeping all God's commands.

Christians are holy because they have been set apart by the Holy Spirit. But we must also seek for that holiness which means moral purity of life. And we cannot achieve this without the power of the Holy Spirit.

* * * *

Questions for thought and discussion

1. How can we express our awareness of God's holiness in our worship?
2. Is there still any need to regard certain things as holy in the sense that they are set apart specifically for God's use, as they were in Old Testament times?
3. Considering the present moral climate, what do you consider are the most important ways in which a Christian should show holiness of life in your particular situation?
4. What are the most important things that help us grow in Christian maturity?
5. In what ways can a local church show that it is a "dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit"?

ch.5 Redemption

The "kinsman redeemer"

Jews have always considered family loyalties to be very important. In Old Testament times, the `next of kin' (Hebrew *go'el*) had various responsibilities. If somebody was murdered, it was his duty to put the murderer to death, because any unlawful killing was regarded as a serious offence, so some Bible versions translate the word as the "avenger of blood" (Num.35:19). If the killing was accidental, the accused had to flee to a town designated as a "city of refuge" where he was put on trial (Num.35:9-29). If he was found innocent, the avenger of blood could not touch him, but he had to remain there till the death of the high priest.

Another duty of the nearest relative concerns the ownership of land. In Leviticus 25 we find laws given to ensure that the land was kept in families, as it was their only means of livelihood. If a man had to sell land to raise money, his nearest relative was under an obligation to redeem it (v.25, the word `redeem' is from the same root as `next of kin'). If he had no near relative, he could still redeem the land himself if he was able to raise the money at a future date (v.26), or it would revert to him in the Year of Jubilee (v.28). The purpose of this law was to prevent land being permanently be transferred out of a family's possession. One example of this happening is in Jer.32:7; Jeremiah's cousin was selling a field, and God told Jeremiah to buy it "because as nearest relative it is your right and duty to buy it."

If a man became so poor that he had to sell himself as a slave to a rich foreigner, one of his relatives could redeem him by paying for him to be freed (Lev.25:47-49).

In these examples, redemption is when the next of kin of a person frees him or his land, by payment of a price. So the Bible meaning of the word `redeem' has a different background from that of the English use of the word, where it usually means buying back one's own property.

God as Redeemer

When God delivered the Jews from slavery in Egypt, he called it "redemption", he was acting as their `next of kin' by securing their freedom. The price to be paid is described as the power he would demonstrate by this act, for he told Moses, "I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment." (Ex.6:6). Nearly always, when this word `redeem' is used for something God did, there is a mention of the power of God that is demonstrated in the act of redemption.

From then on, the Jews could pray to God to help them in the future and appeal to this special bond. So in Ex.15:13 they describe themselves as "the people you have redeemed". In years to come they could remember that "God Most High was their Redeemer" (Ps.78:35).

Redemption from exile in Babylon

Many hundreds of years later, the Jews were taken into captivity by the Babylonians. The second part of the book of Isaiah (ch's 40-55) is addressed to the Jews exiled in Babylon. God promised that they would return to their own land, and it would be another example of redemption. In ch.48:20 God says to them,

"Leave Babylon, flee from the Babylonians!
... say `The LORD has redeemed his servant Jacob.'"

In the book of Isaiah, God is called the Redeemer of Israel thirteen times. Some of the promises speak of them passing through the waters, and finding streams in the desert, language which reminds us of what happened when they were redeemed from Egypt; this return was to be a Second Exodus:

"Fear not, for I have redeemed you
... When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you" (Isa.43:1,2).

God could therefore call himself their Redeemer, not only because of what he had done in

redeeming them from slavery in Egypt, but also because of what he was about to do in delivering them from exile.

"Do not be afraid, ..
for I myself will help you,' declares the LORD,
your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel" (41:14).

Jeremiah also calls God their Redeemer when he predicts the downfall of Babylon, "Their Redeemer is strong ... so that he may bring rest to their land" (Jer.50:34). Again we see that God's power will be demonstrated when they are redeemed.

Redemption by payment of a ransom

There is another Hebrew word for redeem (Hebrew *pdh*), and in this case, the emphasis is on the ransom price that has to be paid. Anybody can perform this kind of redemption.

We saw in chapter 4 that God commanded that the firstborn of children and animals were to be consecrated to him. (Ex.13:1). For 'clean' animals, this meant offering them in sacrifice. But since donkeys were not acceptable as sacrifice, the firstborn of these had to be redeemed by sacrificing a lamb instead, the lamb was substituted for the donkey (v.13).

Redemption, the Passover and the Exodus

When God commanded that the Levites should be set aside for his service in place of the firstborn, because there were more firstborn than Levites, the extra firstborn were redeemed by payment of 5 shekels each. (Num.3:40-51). From then on, firstborn males were to be redeemed by a payment of 5 shekels when the baby was one month old (Num.18:16).

Also, God looked on the whole nation of Israel as his firstborn. This meant that they were very special to him (Ex.4:22,23). So when Pharaoh would not let them go free, God told him he would slay his firstborn meaning the firstborn of every family in Egypt. But this put the firstborn of the Jews at risk, so each Jewish family had to kill a lamb and sprinkle some of its blood on the door frame. We read "The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt" (Ex.12:13). This event became known as the Passover, a word meaning pass or leap over. The lamb was slain so that the firstborn would not die, so we can say that the firstborn son was redeemed by the Passover lamb.

From then on, God was known as the God who redeemed them from Egypt. This second word for 'redeem' is used several times in the book of Deuteronomy for what God had done, it meant that God had acted out of grace, not because they deserved it. But he also did it to keep his promise to Abraham, Moses told the people "It was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery" (Dt.7:8).

Personal redemption

In the Psalms, when the writer prays to God to redeem him from his enemies, it shows that he was looking on God to act as 'next of kin' and rescue him, there was a close personal bond between him and God. For example, in Ps.19:14, David addresses God "O LORD my Rock and my Redeemer", and in Ps.31:5 he prays, "Redeem me, O LORD, the God of truth". Also in Lam.3:58, Jeremiah says to God "you redeemed my life", meaning that he had rescued him from those who were plotting to kill him.

Job 19:25 has been made famous because it has been set to music in Handel's 'Messiah',
"I know that my Redeemer lives,
and that in the end he will stand upon the earth".

Job believed somebody would come to act as his 'kinsman' by testifying to his innocence from the accusations of his so-called friends.

Future redemption of the Jews

In all the examples given so far, redemption was from some physical danger. But later the word came to acquire a spiritual sense. In Ps. 130:7,8, we read,
"O Israel, put your hope in the LORD,
for with the LORD is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.
He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins."
The writer may have had physical deliverance in mind, but that led his thoughts on to the greater need of forgiveness of sin.

We have already seen that when the Jews were allowed to return from exile in Babylon, it was regarded as a second great act of redemption, similar to the first Exodus from Egypt. Also, as the prophets had said that their exile had been judgment on the nation for their sin, so they predicted that the return from exile would be accompanied by spiritual renewal in the nation.

But this prediction was only partially fulfilled at that time. They were allowed to observe their religious festivals, Ezra taught them to observe the laws they had long since forgotten, and their religious life was purified from the pagan practices which were so common before the exile. But the prophet Zechariah promised a further gathering of the Jews from many nations in large numbers. God's message to them was,

"Surely I will redeem them;
they will be as numerous as before." (Zech.10:8)

This means that there was still a future redemption for them. In Isa.59:20, the promise of redemption is linked to a plea for personal repentance, "The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins."

At the time that Jesus was born, we know that the Old Testament prophecies had led the Jews to believe that a person would come whom they called the Messiah (which means an "anointed one"). Some people believed that this redemption would bring them freedom from the Romans so that they would be able to govern their own affairs, and they were willing to achieve this by force if necessary. But in Lk.2:38, we read of a group of people "who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem". But from what we read of Simeon and Anna (Lk.2:21-40), there was a nucleus who were more concerned for a spiritual restoration of the people.

When John the Baptist was born, his father Zechariah believed that the mission of his son was to prepare the way for the Messiah, who himself would bring in this future redemption, for he sang,

"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come and has redeemed his people", Lk.1:68).

He would do this by giving "his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins" (v.77). He believed that God was about to fulfil the promise of Isa.52:9 which said,

"The LORD has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem."

Redemption in the world of the New Testament

In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the one Greek word used to translate the two Hebrew words for 'redeem' had the meaning 'to release upon payment of a ransom'. In the Roman Empire at that time, it was possible for a slave to buy his own freedom by paying a sum of money into the temple of some god. Theoretically he was then a slave of that god, but effectively he was free, and harsh penalties were imposed on any who tried to enslave him again. This background is therefore similar to the Old Testament usage where the word 'redemption' is applied to the deliverance of the Jews from slavery in Egypt.

Redemption by the death of Christ

Jesus used the word 'ransom' once. Two of his disciples were seeking power for themselves in the kingdom they expected him to set up, so he told them "even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk. 10:45). Here is a clear prediction of his death, because he was going to "give his life", an expression used by

the Jews of the death of martyrs. Also, the word "for" here does not just mean 'for our benefit', but 'in our place'. He was going to die the death we deserved to die. This is what is meant when we say that he died as our substitute. Jesus was laying the foundation for the New Testament teaching on the basis by which sin can be forgiven.

In Eph.1:7 Paul tells his readers that redemption means "the forgiveness of sins". Also, this redemption is "through his blood", referring to Christ's death. The ransom price of our forgiveness is the death of Jesus.

In Heb.9:15, we read that Christ "died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant". We saw in chapter 2 that the sacrifices prescribed in Old Testament times anticipated the death of Jesus, the true ransom price which had to be paid in order for God to forgive sin.

In chapter 3 we looked at Rom.3:24, where we read that we are justified "through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus". This means that we can only be justified, accepted by God as righteous, because Christ has brought about our redemption through his death.

We must not forget that Christ willingly gave himself to redeem us, for we read in Tit.2:14 that Christ "gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness". Also, the purpose of this was "to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good". If we truly understand what Jesus has done for us, this must affect how we live. This is also brought out in 1 Pet.1:18-19 where Peter tells his readers that they have been redeemed "with the precious blood of Christ", and this was "from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers". This follows an exhortation to live their lives "in reverent fear" (v.17). Jesus has redeemed us from a life without purpose to a life of service to God. And as we realise that the cost of our redemption was the death of Jesus, this should lead us to a reverent fear of God.

Redemption from slavery

The word 'redeem' is also used for deliverance from other kinds of bondage. In the epistle to the Galatians, Paul wanted his readers to have a right attitude to the Old Testament Law; he told them that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law" (Gal.3:13). Now nobody is able to keep the law completely, so those who seek to be accepted by God on the basis of their obedience to the law are under God's curse, "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law" (v.10). When Jesus died, he freed us from this curse by dying a death which was regarded as accursed by God, the curse was transferred to Him.

Paul describes the period of the Jews' history when they were under the rule of the Law as a state of spiritual immaturity. This was necessary for the Law was like the "guardian" who administered the estate of a child till he became an adult (Gal.4:2). Then Christ came to "redeem those under law" (v.5) so that now we are in a state of spiritual maturity, "no longer a slave but a son" (v.7). We have "the full rights of sons" (v.5), we can look on God as a loving Father and not as a distant Master (v.6). We no longer keep the law as a means of our being accepted by God, but because it contains the principles by which we should live as his sons.

Future redemption in the New Testament

In the New Testament, as well as in the Old, we read of a redemption which is yet to take place. When Jesus told his disciples that he would come again in glory, he called it "your redemption" (Lk.21:28). This hope should sustain them during the persecution that he predicted would take place (v.12).

In Eph.1:14, Paul also speaks of "the redemption of those who are God's possession" as something which is in the future, this must also mean Christ's return. Only then will we be delivered from sin completely and inherit all that God has promised for us. Also, the Holy Spirit in us is the guarantee that this will take place, for he tells his readers that he is "a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance". However this brings the responsibility that we must not "grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" (Eph.4:30).

In Rom.8:18-25, Paul contrasts his present suffering as a Christian with what he believes is the future for God's people. Our present experience of suffering of all kinds is called "bondage", but one day we will be liberated, or "redeemed", the whole Universe will be transformed, and God's purposes for us and the Universe will be completed. This subject is considered further in chapter 11.

* * * *

We have seen that, in the Old Testament, there are two words for 'redemption' with slightly different backgrounds. The first was performed by a near relative, and the second emphasises the payment of a ransom price. Both are used of rescuing from danger.

There are two significant events in the history of the Jews when God redeemed them. The first was when he delivered them from slavery in Egypt. To the Christian, this is symbolic of what Christ did in freeing us from bondage to sin. So while Jews keep the Passover to remember their national deliverance, Christians keep the Lord's Supper to remember his death when he redeemed us from sin.

The second event was when the Jews were allowed to return from exile in Babylon. This was looked upon as a spiritual revival of the nation, for their religious life as a nation had all but ceased. So for a Christian, it can symbolise the spiritual renewal that God can graciously bring about in a Christian after a period of spiritual decline.

In the New Testament, we learn of four important things that are involved in redemption.

- First, redemption means that we have been freed from the guilt of sin, from bondage to a system of Law, and from bondage to the power of sin (bad habits etc.).
- Second, redemption means that a price has to be paid. The price of our redemption is the death of Christ. Sin has to be atoned for, and redemption emphasises the cost of this atonement. Jesus bore this cost by dying for us.
- Thirdly it includes the idea of ownership, we now belong to God because he has bought us.
- Finally, there is the state into which we enter as a result of redemption. This described in various ways, as being sons of God, priests etc. But our redemption will not be complete till Christ returns, and then we shall be like him. Then the whole Universe will be 'redeemed'. This hope should sustain us in times of frustration, difficulty and persecution.

* * * *

Questions for thought and discussion

1. What does it mean to you to call God your Redeemer?
2. Does it help you to apply Christ's redemption to a deliverance from any particular bad habits you may have?
3. In what ways can we apply the promises of future redemption of the Jews to Gentile Christians?

ch.6 Reconciliation

In modern translations of the Bible, the word `reconcile' only occurs in the New Testament. Its root meaning in Greek is "to change". Reconciliation is what is needed when two people have quarrelled, and true friendship can only be restored when the cause of the problem is dealt with, it cannot just be ignored.

It is interesting to note that this was the original meaning of the English word `atonement', the bringing of `one-ment' between two people who were previously hostile. This is different from the Bible meaning of the word "atonement" discussed in chapter 2, but it explains why the K.J.V. has the word "atonement" in Rom.5:11 where modern translations have "reconciliation".

Reconciliation to God

The word `reconcile' brings out the personal aspect of forgiveness. When sin is forgiven, we are reconciled to God, friendly relations are restored.

There are four main passages in the New Testament where reconciliation to God is mentioned, and there are several important things we can learn from them. The passages are Rom.5:8-11, 2 Cor.5:18-21, Eph.2:14-16, Col.1:19-22.

The need for reconciliation

If we speak of reconciliation, it means that there must previously have been hostility between the two parties involved. In Col.1:21, Paul tells his readers that they "were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour." Also, in Rom.5:10 we read "when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son". We were God's enemies in the sense that we were under his wrath (v.9), but we were saved from judgment when we were justified.

The subject of God's wrath has been discussed in chapter 1. It is one way in which the Bible speaks of his judgment on our sin. For it is sin that has spoilt the world he created, and has cut us off from the relationship with God which we should enjoy. But this does not mean that he wants to harm us; the opposite is so, for it is he who has provided the means whereby we can be reconciled to him. The paradox is that God loves us, yet has to judge our sin if it is not forgiven. The extent of God's love is shown by the price he was willing to pay to provide a means of reconciliation.

So reconciliation is possible only when the barrier of sin between us and God is removed, for only then can we enter into a personal relationship with him.

God's provision

It is important to realise that the purpose of sacrifices in Old Testament times was not to appease an angry God as some religions taught. It was the means that God had provided by which sin could be atoned for. This is brought out in Col.1:22 where we read that it is God who reconciles us, and in Eph.2:16 it is Christ who reconciles us to God. (There is no essential difference between these two, for in 2 Cor.5:19, we read that "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ").

There are two things to notice here. The first is that it was God who took the initiative in bringing about the reconciliation. God is not reconciled to man, it is man who is reconciled to God. We are separated from God because we have done wrong, we are guilty of breaking God's laws, this is the cause of the hostility. So we need to receive the means of reconciliation that God offers. Paul urges the Corinthians "Be reconciled to God" (2 Cor.5:20).

The second important thing to realise is that this reconciliation is something which has already been made. "God ... reconciled us to himself through Christ" (2 Cor.5:18). "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ" (v.19). "We were reconciled to him through the death of his Son" (Rom.5:10). The means of reconciliation has already been provided, it is up to us to claim

the benefits.

The Death of Christ

All four of the passages mentioned above say that reconciliation is only possible because of the death of Christ. "We were reconciled to him (God) through the death of his Son" (Rm.5:10). "His purpose (speaking of Christ) was ... to reconcile both of them (Jew and Gentile) to God through the cross" (Eph.2:15,16). "Now he (God) has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death" (Col.1:22).

In the fourth passage, 2 Cor.5:14-21, Paul goes right to the heart of the significance of Christ's death. In v.15 he says "He died for all", and the result of this is that "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (v.17). Then in v.19 he says that God's reconciling of the world means "not counting men's sins against them". The reason why God can forgive sin is given in v.21, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God". We saw in chapter 2 that, when a person offered a sin offering in Old Testament times, he first placed his hands on the animal to symbolise the transfer of sin. Here we see that our sin was transferred to Christ when he died, and now we can receive his righteousness. This is why there is a "message of reconciliation" to preach (v.19).

The result of reconciliation

In Col.1:22, Paul tells his readers that God's purpose in reconciling them is "to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation". The words "without blemish" remind us that animals had to be perfect if they were to be offered to God as a sacrifice. When we have been forgiven, we are regarded as morally pure. This is the only way in which we can be acceptable to a holy God.

This peace is not only harmony with God, but harmony with our fellow man. In the minds of a typical Jew in New Testament times, there was a great gulf between them and the Gentiles, because God had chosen them and no other nation. There was also a physical barrier outside the temple in Jerusalem preventing Gentiles from entering the inner courtyard where Jews prayed. But Paul more than any other New Testament writer emphasises the fact that both Jew and Gentile approach God on the same grounds, and so there should be no barrier between them. They are reconciled to God in the same way, "through the cross, by which he (Jesus) put to death their hostility" (i.e. that between Jew and Gentile, Eph.2:16). "His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace" (v.15).

This in-built prejudice inevitably carried on into the early church. At first Paul had an uphill struggle to break down this hostility, as we see from the book of Acts and his letter to the Galatians. But soon Gentiles became the majority, and the issue ceased to be a problem. However, in the Christian church of today there are many other man-made barriers, and Paul's words are as relevant today as then for their removal. There are differences of culture, social background, taste in music etc, but these need not be a barrier between those who have been reconciled to God. We need to work hard to bring down those that do exist.

Paul also refers to Jews and Gentiles in Rom.11:15, "If their rejection (meaning of the Jews) is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?" Reconciliation is now available to the whole Gentile world, while Israel as a nation has rejected God's offer of forgiveness. Though they do not believe, God has not abandoned them completely; Paul looks forward to a time when "all Israel will be saved" (v.26). But they can only be accepted by God on the same basis as the Gentiles, becoming one with all God's people.

Cosmic reconciliation

In Col.1:20, Paul speaks of God, through Christ, reconciling "to himself all things, whether on earth or things in heaven". The mention of reconciliation of things "on earth" can be linked with Rom.8:20-21 where he tells us that the creation which has been "subjected to frustration" will one day be "liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God."

The relationship of man to his environment is now a much debated topic. We are constantly made aware of the ways in which man has polluted nature, partly through ignorance, but mainly due to human greed, the desire to exploit natural resources without concern for the effect on others. But true harmony between man and the rest of Creation cannot be brought about by legislation, only by a radical change of heart, in other words only when sin is finally removed. This liberation will not come about by human effort, God must intervene to bring it about.

It is not quite clear what is meant by the "things in heaven" which need reconciling. We may link them with the "powers and authorities" mentioned in Col.2:15, heavenly beings that Christ triumphed over in his death. But whether the things being reconciled are inanimate, or humans, or spiritual beings, reconciliation is only possible because Jesus made "peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (Col.1:20).

The message of reconciliation

Paul tells the people of Corinth that he and those with him are "Christ's ambassadors" (2 Cor.5:20), and to them has been given this "ministry of reconciliation" (v.18). And in carrying out this task they should be compelled by Christ's love (v.14).

All those of us who have been reconciled to God have the responsibility of passing on this message, for it is a message of hope and comfort to bring to a world that needs reconciling to God. We do not do this on our own authority, we are ambassadors, representing God. We should do it with the diplomacy and courtesy that an ambassador needs to show to others.

* * * *

We have seen that man is the enemy of God because of sin, but reconciliation is now possible because sin can be forgiven. This reconciliation is something that God has provided, the cost of it was the death of Christ.

This is something which has already been done, it must not be confused with the ongoing process usually called sanctification. Also, we need to receive this reconciliation, God does not force it on us.

While the word 'justification' refers to our legal standing before God, the word 'reconciliation' is the equivalent on a personal level, the removal of enmity and the establishing of a personal relationship with God.

When we are reconciled to God, this should also bring about harmony between people despite outward differences. There will also be harmony between man and the rest of Creation. But this will only be fully achieved when all that is evil has been removed.

All those who have received this message of reconciliation have an obligation to pass it on, as Christ's ambassadors.

* * * *

Questions for thought and discussion

1. How can we explain to a non-Christian, who says that he has no hostility to God, that he needs reconciling to him?
2. How can we explain to others that God loves us, yet the Bible speaks of God's wrath when it mentions judgment on sin?
3. What turns a difference in race, habits etc. between two people into a barrier to friendship?

Reconciliation

4. When do minor issues become major barriers between Christians? What can be done to remove the basic cause of these barriers?

ch.7 Covenants

The need for a covenant

These days people talk a lot about relationships, but many of these do not last because there is no basis for the relationship. In Bible times, sometimes people made a covenant to strengthen a friendship, such as the well-known one between David and Jonathan (1 Sam.18:1-4). Also, if one country conquered another, the victorious nation would draw up a covenant treaty, promising to help the weaker one provided it fulfilled certain obligations. In both sorts of covenants, the gods worshipped by each party were called upon to witness the agreement, and to bring down curses if either side failed to fulfil their obligations. Then the covenant was ratified by offering an animal as a sacrifice. In Jer.34:18 we read that the people making a covenant cut the calf they were sacrificing into two pieces, and then walked between these two halves. It is thought that this might have been the normal practice, as the Hebrew word for making a covenant means 'to cut' (a covenant).

The covenants made by God

One thing that is clearly taught in the Bible is that God is not capricious or unpredictable, nor does he demand mechanical submission to an arbitrary set of rules. Instead he reveals himself as a God who can be relied on, one who wants to enter into a relationship with us. And our obligation in this relationship is to live as God's covenant people, obeying the laws he has given.

The first mention of a covenant in the Bible is that with Noah. After Noah, his family and all the animals came out of the ark, he promised that he would protect them and never again destroy life on earth with a universal flood (Gen.9:9-17). As a sign of this covenant, God put his bow in the sky, just as a warrior hangs up his bow after a battle. The rainbow is to remind us of the fact that God is suspending judgment. This covenant was between God and the whole of mankind, for Noah represents the new community that was saved from God's judgment, in other words the whole human race.

After this there are four main covenants made by God in the Bible. The first was with Abraham and his descendants. This was extended to be a covenant with the Jewish nation in the time of Moses. The third was with David and the kings who would be descended from him (2 Sam.7), and the fourth is the New Covenant, promised by Old Testament prophets, but brought in by Jesus and ratified by his death.

This theme of covenant runs through the whole Bible, in fact the two parts of our Bible should be called the Old and New Covenants instead of Testaments. The reason why the word "testament" came to be used is given on p.41.

The covenant with Abraham

The story of the Jews begins with Abraham. In Gen.12:1-3 we read that God commanded him, "leave your country ... and go to the land I will show you". Then he promised that he would be the founder of a great nation which would bring blessing to "all peoples on earth".

In Gen.15, we read how God appeared again to Abraham and repeated the promise of a son. Then he had a strange experience (v.9-17); he was told to bring some animals and cut them up, then at nightfall a he saw a burning light pass between the pieces. We can understand that the light was the symbol of God's presence, and this passed between the pieces to ratify the covenant according to the practice already mentioned. But only the symbol of God's presence passed between the pieces, it was a covenant initiated by God alone, "on that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram" (v.18).

The terms of the covenant are repeated in ch.17. First, Abraham was told he "will be the father of many nations" (v.4), and his name was changed from Abram to Abraham to mark this occasion. Secondly, God promised "to be your God and the God of your descendants after you" (v.7), the covenant was a relationship between God and Abraham's descendants. Thirdly, he

would give them the "whole land of Canaan" as their territory (v.8).

Later Abraham was told to circumcise all the males in his household (17:9-14). This was the sign that they were God's covenant people. God told him that if any male in the household was not circumcised, it meant that he does not want this relationship, so had to be "cut off from his people" (v.14).

After Abraham's death, his son Isaac inherited the promises. In Gen.26 we read of two occasions when God appeared to him; he promised "to confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham" (v.3). We have already seen that a covenant involves the swearing of an oath, so the words "oath" and "covenant" are often used interchangeably in the Bible.

Isaac then passed on this blessing to his son Jacob, and God confirmed this to him personally in the dream that he had when he was running away from Esau (Gen.28:13-15). From then on, God was known as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; he was the One who appeared to and provided for these three patriarchs.

When the descendants of Jacob were made slaves in Egypt, they were tempted to believe that God had forgotten them. But in Ex.2:24 we read that God "remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob". The time had come to bring them out of Egypt and back to the land which he had promised to them, so in Ex.3 we read how God appeared to Moses and told him that he was the one whom he had chosen to deliver the Jews from the power of the Pharaoh of Egypt.

God assured the people through Moses that the promises made to Abraham were now going to be fulfilled for the whole nation. "I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God, ... and I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob" (Ex.6:7,8). He also associated the name 'the LORD' (Hebrew *YHWH*) with the covenant; from then on, that was to be regarded as the personal name of the God who had entered into a covenant relationship with them. "This is my name for ever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation" (Ex.3:15).

The covenant with Israel

When they arrived at Mount Sinai, God told the Jews that he was making a covenant with the whole nation. We need not understand this as a completely different covenant, only that the covenant with Abraham was being extended to the whole nation, and God was making clear to the people what he required of them.

In Ex.19:3-6, God reminds them of what he has done for them, and tells them of the privileges they will have; they will be God's "treasured possession", a "kingdom of priests, and a holy nation". They were priests because they had access to God, and they were a holy nation because God had set them apart from other nations.

But in return, God was demanding from them a standard of behaviour that was higher than he expected from other nations. He gave them the laws which we find written in the books of Exodus to Deuteronomy (often called "The Law"). If they obeyed these laws, God promised to bless them. But if they disobeyed, God promised they would be cursed and would suffer various disasters (Lev.26, Deut.27-28).

In Ex.24 we read of a special ceremony that was performed to ratify the covenant. We are told that Moses "wrote down everything the Lord has said" (v.4) so that there was a permanent record of the covenant requirements. There was a public reading of the "Book of the Covenant" (v.7), so that the people would know what was required of them. After this the people pledged their obedience. They also offered animals as sacrifices, and the blood of the animals was sprinkled on the people as a symbol of purification from sin (v.8). God had set them apart, but had to show them that they needed forgiveness of sin.

The book of Deuteronomy

The book of Deuteronomy records what Moses said to the Jews at the end of his life. The theme of God's covenant runs throughout the book, the word "covenant" occurs 13 times in chapters 4 to 9.

In 1:6-3:29 we how God's care for the Jews was shown in what happened to them between the their leaving Mount Sinai and arriving at the river Jordan.

He showed his love to them by making a covenant with them (7:8), but from then on he showed he would be faithful to the covenant he had made (7:9, see the next chapter for the special meaning of the word "love" in this verse).

But in turn, he wanted them to obey his laws. So a large part of the book is taken up with details of these laws.

Then at the end of the book we find a series of blessings for them if they are obedient, but also the curses that will come on them if they disobey these laws.

Finally, the Levites are told to place the Book of the Law beside the "ark of the covenant" (ch.31:26). This was a sacred chest containing the stone tablets on which were engraved the 10 Commandments (ch.10:5) which are called the "words of the covenant". Then there must be an annual public reading of the Law at the Feast of Tabernacles (ch.31:10-13).

The covenant governs Old Testament history

Sadly, the subsequent history of the Jews shows that the warnings of the curses to come on those who disobeyed God's laws were not heeded. The historical books of the Old Testament have as their main message the covenant principle that when they obeyed God, they prospered as a nation, but when they started to follow other religious customs and ignored God's rules for their social life, the disasters that had been predicted came true. The prophets frequently warned them that they were breaking God's covenant by worshipping the idols of the surrounding countries. Unless they repented the threatened disasters would come as judgment on them.

But the people took little notice of these warnings. So the northern kingdom of Israel was invaded by the Assyrians and the population deported. The writer of the book of Kings, having narrated this disaster, interrupts the narrative with a long section drawing the spiritual lesson that these things happened because the people had disobeyed God's commands, and had taken no notice of the repeated warnings from the prophets God had sent. (2 Kgs 17:7-23).

The southern kingdom of Judah had a reprieve at that time, but neither did they heed the warnings of the prophets sent to them, so they were invaded by the Babylonians who sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, and deported many of the people.

But fortunately, that was not the end of the story. The prophets assured them that God's covenant was permanent. Although God would judge them for their unfaithfulness, he would not stop being their God; after the exile they would return to their land again. Jeremiah told them that the exile would last only 70 years (Jer.25:11,12).

Daniel was one who obviously took this prophecy seriously, for when this period was up, we find his prayer in Dan.9 in which he reminds God of this promise. But first he prayed a prayer of confession. He acknowledged that they have sinned and so deserve God's judgments. But he also claimed the fact that God "keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands"(v.4). They were still God's people, and the city of Jerusalem still bore God's Name (v.18).

Then after some of them had returned from exile, their existence as a nation was threatened in the time of Nehemiah. He made a similar appeal to God to help them. He claimed the promise that God was one "who keeps his covenant of love", and he appealed to what he had

said to Moses (recorded in Dt.30:1-4) that he would gather them again if they once more obey him (Neh.1:5). This promise was the basis of their belief that God would never completely abandon them.

The covenant with David

Another important Bible covenant is the one God made with David, promising that a permanent dynasty of kings ruling over the Jews would come from him (2 Sam.7:8-16). The word 'covenant' does not occur in this passage, but it is called a covenant in Ps.89:3 where God speaks through the psalmist,

"I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to David my servant,
I will establish your line for ever
and make your throne firm through all generations"

This covenant dealt with the special relationship between the king and God, "I will be his father, and he shall be my son" (2 Sam.7:14). And like the covenant with the whole nation, it is permanent. So even when enemies devastated the land, the writer of Psalm 89 could appeal to the covenant God made with David:

"You have renounced the covenant with your servant
and have defiled his crown in the dust" (v.39)
"O Lord, where is your former great love,
which in your faithfulness you swore to David?" (v.49).

Only in the New Testament do we find the answer to this question.

The promise of a new covenant

We may ask why God made a covenant with the Jews when he knew that, as a nation, they would not keep it. We cannot understand all God's ways, but one thing we do know is that the Jews were supposed to learn from their past experiences. And one of these lessons is that we cannot keep God's laws without his help.

Towards the end of the Old Testament era, each of the three major prophets promise that God would make a New Covenant. The most detailed statement as to what this would involve is given in Jer.31:31-34. The two new features of this covenant were that God promised forgiveness for their sins ("I .. will remember their sins no more"). Also the law would no longer be an external compulsion, but an inner desire ("I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts"). It would still be a covenant of relationship ("I will be their God, and they will be my people"), but this would now be a relationship of personal knowledge ("they will all know me").

There is a similar promise in Isa.59:21, for we read of a covenant that God's Spirit and God's words will not depart from his people. Also Ezekiel promised that God would bring his people back from exile, cleanse them from their impurities, and put his Spirit in them so that they would want to obey his laws (Eze.36:24-27). This is called "a covenant of peace", promising harmony within the nation (37:26), and between man and nature (34:25).

The institution of the new covenant

This promised covenant did not come into force until Jesus' death, for we have seen in previous chapters that this is the only basis on which sin can be forgiven.

It was at the Last Supper that Jesus introduced the subject of the new covenant to his disciples. All three Synoptic Gospels and also Paul in 1 Cor.11:25 record that Jesus took a cup of wine and said "This cup is the new covenant in my blood". These words should have reminded the disciples of the Old Testament promises of a new covenant, and have told them that they were now about to be fulfilled. These words are similar to those spoken by Moses in the covenant ratification ceremony described in Ex.24:8, "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you". We have seen that, in the Old Testament, covenants were ratified with an animal sacrifice; so when Jesus spoke of his blood, he was referring to his death (see chapter 2), saying that this would bring in the new covenant, the new relationship between God and man. So

whenever Christians obey Christ's command to "do this...in remembrance of me" by observing the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion, we acknowledge that his death was necessary to enable us to enter into this covenant relationship with God.

The old and new covenants

After this passage, there is little mention of God's covenant apart from the epistle to the Hebrews. This was a letter addressed to Jewish Christians who were being persecuted for their faith, and so were tempted to take the easy way out and re-convert to Judaism. So the author points out that God brought in a new covenant with the death of Jesus. He quotes from Jer. 31 twice to show that the old covenant was now "obsolete" (8:13), because a new one had been brought it, one which is "founded on better promises" (8:6). Therefore, the sacrifices commanded in the Old Testament have no further value since the death of Jesus was the one sacrifice which atoned for sin.

And just as the old covenant had warnings of the consequences of disobedience, so also did the new. For a person to give up his faith is to treat "as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him" (v.29), and so that person is promised even more severe punishment than that imposed in Old Testament times. But he ends with a note of encouragement by assuring his readers that "we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved" (v.39).

Jesus is described as "the mediator of a new covenant" (8:15). His task was to restore harmony, or bridge the gap between God and man. He is also called the "guarantee of a better covenant" (7:22); (a "guarantee" is one who brings two hostile parties close together) it was he who reconciled us to God.

Covenant and testament

In ch.9:15-17 we read of the similarity between God's new covenant and a human 'Last Will and Testament'. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for 'covenant' is usually translated by a word which the Greeks used for a 'will', as the footnote in the N.I.V. points out. This is why in the King James Version, the word 'covenant' is sometimes translated 'testament'. This led to the two parts of our Bible being called the Old and New Testaments, whereas, strictly speaking, it would be better to call them the Old and New Covenants.

It is thought that this Greek word was used because one reason why the covenant God has made is like a human will is that only one person inaugurates them, whereas a human covenant is made between two parties. Secondly, a will is permanent, Greek law would not allow the terms to be altered. Finally, a person has to die before his will comes into force (9:17).

The covenant with Abraham still in force

There are several passages in the New Testament which show that the covenant with Abraham is still in force, even though the one made at Sinai has been superseded. Zechariah saw the birth of John the Baptist as a fulfilment of the covenant with Abraham, for in it God had promised

"to show mercy to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant,
the oath he swore to our father Abraham" (Lk.1:72-73).

After the resurrection, Peter in Acts 3:25 told his Jewish audience that they are the beneficiaries of the covenant with Abraham because Jesus came to bring blessing by turning them from their wicked ways. He also reminded them that God had promised to Abraham that "through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed".

In Eph.2:12 Paul refers to the "covenants of the promise" from which Gentiles were excluded in Old Testament times. Then he emphasises the fact that now there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile, both can be reconciled to God "through the cross" (v.16). The covenant made at Sinai was with the Jews only, the new covenant is for all who become spiritual children of

Abraham by faith. He makes the same point in Gal.3:6,7, "Consider Abraham: 'He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness' (a quotation from Gen.15:6). Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham".

So all, both Jew and Gentile, can trust God to keep his covenant with us. But in turn this brings on us the obligation to live as his covenant people, obeying his laws. And we can only do this through the power of the Holy Spirit, for in Rom. 8:4 we read that the work of the Holy Spirit is to enable those who live "according to the Spirit" to meet "the righteous requirements of the law".

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We have seen that God's purpose for mankind is that we should be a people bound to him in a covenant relationship. He first revealed this to Abraham. Then when the Jews emerged as a separate nation, he confirmed that it applied to the whole nation. In the New Testament, this relationship is shown to be available to all on the basis of faith.

The covenant that God made with the Jews contained the privilege of God's blessing, but only if they obeyed God's laws. But even when they were judged for disobeying, they did not cease to be God's covenant people, God promised never to break his covenant.

The new covenant gives us the assurance of forgiveness and a personal knowledge of God. This relationship has only been made possible because of Christ's death. This can be understood as the sacrifice which ratifies a covenant, or the death of the testator which allows a will to be executed.

The covenant with David first concerned the human kings, descended from David, who ruled in Jerusalem. Jesus came to be not only the king of the Jews, but ruling over the kingdom of God, and entry to that is open to all who will submit to God's rule. So the covenant with David becomes the promise of Christ's rule as king.

* * * *

Questions for thought and discussion

1. What is the value of studying the old covenant that God made with the Jews?
2. What difference does it make to you to know that you have been brought into a covenant relationship with God?
3. Some Christians (e.g. Methodists) like to dedicate themselves to God every New Year by making a covenant with God. What is the value of this? Can you find any teaching in the Bible on this subject?

ch.8 Covenant Love

In Old Testament Hebrew, there are two common words which can be translated 'love'. One of them has a meaning very close to the New Testament word for love, the love which is undeserved and is given unselfishly.

There is another Hebrew word (*hesed*) which has no exact Greek or English equivalent, so it is translated in a variety of ways depending on the context. In the K.J.V., it is usually translated as "mercy", but sometimes as "kindness" or "lovingkindness". In the N.I.V. it is often translated just as "love", but sometimes as "great love", sometimes as "kindness" etc.

Its basic meaning is faithfulness or loyalty to a relationship, either to members of one's family, or because of an oath or covenant. In this chapter, this word will be written as loyalty, and when it occurs in Bible passages which are quoted, the word or words used to translate it will be put in *italics*.

Loyalty between people

One example of loyalty being shown by an individual is in the story of Ruth. Boaz considered that she showed loyalty by claiming her right to marry him because he was a near relative of her dead father-in-law rather than seeking a younger husband, for he said to her "This *kindness* is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men" (Ruth 3:10).

When David and Jonathan made their covenant of friendship with each other, Jonathan asked David to show him and his family loyalty for ever, "do not ever cut off your *kindness* from my family - not even when the LORD has cut off every one of David's enemies from the face of the earth" (1 Sam.20:15). After Jonathan had been killed in battle and David had become king, he was under an obligation to show loyalty to Jonathan's family. He found Mephibosheth, Jonathan's son, and told him "I will surely show you *kindness* for the sake of your father Jonathan" (v.7). It is important to realise that he was not doing this out of compassion because Mephibosheth happened to be lame, but because of the covenant he had made with Jonathan.

If one person shows loyalty, the same is expected in return. Abimelech, the Canaanite king, asked Abraham to show loyalty to him because he claimed that he had shown it to Abraham (Gen.21:23). In Josh.2:12, we read that Rahab asked the two men who had come to spy out Jericho to show loyalty to her by sparing her life when they captured the city, in return for the loyalty she had shown by protecting them from the men of Jericho who had come to kill them. So the spies replied "If you don't tell what we are doing, we will treat you *kindly* (i.e. 'with loyalty') and faithfully when the LORD gives us the land." (v.14).

God's loyalty

When the word loyalty is used of God, it is nearly always in connection with one of the covenants mentioned in the previous chapter. There we saw that God is always faithful to his covenant. He can be relied upon to show loyalty to his covenant people. In Dt.7:9, Moses tells the Jews "he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of *love* to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands."

Solomon, at the dedication of the temple, addressed God as "you who keep your covenant of *love* with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way." (1 Kgs.8:23). In the previous chapter, we saw that Daniel and Nehemiah both prayed to God to keep his "covenant of *love*" (Dan.9:4; Neh.1;5, 9:32). Although the covenant had promised judgment on their disobedience, they could still appeal to God's loyalty to restore their fortunes.

When God made the covenant with David, promising that the right of kingship would remain in his family, he said of David's son, "my *love* will never be taken away from him" (2 Sam.7:15). This is why, when the Jews were conquered by enemy nations, the writer of Psalm 89 could not understand why it appeared that God had renounced this covenant, for he cried out, "where is your

former *great love*?" (v.49).

But frequently in the Psalms, God's loyalty is a theme in worship and thanksgiving,
"All the ways of the LORD are *loving* and faithful
for those who keep the demands of his covenant" (Ps.25:10).

It is also found in the last verse of that most favourite of psalms, "Surely goodness and *love* will follow me all the days of my life" (Ps.23:6).

There is a two line refrain which is found several times in connection with worship in the temple, and so it must have been a favourite `chorus' in temple worship,

"Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his *love* endures for ever".

One place where we find this is in Ps.136:1 where the second line of this couplet is repeated in every verse. The whole psalm is a recital of events in the life of the nation which showed that God was being faithful to his covenant with them.

The word also occurs in Lam.3:22,23, words which have been made popular in several songs, but whose context is often forgotten. Jeremiah was looking out at the devastation caused to Jerusalem by the Babylonians when they had conquered the city, yet he was able to say,

"Because of the Lord's *great love* we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

Despite the destruction of the holy city and the holy temple, he still believed God would be loyal to his covenant.

Loyalty and truth

We are helped in understanding Bible words by seeing what other words they are linked with, for often two words are put together because they are similar in meaning. The word loyalty is linked with the word `truth' over 20 times in the Old Testament. Now `truth' implies reliability, stability and faithfulness, and from it comes the Hebrew word Amen. So part of loyalty is being trusted to tell the truth.

This is why the N.I.V. sometimes translates the Hebrew word for `truth' as "faithfulness", as in the above quotation from Lamentations. Also, when God revealed himself to Moses on Mount Sinai, he proclaimed "The LORD ... abounding in *love* and faithfulness". (Ex.34:6). Several times in the Psalms, the two words occur together in praise or petition.

"*Love* and faithfulness meet together;
righteousness and peace kiss each other." (Ps.85:10).

Our obligation to be loyal

Part of our obligation as God's covenant people is to be loyal to him, just as he is loyal to us. For the Jews in the Old Testament, this meant worshipping God and not the gods of the surrounding nations. The prophet was aware that the Jews around him professed to be loyal to God by carrying out religious observances, but their everyday lives showed how superficial this profession was,

"your *love* is like the morning mist,
like the early dew that disappears" ...
I desire *mercy*, not sacrifice,
and acknowledgement of God
rather than burnt offerings" (Hos.6:4,6).

In the next few verses he tells them that this loyalty must be shown in obeying God's commands, including showing loyalty to each other. There was a complete lack of it in their relationships with each other for he lamented, "There is no faithfulness, no *love*, no acknowledging of God in the land" (4:1).

The word loyalty is sometimes linked with the word `justice', to show that loyalty upholds

the principle of justice. In these situations, it is often translated "mercy".

"What does the LORD require of you?

To act justly and to love *mercy*

and to walk humbly with your God" (Mi.6:8).

Zechariah had to tell the people, "This is what the LORD Almighty says: `Administer true justice; show *mercy* and compassion to one another'" (Zech.7:9).

Loyal ones

It was pointed out in chapter 4 that the English word `saint' is used to translate two different Hebrew words. One of these literally means `holy one', somebody who has been set apart by God, or has specially dedicated himself to God. The second is derived from the word loyalty, so it means a person who seeks to be loyal to God. It occurs several times in the psalms, these people are exhorted to praise God, to rejoice, and to expect God's protection.

The word occurs in the well known verse Ps.16:10,

"You will not abandon me to the grave,
nor will you let your Holy One see decay."

The literal meaning of this passage is that the writer is thanking God for his protection and goodness in the past, and is expressing his confidence that the God who has been faithful to him in life will not abandon him at death. In the New Testament, Peter quotes this verse saying that it is a prediction of Christ's resurrection (Acts 2:27). This means that Jesus is the supreme Loyal One.

There is no evidence that these `loyal ones' were an organised group of people in Old Testament times. In Ps 89:19, we read that God spoke to Samuel then to Nathan about David and the kings who would succeed him, he calls them his faithful people. So the description `loyal one' could have been used of any person who sincerely sought to serve God.

Later, in the Second Century B.C. when the Jews were ruled by Greeks, a ruler known as Antiochus Epiphanes started a bitter religious persecution. Those who resisted called themselves the `loyal ones' (Hasidim), they wished to be faithful to God's Covenant. We read about them in the books of Maccabees in the Apocrypha. When the persecution ceased, they remained an influential group who resisted the effects of Greek culture. Eventually they died out, but their spirit lived on in the Pharisees of New Testament days.

In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, `loyalty' is translated by a variety of words as there was no exact equivalent. So the concept does not carry directly into New Testament teaching, though the basic principle is there. Jesus told us to be people whose word could be trusted (Mt.5:37).

* * * *

For those who do not read Hebrew there are two clues to tell you when the Hebrew word for loyalty occurs. It is either when you see "love" or a similar word mentioned in connection with God's covenants, or it will be when you find words describing love such as "great love" or "unfailing love" in the N.I.V.

Loyalty was a very important idea in Old Testament times. It gave stability to human relationships. But its most important application was that God promised the Jews that he would be loyal to his covenant promises. This was shown throughout the Old Testament, despite their continued unfaithfulness to him, and is still shown in the fact that he has not rejected them as a nation

Those of us who have entered into the new covenant relationship can trust that he will be loyal to us. But we saw in the previous chapter that such a privilege involves the responsibility of obeying his commands as a sign of our loyalty to him.

We need to see loyalty as an important element of love. These are days when human promises are not taken very seriously, and few believe in a God who will punish us for not keeping our word. This is shown, for example, in the high divorce rate, and the way in which some try and get round business agreements wherever possible. Loyalty to God also involves being loyal in our social relationships.

* * * *

Questions for thought and discussion

1. What are the distinctive features of loyalty that make it different from other aspects of love?
2. What are the ways in which we need to show loyalty in our social life today?

ch.9 Salvation

Salvation in general

The English word `save' has a very wide range of meanings, as a look at a dictionary will show, from saving money to saving goals in football. Christians tend to use the word in the very limited sense of being saved from sin, or Christian conversion.

In the Bible the word is often used in the sense of being rescued from many different kinds of dangers. In the Old Testament, most of these were very obvious and visible, it is only later that the word `salvation' came to be used mainly in a moral and spiritual sense. So to understand any verse which speaks of salvation, it is important to see what the person is being saved from. This is why, in modern translations, the Hebrew and Greek words `to save' are translated by a variety of English words.

When Moses fled to Midian and met some shepherdesses at a well who were being harassed by other shepherds, he "got up and came to their rescue" (literally he `saved' them, Ex.2:17). He saved the shepherdesses by protecting them.

In the first part of David's life he had many enemies. Ps.34 was written to celebrate a narrow escape from a Philistine king, he writes,

"This poor man called, and the LORD heard him;
he saved him out of all his troubles" (v.6).

When God had answered Hannah's prayer for a son, we read that she sang,
"I rejoice in thy salvation" (1 Sam.2:1, K.J.V.)

God had saved her from the reproach of not being able to bear children.

Israel's salvation from their enemies

The Old Testament is the story of the nation of Israel and how God saved them from many different dangers. Their history as a nation started when God brought them out of slavery in Egypt. But no sooner had they left the country when Pharaoh chased after them and caught up with them at the edge of the Red Sea. When the people cried out in fear, Moses told them "Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will shew you today" (Ex.14:13, K.J.V.). God saved them from the Egyptians by sending a wind to drive the sea back so that they could cross on dry land. Then the sea returned and the Egyptians who followed them were drowned. We read, "That day the LORD saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians" (v.30).

Then Moses celebrated this event by singing:

"The LORD is my strength and my song;
he has become my salvation" (Ex.15:2).

They could call God their "salvation" because they could trust him to rescue them from all their enemies.

Later, when they were about to enter Canaan, Moses encouraged the people to be brave in fighting the Canaanites, "for the LORD your God is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory" (K.J.V. "save you", Dt.20:4). God was going to give them victory because he had promised to Abraham that his descendants would inherit the land of Canaan. They were his people, and he was giving them the land as their home.

Many years later, when the Philistines were attacking the Jews, the young David told their champion Goliath that God would help him kill him, so that "all those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD's, and he will give all of you into our hands" (1 Sam.17:47).

The Second Exodus

Salvation is one of the great themes of the book of Isaiah. The first part of the book is

addressed to the people living in and near Jerusalem at a time when the Assyrians were threatening to invade the land. At that time God wanted them to trust him to defend them. Isaiah promises that after the enemy has been defeated they will say:

"Surely this is our God;
we trusted in him, and he saved us.
This is the LORD, we trusted in him;
let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation" (Isa.25:9)

However, a century later, God allowed Jerusalem to be destroyed and the people to be deported as judgment on them for their sin. Chapters 40-55 promise that after this, the Jews would be allowed to return to their own land. This deliverance will be as dramatic as when they were delivered from slavery in Egypt.

In Isa.52:7 there is a graphic description of the messengers who would bring the good news to the ruined Jerusalem that the exiles were returning,

"How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of those who bring good news,
who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings,
who proclaim salvation".

What the Jews needed to realise that it would be God who would bring them back to their land, it would be another act of 'salvation',

"I am bringing my righteousness near, it is not far away;
and my salvation will not be delayed". (Isa.46:13)

Spiritual restoration

The Jews were exiled because of their sin. When they were allowed to return, it was a sign that their sin had been forgiven,

"Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
... that her sin has been paid for" (Isa.40:2).

Deliverance from captivity was being promised to teach them the need for something more important, deliverance from sin.

We saw in chapter 5 that the redemption of the nation from exile in Babylon would be accompanied by a spiritual renewal of the nation. The prophet Ezekiel promises that God will put his Spirit in his people, "I will cleanse you from all your impurities ... I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you ... I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws ...I will save you from all your uncleanness" (Eze.36:25-29).

Ezekiel goes on to promise that they will return from exile, and the two former kingdoms will be united under one king. Then God promises "I will save them from all their sinful backsliding" (37:23). His purpose for them was not merely political independence, but a national spiritual renewal leading to social harmony.

Personal forgiveness

One of the saddest stories in the Old Testament is how David, who is regarded as the greatest king the Jews ever had, gave in to the temptation to commit adultery with Bathsheba. Ps.51 is his prayer of repentance after he had been convicted of his sin. In v.12 he prays "Restore to me the joy of your salvation", addressing God as "the God who saves me" (v.14). He acknowledged that he had sinned, and wanted not only forgiveness but also a "pure heart" and a "steadfast spirit" to enable him to do right in the future. The law prescribed the death penalty for adultery, so he was saved from that. But he also wanted to be saved from giving way to temptation in the future. This incident shows that people were beginning to use the word 'salvation' in the spiritual sense which included that of personal forgiveness.

Salvation in the New Testament

In the New Testament, the word 'save' is sometimes used for deliverance from physical

danger. Once, when Jesus was in a boat with his disciples on the Sea of Galilee, a sudden storm came up and the disciples were afraid they would drown. "Lord, save us!" they cried (Mt.8:25). When Paul was in a storm on the way to Rome, after several days of not seeing the sun or stars, they had no idea where they were, and Luke writes "we finally gave up all hope of being saved" (Acts 27:20). This referred to their lives being saved.

In describing Jesus' healing miracles, often the Gospel writers use the Greek word for 'save' when people were saved from sickness, and so it is often translated as "heal". A common phrase used by Jesus literally means 'your faith has saved you'. He said this to the woman with internal bleeding (Lk.8:48), to a blind beggar (Lk.18:42), and to a leper who had been healed (Lk.17:19). It is also what he said to the woman "who had lived a sinful life" who anointed Jesus' feet with perfume (Lk.7:50). Here, Jesus meant that she had been saved from sin, for he had just told her "Your sins are forgiven" (v.48). Jesus was teaching that these people received healing and forgiveness because they trusted him, not because of anything they had done to merit it.

Salvation through Jesus

The name 'Jesus' comes from the Hebrew word *Yeshua* which means 'Saviour'. This name was given him God, as the angel said to Joseph, "You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." (Mt.1:21). Then after Jesus' birth, the angel told the shepherds, "Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you". (Lk.2:11).

One of the best known verses in the Bible is Jn.3:16, "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." In the next verse, we read the same truth in slightly different language, "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him". So 'being saved' means the same as 'having eternal life', we are saved from perishing, which is the eternal penalty for sin.

Salvation past, present and future

It is important to realise that when the New Testament is speaking of salvation from sin, there are three senses in which the word can be used. It can refer to salvation from past sin, or forgiveness; or to salvation from temptation to sin in the present; or to the final salvation from sin at the end of the Christian life when we are removed from this sinful world and will be tempted no more. And the word is used in this third sense most often in the New Testament, or else to salvation in all three senses.

Salvation from past sin

One of the verses which clearly refers to salvation from past sins is Eph.2:8, "it is by grace you have been saved". Paul had just been writing about their past life which he describes as being "dead in your transgressions and sins" (v.1). He then tells them that God has "made us alive with Christ" (v.5). He stresses that they have not done any good "works" to merit this salvation, it is because God loves them that they are forgiven; for grace is undeserved love.

Also, we receive this forgiveness by faith. In Tit.3:5 we read, "He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy." Paul then goes on to describe in more detail what God did, "He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit." This "rebirth" is the same as being "born again" (Jn.3:3,7), which describes the start of the Christian life when the Holy Spirit gives us spiritual life.

Present salvation

In the Peter's first epistle, he encourages his readers to "be holy" (1:15), and to get rid of wrong attitudes such as "malice and all deceit" (2:1). He then says "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation" (v.2). Those who have recently been born again are like new babies, and if a baby does not grow, something is wrong. This aspect of salvation is something we grow up in; negatively by avoiding wrong attitudes, and positively by living holy lives which please God. We need to be saved from sin continually, which is why we pray in the Lord's prayer, "Deliver us from evil".

Future salvation

The third aspect of salvation refers to deliverance from final condemnation at the end of our life on earth. In Rom.5:9, after saying that we have been justified because of Christ's death, Paul adds that we will be "saved from God's wrath through him". Those who refuse God's offer of forgiveness will experience God's wrath on their sin. But when we are forgiven, or justified, we are saved from this final condemnation (Rom.8:1).

In Heb.9 the writer contrasts the temporary and symbolic value of the Old Testament sacrifices with the permanent value of Christ's death, he "was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people". Then the writer adds "and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him" (v.28). Christ's second coming is the event which we should all be looking forward to, for then we will finally be delivered from sin.

However, until then, Christians are told to expect difficulties and even persecution. Before his arrest and trial, Jesus told his disciples of what was to come, adding, "he who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Mk.13:13). A genuine faith is one that does not give in under persecution.

Peter's epistles were written to people who were already suffering for their faith. He encourages them that we "through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Pet.1:5). He has just reminded them that they have the hope of an imperishable "inheritance" kept in heaven for them (v.4). The salvation they can look forward to will be when they are delivered from these trials and enter this promised inheritance.

We can thank God that we have a Saviour who "is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (Heb.7:25). To save completely must mean rescuing us from all forms of evil, and keeping us safe from future harm.

* * * *

We have seen that in the Old Testament, when salvation is mentioned, it is usually from some very obvious material danger. The two great demonstrations of God's salvation to the Jews were their deliverance from slavery in Egypt and from exile in Babylon. For the Christian church, the two great historic events we remember with gratitude are Christ's death and resurrection, it is only because of them that we can be saved from the guilt and power of sin.

Now we are commanded to do what we can to spread this message throughout the world. God's salvation must start with the forgiveness of sin. Then having been forgiven, we need to be kept safe when we are tempted. The process of salvation continues as the Holy Spirit brings about maturity of Christian character, and this process will only be complete when Christ returns and "we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is" (1 Jn.3:2). Let us not be ashamed of this gospel "because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rm.1:16).

* * * *

Questions for thought and discussion

1. What are the most important things that you personally need saving from?
2. In the Bible, God's salvation is both material (salvation from an enemy, sickness etc.) and spiritual (forgiveness, victory over temptation etc.). What priority should we give to seeking to help the meeting of the physical as well as the spiritual needs of others?

ch.10 The Kingdom of God

Most people think of a kingdom as territory which is ruled over by a king. This seems to be the reason why a country will engage in costly warfare to defend or even enlarge its borders. But the Bible is more concerned with people and how they live. The kingdom of God means God's rule as king, it is a theme which runs through the whole Bible.

God, the king of the Jews

In chapter 8, we saw that God promised Abraham that he would become the father of a great nation, and that they would be given "the whole land of Canaan" (Gen.17:8). But Jacob and his family had to migrate to Egypt because of a severe famine. Years later, when the descendants of Jacob had become so many, the king of Egypt (called Pharaoh) was afraid of them and made them slaves.

The event which moulded them into a nation was when Moses led them out of Egypt. He was the human leader of this nation, but it was God who was their king, it was he who gave them laws to guide their lives, and provided for them in various miraculous ways as they travelled through the wilderness.

The appointing of a king

When the Jews arrived at the land of Canaan, they dispersed and for a time there was little national unity. Samuel was the next person to show any spiritual leadership, but because of the threat of enemy attack, they demanded a king to lead them. Samuel did not think this was right, and God confirmed his feelings by telling him "it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king... Now listen to them, but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will do" (1 Sam.8:7,9). He told Samuel to anoint Saul as king (9:15-17), but he made it clear that he only ruled under God's authority (12:13-15).

Saul proved to be an able military leader, but he gave no spiritual leadership. So God chose David to replace Saul (1 Sam.16:1-12). Later, he promised that the line of succession would remain in his family "for ever" (2 Sam.7:8-17). From then on, the line of kings was known as "the house of David", they sat on "the throne of David". It was David who was the standard by which the actions of later kings were judged.

Imperfect kings

The Jews soon found out that human kings were far from ideal. Saul became unable to deal with the growth of Philistine power, the end of David's reign was plagued with a struggle as to who should succeed him, and Solomon became known as a ruthless employer of forced labour (1 Kgs.12:4). This led to the nation dividing into two kingdoms, David's successors only ruled over the tribe of Judah in the south.

The social and spiritual state of both kingdoms continued to decline. We read that God sent prophets to both kingdoms to speak against the injustice and oppression which existed. Amos, speaking to the northern kingdom said that God would destroy "the sinful kingdom", but "not totally destroy the house of Jacob" (Am.9:8). One day he "will restore David's fallen tent" (v.11). Other prophets preached similar messages that if they continued to sin, God would allow them to be conquered by other countries and taken into exile as judgment.

But this message was not heeded, so the Assyrians invaded the north and deported many of the people. The writer of the book of Kings makes it very clear that this was God's judgment on them because of their sin (2 Kgs.17:7-23).

Future hope

The prophet Isaiah first started preaching when Judah was under threat of attack from the larger countries around them, but his message to king and people was that God was with them and they must trust him to deliver them. Though they were surrounded by hostile neighbours, God was going to give them a king who

"will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness" (Isa.9:7)

He will rule justly because God's Spirit will rest on him (11:2). The two kingdoms will again be united (11:13), there will even be harmony among the animals (11:6-9).

Conquest and captivity

But the spiritual state of the people gradually became worse despite attempts at reform by Hezekiah and Josiah. Eventually the Babylonians invaded Judah, destroyed Jerusalem, and deported many of the people. No longer was a descendant of David ruling in Jerusalem.

Daniel was one of those who were exiled. He was given positions of considerable authority under successive kings. The message of the book of Daniel is that God is still in control of the destiny of his people, even when they are subject to a foreign power. A recurrent theme is that "the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men" (Dn.4:17,25,32; 5:21).

God spoke to Nebuchadnezzar, the ruler of Babylon, through a dream about a giant statue. Daniel interpreted the dream for him telling him that the statue represented various kingdoms that would succeed each other. Then one day God would set up a kingdom which would crush all these kingdoms, "but it will itself endure for ever" (2:44). Daniel himself had visions where he was told about human rulers who would rise and fall in power. In one dramatic dream he saw "one like a son of man" who was given a "kingdom ... that will never be destroyed" (Dn.7:13,14). This is a very significant prediction which will be discussed later.

When Cyrus, head of the Persian Empire conquered Babylon, he allowed those Jews that wanted to return to their own land. But they were still under the rule of a foreign power, the promise that the kingdom would be restored was not fulfilled. After the end of the Old Testament period, the Greeks took over control of the country from the Medes and Persians. There was a brief period when the Greek power had declined, and they appointed their own rulers, but they were not descendants of David, so they were not accepted as fulfilling any of the Old Testament promises. Then the Romans established control, with Herod the Great acting as 'king' under them. So at the time of the New Testament, the Jews were hoping for somebody who would free them from Roman rule and set up the promised kingdom of God by restoring the authority of the Old Testament law.

The Old Testament picture of the future kingdom

There are various passages in the Old Testament which promise future prosperity to the Jews, which were not fulfilled in Old Testament times. We can link them together to get a picture of God's ultimate purpose for his people.

Psalms 72 has the heading "of Solomon". Taken literally, it is a prayer for the reigning king. It speaks of the high standard of justice that all kings should live up to, he must rescue those suffering from injustice,

"He will judge your people in righteousness" (v.2)
"He will deliver the needy who cry out,
the afflicted who have no-one to help...
He will rescue them from oppression and violence" (v.12,14).

But the psalm goes on to wish for the king's dominion which will extend

"from sea to sea
and from the River to the ends of the earth" (v.8).

"All kings will bow down to him
and all nations will serve him" (v.11).

This is not just a wish for political power for its own sake, but so that the nations can know the prosperity that comes from following God's laws,

"All nations will be blessed through him,

and they will call him blessed" (v.17).

This will be the ultimate fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham (Gen.12:3).

This is similar to the prediction in Isaiah 2 that one day God will set up a world-wide empire centred on Jerusalem. All nations will want to obey his laws, they will say,

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob.

He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths" (v.3).

This will bring universal peace,

"Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war any more" (v.4).

The benefits will be seen in greatly increased fertility of the land,

"The desert and the parched land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.

Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom" (Isa.35:1).

Conditions will be so different that in Isa.65:17 it is described as "new heavens and a new earth".

People will live for a long time,

"he who dies at a hundred
will be thought a mere youth" (v.20).

"my chosen ones will long enjoy
the works of their hands" (v.22).

There will be harmony among animals as well,

"The wolf and the lamb will feed together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox" (v.25).

But more important still will be the fact that

"the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea" (Isa.11:9).

So we can understand these passages as describing God's ultimate purpose for the world, they show the ideal that we should aim for. But we also need to consider what is preventing this ideal from being achieved.

Other passages suggest that this new order of things will only come about after judgment on all those who oppose God's purposes. Psalm 2 portrays nations conspiring to attack God's chosen king (v.2). So God encourages this king "You will rule them with an iron sceptre" (v.9). In Joel 3:12-16 we read of "the day of the LORD" when God will "judge all the nations". Zech.14 also describes a battle when God will fight against all the nations who gather to attack Jerusalem. Combining the two sets of prophecies, we see that now there is opportunity for people of all nations to submit to God's rule. But it will only be fully established when those who oppose it are dealt with firmly.

The Messiah

Various names are given to the one who will rule over this future kingdom. In Jer.33:15 he is described as "a righteous Branch ... from David's line". Isa.11:1 calls him a Branch "from the stump of Jesse". In Eze.34:23, God says "I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them". (It was common in those days to call the king 'shepherd'.) The next verse calls him a "prince", which literally means an exalted one. Each name tells us something about this promised king, he will be a descendant of David, for he was considered as the pattern for all future kings. Also he will care for his subjects as a shepherd should care for his sheep.

A common name for the reigning king was "the Lord's anointed", for kings were consecrated to that task by being anointed with oil. The Hebrew word for "anointed one" is Messiah. After the end of the Old Testament period, this was the name that the Jews began to use for the person they were expecting to come and rule as their king, and restore the authority of the laws given by Moses. The Greek word for "Anointed One" is *Christos*, so in the Gospels, when we

read that the Jews spoke of "The Christ", it means they spoke of this expected Messiah.

Jesus, the king of the Jews

Mary was the first to be told that her future child would be the promised king, for the angel said to her "The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end" (Lk.1:33), in other words, he would be the expected Messiah. Also the Magi believed that the star they saw heralded the birth of the "king of the Jews" (Mt.2:2).

However Jesus was not the sort of king that many of the people wanted, he made it clear that he had not come to set up a political kingdom on earth. Nor did he ever make any public claim to be a king. When Peter openly acknowledged to Jesus "You are the Christ (Messiah)" (Mk.8:29), Jesus accepted this title, but to correct any false idea they might have had as to what he had come to do, he told the disciples that he must be rejected and killed, then he would rise again (v.31).

After the Jewish rulers had arrested Jesus and convicted him on a charge of blasphemy, they took him to Pilate and accused him of claiming to be a king. But Jesus made it clear to Pilate "My kingdom is not of this world" (Jn.18:36). His kingdom is from God, it is a spiritual kingdom, and so was no political threat to Pilate's authority.

The preaching of the kingdom.

The coming of the kingdom of God was the main theme first of John the Baptist's preaching, then of Jesus' early teaching. Matthew tells us that John the Baptist's message was, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near", (literally 'has come near', Mt.3:2.) He warned them, "after me will come one who is more powerful than I" (v.11) who will come to judge them, and therefore they must repent of their sin.

Jesus started his preaching with the same message, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Mt.4:17). But instead of bringing instant judgment, he told them how they could enter the kingdom, and how the citizens of this kingdom should behave. When he did mention judgment, it was to be in the future, and on those who rejected his teaching.

It is important to realise that throughout the New Testament, two aspects of the kingdom are taught. In one sense, it came with the coming of Jesus. But one day, the kingdom of God will be fully revealed, when God is seen to rule as king over the whole world.

Entrance to the kingdom

In his teaching, Jesus went against the popular belief that Jews were automatically members of God's kingdom. He told Nicodemus, the devout Pharisee, "no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." (Jn.3:3). This radical change can only come about by the power of the Holy Spirit (v.5), and in those who are humble like a child (Mt.18:3). An outward profession of religion is not enough, for he said "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Mt.7:21). Jesus makes the same point in the parable of the two sons in Mt.21:28-32, the son who was commended was the one who rebelled at first, then changed his mind and obeyed his father.

Wealth can prevent a person from entering the kingdom if that person is too occupied with it, for Jesus once said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!" (Mk.10:23). The kingdom is about spiritual values, and not material things. It is also something that God gives us. Jesus told his disciples, "seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom" (Lk.12:31,32). We must give priority to things of spiritual value, and trust God to provide for our material needs.

However, Jesus does not promise an easy time for those who seek to do right. In the 'Sermon on the Mount' he said,

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt.5:10).

He also demands wholehearted commitment, "No-one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God" (Lk.9:62).

The kingdoms of God and Satan

In the Gospels, we read of several occasions when Jesus met people who were demon possessed, and exorcised these demons. He told the people that his ability to do this was a visible sign of the presence of the kingdom of God, "If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Mt.12:28). When the Pharisees tried to dismiss this by saying that Jesus was casting out demons by "the prince of demons" (v.24), he pointed out how ridiculous this statement was, for if Satan was casting out his own demons, his kingdom would not stand (v.26). Satan has a kingdom which is opposing the kingdom of God, he is like a "strong man" who has to be overpowered before his possessions (the demon-possessed) can be taken from him (v.29).

Parables of the kingdom

Much of Jesus' teaching on the kingdom is in parables. The growth of the kingdom is like the growth of seed sown in the ground (Mk.4:26-29). The parables of the Mustard Seed and of the Yeast predict that this growth will be phenomenal (Mt.13:31-33). The kingdom is of great value, worth any sacrifice, this is what we learn from the parables of the Hidden Treasure, and the Pearl (Mt.13:44-46).

Another important lesson that Jesus taught was that the kingdom is not exclusively for the Jews. During Jesus' earthly life they had an opportunity to enter. But he knew that they were going to reject him as their king, so he told them that the privileges they were enjoying would be taken from them. This is the teaching of the parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard (Mt.21:33-44). Because the nation has not shown the "fruit" of right living, "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit" (v.43).

Future judgment

Other parables speak of a future aspect of the kingdom when Christ will come as judge. The parable of the Weeds (Mt.13:24-30) teaches that the "sons of the kingdom" live alongside the "sons of the evil one", and they will only be separated "at the end of the age" (v.37-43). This separation of the righteous and the wicked at "the end of the age" is also taught in the parable of the Net (Mt.13:47-50).

There will be rewards in the kingdom; in one sense, all will receive the same privileges, this is taught in the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Mt.20:1-16). We all enter the kingdom on the same terms, no matter at what age we enter. On the other hand, the parable of the Talents (Mt.25:14-30) teaches that God has given to each different abilities, and we will be given differing responsibilities in the kingdom depending on how we have used these abilities.

This judgment will mark the end of the opportunity to enter the kingdom, the parable of the Ten Virgins teaches that there will be no opportunity to join afterwards (Mt.25:1-13).

Jesus' Second Coming

The three synoptic Gospels each record how Jesus clearly taught that one day he will come again to bring about the future manifestation of the kingdom. After speaking of various cosmic disturbances, he said "At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory" (Mk.13:26). These words should have reminded them of the vision of Daniel already mentioned, in which he saw "one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven" to be given "authority, glory and sovereign power" (Dn.7:13,14). So this passage must refer to Christ's Second Coming. In Lk.21:31, Jesus calls the signs of his return the signs that "the kingdom of God is near". In other words, Christ's return will mark the future coming of the kingdom.

Other passages speak of "the end", or "the end of the age". Before this happens, "this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world" (Mt.24:14). This is why, after his resurrection, Jesus told his disciples to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Mt.28:19). This

confirms what is taught in the Old Testament that God's kingdom is to extend world-wide.

In the 'Lord's Prayer', when we pray "your kingdom come" (Mt.6:10), we look forward to Christ's return when the will of God will be perfectly obeyed throughout the earth, for in the next phrase we pray, "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven". This second phrase has a double meaning, we want God's will to be done in us now as we seek to obey him, but we know it will not be completely achieved on earth till the fulfilment of the kingdom.

The heavenly banquet

For believers, this will be an occasion of joy, and people celebrate a joyful occasion with a banquet; so in New Testament times, the age which Messiah was to bring in was thought of as a heavenly banquet. Jesus might have been referring to this at the 'Last Supper' when he told his disciples "I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom" (Mt.26:29). Certainly the theme of the banquet occurs in several parables. That of the Ten Virgins tells the story of a wedding reception (Mt.25:1-13). This theme was also mentioned by a Jew in Lk.14:15 who said, "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God".

This last remark led Jesus to tell the parable of the Great Banquet (Lk.14:15-24) which teaches that the invitation to enter the kingdom is for all, religious and irreligious, Jew and Gentile. He gave the same teaching in Mt.8:11,12 when he said that people from all nations will "take their places at the feast" while Jews, here called the "subjects of the kingdom", will be "thrown outside". Naturally, this was not popular with the religious leaders.

The kingdom in the rest of the New Testament

After the resurrection, and before Jesus ascended, the disciples still thought that Jesus was going to set up an earthly kingdom, for they asked him "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). In reply, Jesus said that they were not to know when this would be, their task was to be his witnesses world-wide in the power of the Spirit (v.8). The rest of the book of Acts records how they obeyed his command, starting on the Day of Pentecost when the power of the Holy Spirit was revealed as people from many nations heard them declaring the wonders of God in their own languages. From then on the message of the kingdom has been spreading throughout the world. For that reason, it is possible that the Day of Pentecost is the event Jesus referred to when he said "some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power" (Mk.9:1). For it was then that the power of the Holy Spirit was openly shown as the kingdom began to spread.

The message that the believers preached was called "the good news of the kingdom of God" (Acts 8:12). At Ephesus, Paul argued "persuasively about the kingdom of God" in a Jewish synagogue (Acts 19:8). Then the last that we are told about Paul in the book of Acts is that "he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 28:31). So the theme of the kingdom of God is at the heart of Christian belief.

Paul teaches in Col.1:13 that God has "rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves". Again we see the contrast between the two kingdoms. This is the reason why he knew he could silence those who opposed his teaching in Corinth, for he wrote "the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power" (1 Cor.4:20).

The kingdom and the future

On many occasion when Paul speaks of kingdom, he refers to it as something which is in the future. One example is when he warns new converts that "we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). He tells the Christians in Thessalonica that suffering will cause them to "be counted worthy of the kingdom of God" (2 Thes.1:5).

This belief must affect the way we live. Only those who seek to live morally pure lives "will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor.6:9,10).

Paul also links the final manifestation of the kingdom with Christ's return, In 2 Tim.4:1 he encourages Timothy to perform his responsibilities faithfully "in view of his appearing and his kingdom", reminding him that Christ "will judge the living and the dead".

Concerning the resurrection of the dead he says, "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor.15:50). At the final resurrection we will be given spiritual bodies, "just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven" (v.49). After this all God's enemies, including death, will be destroyed. "Then the end will come when he (Christ) hands over the kingdom to God the Father" (v.24), for at the moment, Christ rules over the kingdom as God's representative.

The book of Revelation takes up some of the themes of the book of Daniel. The prediction made in Dn.2:44 that God will set up a kingdom which will crush earthly kingdoms is fulfilled when an angel announces "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ" (Rev.11:15). We also read of the final overthrow of the kingdom of Satan when he and his allies are "thrown into the lake of burning sulphur" (20:10).

At the end of the Bible, we are left with the picture of a city surrounded by other nations with kings (Rev.21:24), similar to that described in Isa.2. This is a "new heaven and a new earth" (21:1), for the details described cannot be fulfilled literally in this present world order.

Understanding Old Testament prophecies

There is no detailed teaching in the New Testament about the setting up of an earthly kingdom as suggested by the Old Testament passages mentioned earlier in this chapter. To understand them, it is important that we interpret them in the light of the teaching of the New Testament, and not the other way round. There are many different views as to how we interpret the various predictions, we need to try to understand what general principles are clearly taught.

In the New Testament we find that Old Testament passages are quoted and applied to the present situation. In Rom.10:13, Paul quotes from Joel 2:32, to prove that God wants Gentiles as well as Jews to believe, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved". However, this verse occurs in a passage which speaks of events to happen "before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD" (Joel 2:31). Also in 2 Cor.6:2, he quotes Isa.49:8, words which predict a mass return of Jews to their own land,

"In the time of my favour I will answer you,
and in the day of salvation I will help you"

then Paul adds "I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation." He has no hesitation in applying to Gentiles words originally addressed to Jews. So we can say that many of the Old Testament predictions have at least a partial fulfilment in the spread of God's kingdom as people from all nations enter it. But this does not rule out a more literal fulfilment in the future.

Also, both of the passages just quoted link the theme of the kingdom with that of salvation. Both themes have a present and a future aspect. In the New Testament, the main emphasis is on the present need to spread the Christian gospel. But our present lives must be lived in the knowledge of what is to happen in the future. We need to know what God's ideal is for us, and work towards that.

However, the final establishment of the kingdom will not come about through the gradual improvement of conditions on earth, the clear teaching of the Bible is that it will be sudden, when Christ returns and God intervenes in human history.

* * * *

In Old Testament times, God intended that the Jews should live as a model of what all nations should be like, a people ruled by God as king. However, because human nature is imperfect, their human leaders were far short of God's ideal.

Kingdom of God

When Jesus came, he emphasised that the most important aspect of the kingdom is that we should accept God's rule over our lives. This is such a radical change that it can only come about by the power of the Holy Spirit.

After his resurrection and ascension, Jesus told his followers to proclaim this good news throughout the whole world. Many of the Old Testament promises are being fulfilled now as people all over the world submit to God's rule, and live according to his commands. At the moment, God is giving the opportunity to people of all nations to enter the kingdom voluntarily.

However, one day this opportunity will end. Christ will return as judge, and God will remove all that opposes his ultimate purpose and finally establish his kingdom. The Bible only gives a symbolic description of what God's ultimate purpose for the world will be like, what we are assured of is that we will live in harmony with God, with each other and with our environment. The whole Universe will operate to God's glory.

* * * *

Questions for thought and discussion

1. Jesus said it was hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom, he did not say it was impossible. What examples do we find in the Bible of rich people who made good use of their wealth?
2. What does the New Testament teach about how the present aspect of God's kingdom should affect our daily lives?
3. What is the value of studying the biblical prophecies of events that are to take place in the future?
4. The Old Testament promises the spiritual restoration of God's people. Do those passages have any application to the Christian Church today? If so, what should be our response?

chapter 11 God's Solution to the Problem of Sin

The problem restated

In the first chapter of this book, we saw that at the root of all the world's problems is man's sin. It cuts us off from the relationship with God which we were made to enjoy. Without this, the spiritual side of our nature is dead, for Paul tells the Christians at Ephesus "you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world" (Eph.2:1,2). The only way we can enter into a right relationship with God is if he forgives our sin. But we also saw that this raises the question; how can God forgive sin and yet uphold his own moral laws?

In chapter 2, we saw that sin can be forgiven if it is atoned for, and the New Testament writers tell us that Jesus' death has provided atonement for all sin. In this final chapter we consider in more detail the New Testament teaching about the significance of his death, and what this should mean to us in our daily lives. What follows is what is generally understood by the word 'atonement' in present-day Christian use, as this word has a wider meaning now than it has in the Bible.

Jesus' death was planned by God

From the amount of space devoted to the events surrounding Jesus' death in the gospels, and the number of references to it in the epistles, we see that it was regarded as the most important aspect of his earthly life.

A careful reading of the gospels will also show that Jesus' death was not an unavoidable tragedy. He knew that it was God's purpose that he should die, and he told his disciples this on several occasions. For example, immediately after Peter had confessed his belief that Jesus was the expected Messiah, we read that "He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again" (Mk.8:31).

He also told them that these events were predicted in the Old Testament. When his disciples asked him about the belief that a second Elijah had to come before Messiah, he replied, "Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected?" (Mk.9:12). Then at the Last Supper he predicted his betrayal by saying "The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him" (Mk.14:21).

Jesus also told his opponents "I lay down my life - only to take it up again. No-one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord." (Jn.10:17,18). These words speak of a voluntary action, not of an inevitable fate. Also, the reason why he was going to lay down his life was because he was the good shepherd who would lay down his life "for the sheep" (v.11), suggesting that his death is the means whereby his "sheep" are delivered from death.

However, Jesus' death has no significance apart from his resurrection, for he was condemned and crucified as an impostor, and his claims were only vindicated when he rose from the tomb. In Rom.1:4, Paul says of Jesus that he "through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God, by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord." That was the only way the people who witnessed Jesus' crucifixion could believe that he was not a blasphemer, but who he claimed to be, the Son of God.

Christ died for our sin

We must now ask the question, If Jesus had to die, what was the purpose of his death? To answer this question we must first notice that many of the references to it connect it with the forgiveness of sin. Paul says that it is a doctrine "of first importance" that "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor.15:3). This is a foundation truth of the Christian faith. But how does the death of Jesus enable God to forgive us?

The death of Christ as a sacrifice

In the epistles, the death of Christ is often mentioned using the language of sacrifice which is how atonement was normally made for sin in Old Testament times. This includes references to "the blood of Christ" and this is a way of speaking of his death, for blood represents a life given up in death. One example is 1 Jn.1:7 where we read, "the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin." In the Old Testament, the sprinkling of blood was the normal way of purifying something from ritual defilement, so this verse means that the death of Jesus is seen as a sacrifice which has provided cleansing from sin.

A ransom

In chapter 5, we looked at Mk.10:45 where Jesus said that he had come "to give his life as a ransom for many", Now the word "ransom" leads us to ask what we were rescued from. We saw in chapters 2 and 5 that sometimes a sacrifice could be offered as the ransom price to save the life of a person who would otherwise die. The animal died as a substitute for the person whose life was threatened. So one way of looking at the death of Jesus is to say that he died as a ransom-sacrifice for us. We were spiritually dead because of our sin, and Jesus died in our place so that we might be rescued from this spiritual death.

Christ bore our sin

In 1 Pet.2:24, we read that "He himself (Christ) bore our sins in his body on the tree". Now to 'bear sin' was an Old Testament way of speaking of suffering the consequences of sin. One example of this is in Lev.5:17 where we read "If a person sins and does what is forbidden in any of the LORD's commands, even though he does not know it, he is guilty and will be held responsible" (K.J.V. "shall bear his iniquity"). So this verse in 1 Peter tells us that when Christ died, he was suffering the consequence of our sin, which means that now we can be forgiven.

Christ was made sin

Paul goes further in 2 Cor.5:21 where he says "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." This verse was discussed in chapter 6. It is important to point out that Jesus "had no sin", he was the only one who was truly righteous. This enabled God to take the guilt of our sin and put it on him, so that God might accept us as righteous. This may be hard to accept, how can guilt be transferred from one person to another? There are two events which occurred just before Christ's death to confirm that Paul had a true understanding of what happened.

The first is Jesus' distress in the Garden of Gethsemane. He knew that he would die and rise again, and countless Christian martyrs have faced death bravely in faith that they too will rise. Jesus cannot have suffered such agony simply because he knew he was going to die. The only way we can understand his distress is by saying that it was because he knew that he, who had never sinned, was to bear human sin, or to "be sin for us".

The second event is his cry when he was on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mk. 15:34, quoting Ps.22:1). These words raise the question, if Jesus was divine how could God forsake him? We may not be able to explain this philosophically, we have to accept that Jesus experienced the separation from God that we feel as a result of sin, and this was the only way that we can be accepted as righteous by God.

Christ as representative

In 2 Cor.5 we find another aspect of Christ's death brought out. "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died" (v.14). This means that, in his death, he represented all men. But this also means that his dying has delivered us from eternal death, for in the next verse Paul refers to "those who live" meaning those who receive eternal life as a result of Christ's death. It is not enough to say that Christ represents us in his death, we must add that his death is the means whereby we can receive eternal life.

The motive for the Christian life

This verse (2 Cor.5:15) leads on to another important consequence of Christ's death. Those who receive the benefits of it are under an obligation not to "live for themselves but for him

who died for them and was raised again". The death of Jesus does not simply bring forgiveness of sin, it provides the motive for the whole of the Christian life. Because Jesus gave his life for us, we owe it to him to dedicate our lives in his service. We should now live under the compelling power of Christ's love.

The importance of Christ's resurrection

The mention of Jesus being raised again shows that we cannot separate the death of Jesus from his resurrection, if Jesus died as our representative, he also rose again as our representative. This now provides us with an additional motive for seeking to avoid sin. Because Christ died as our representative we should count ourselves "dead to sin" (Rom.6:11), and because he rose as our representative, we should count ourselves "alive to God in Christ Jesus".

We should also look on Christ's ascension in the same way, "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God" (Col.3:1). His ascension should take our thoughts from material things to the spiritual values referred to as "things above".

Another very important consequence of Christ's resurrection is that it is the guarantee that we will also rise from the dead. "If we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him" (Rm.6:8). Paul considers this in great detail in 1 Cor.15. Also, when Jesus spoke of "eternal life" he meant a new quality of life which does not end with physical death. We will not rise to a life which is like the present, but one which is the fulfilment of all God's purposes for us. Because of this, we must not just consider the material things of life on earth, but attach more importance to those things which have eternal value,

Other aspects of Christ's death

There are other ways of looking at the reason why Jesus died. His death was the supreme expression of God's love for us, for Paul says "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom.5:8). But this is not the only reason why Jesus died. He loved us because he was willing to die in order that we might be "saved from God's wrath" (v.9), the wrath which is God's judgment on our sin.

Jesus also set an example of being willing to suffer unjustly. In 1 Pet.2:20,21 we read, "if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps." But again, this is not the only reason why he died, for Peter goes on to say "he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" (v.24).

There are many levels at which we can look at the significance of the death of Jesus, but the most fundamental reason why he died is that it was necessary in order that our sin can be forgiven. No understanding of the meaning of his death is adequate which does not take into account the seriousness of sin. The fact that our forgiveness could only be bought at such a cost should move us to show our love and gratitude by giving our lives in God's service.

* * * *

We have seen that the teaching about the death and resurrection of Jesus is at the heart of our faith for three reasons. First, it provides the basis by which sin can be forgiven so that we can approach God. Then it gives the motive for Christian living. Finally we that because Jesus rose from the dead, so shall we, and now we live knowing that death is not the end, we have an eternal future to look forward to, a life lived in fellowship with God and when we will serve him as we should.

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We can now see how the various words discussed in this book fit into the Christian life. We can receive forgiveness of sin because Jesus' death has provided atonement (chapter 2). Having

been forgiven we are now justified, or accepted as righteous in God's sight (chapter 3). The personal way of putting this is that we are reconciled to God (chapter 6). The word 'redemption' brings out the cost of our forgiveness (chapter 5). Also, by redeeming us, God set us apart for his service, in other words we are regarded as holy, but this puts on us the obligation to live a life worthy of this holy God (chapter 4). We are now bound to him by a covenant (chapter 7), we have also become members of his kingdom (chapter 10). The whole process of delivering us from sin throughout life is called 'salvation' (chapter 9). My prayer for the reader is that this book has enabled you to understand these words better, so that you have a clearer understanding of the passages in the Bible where they occur. May this in turn help you to know God better and enter more fully into God's good purposes for you.

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Questions for thought and discussion

1. Why do you think that the Cross was chosen as a symbol for the Christian faith? Can you suggest an alternative?
2. Why is it so important to believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus?
3. What message does the Cross have in a world in which human life is viewed so cheaply because there is so much war and fighting?
4. How much does a person need to understand about the meaning of the death of Christ before he or she can become a Christian?