

STUDY TEXTS FOR YOUTH FELLOWSHIP ASSEMBLY 2017

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The Gathering Of God's People

The coming of Jesus Christ to die for mankind marked a great turning point for good in the history of the world. The inhabitants of the earth who hitherto had walked in darkness and in the shadow of death suddenly had the chance of gaining perfect life, peace and happiness in God's Kingdom fully established. It was for this divine purpose that Jesus Christ, having been endowed with regal power and authority, is, along with the remnant of the saints in these last days, calling his people into his kingdom fold notwithstanding the devil's evil machinations to mislead the people through false religious organisations.

After the fall of man, the Perfect and All-wise God, in keeping with His divine promises, created the nation of Israel to serve as a means through which He will bring His people to walk in harmony with Him again. Unfortunately most of the Jews were stubborn and disobedient and so God scattered them across several nations as He had earlier warned them in Deuteronomy 28:25; 1 Kings 14:15, etc. This prophecy fulfilled to the letter as Israel was conquered, pillaged, humiliated and taken captive by their enemies, which include the Assyrians, Babylonians, and the Romans.

The nation of Israel was a Roman colony when Jesus Christ was born. He was sent by God to save the entire human race including the natural Jews. But being that they were in captivity they looked for political freedom instead of spiritual freedom. (John 8:31,32,36; Luke 4:16-18; John 6:15; Acts 1:6) As a result, only a few of them believed in him. Because they rejected him, Jesus Christ cursed Jerusalem when he said "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord." - Matthew 23:37-39.

Furthermore, Jesus Christ declared that the stubbornness of the Jews would bring upon them misery and anguish. Speaking of the fate that would befall them he asserted: "And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled." - Luke 21:24.

The words of Jesus Christ fulfilled on Jerusalem in AD 70 when General Titus, a Roman commander, marched into the city destroyed its temple, killed many of the Jews, and forced most of them into captivity. Thus, the last vestiges of the state of Israel were wiped out. Most of the Jews then went into Diaspora, a word which means dispersion. It was not until May 14, 1948 that the state of Israel was reborn. This followed the historic decision by the General Assembly of the United Nations on November 29, 1947 to partition Palestine into two other independent states, one for the Jews, the other for the Arabs.

Return

The proclamation of the state of Israel in 1948 was the fulfillment of the Scriptures that the Jews will in course of time regain their land. But the major fulfillment of that prophecy is the gathering of the people of God in various parts of the world into His Kingdom to serve Him in truth for their blessing and salvation in the end by His grace and power as it is written: "My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and upon every high hill: yea, my flock was scattered upon all the face of the earth, and none did search or seek after them. For thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, I, even I, will both search my sheep, and seek them out. As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered; so will I seek out my sheep, and will deliver them out of all places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day. And I will bring them out from the people, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land, and feed them upon the mountains of Israel by the rivers, and in all the inhabited places of the country." - Ezekiel 34:6,11-16.

It goes without saying therefore that what God did for the natural Jews in gathering them to their own land was only a type of what He promised to do in a greater measure to His children the world over through Jesus Christ, the antitypical seed of Abraham. (Galatians 3:16) The sacrificial work of Jesus Christ opened the door of salvation to both the natural Jews and those who were not Jews by birth, then known as the gentiles. All those who believe in Jesus Christ, from any part of the world are today spiritual Jews. In his letter to the Christians in Galatia, St. Paul declared as much when he stated: "Know ye therefore that

they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham. For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” (Galatians 3:7-9, 26-29. See also Romans 2:28,29) Thus, faith and not blood relationship has become the mark by which the true children of Abraham the spiritual Jews are identified. These spiritual Jews are also known as the “Israel of God” in Galatians 6:16.

The Gathering work

Referring to His children the world over, God Almighty declared in Isaiah 43:5-7,21 “Fear not: for I am with thee: I will bring thy seed from the east, and gather thee from the west; I will say to the north, Give up; and to the south, Keep not back: bring my sons from far, and my daughters from the ends of the earth; Even every one that is called by my name: for I have created him for my glory, I have formed him; yea, I have made him. This people have I formed for myself; they shall shew forth my praise.” The work of gathering the people of God has been entrusted to Jesus Christ who is referred to as Shiloh (which means Peaceful One) in Genesis chapter 49 verse 10 as it is written:

The sceptre shall not depart from Judah nor a law giver from between his feet until Shiloh come. Unto him shall the gathering of the people be.” Similar prophecies to the effect that God will use Jesus Christ to bring light to the gentiles are contained in Isaiah 11:10; 42:5-8, etc.

This gathering work will go on despite the devil's opposition. In John 11:49-53 we read of how the chief priests and the Pharisees convened to discuss how to check the popularity of Jesus Christ. They declared: “What do we? for this man doeth many miracles. If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him: and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation. And one of them, named Caiaphas, being the high priest that same year, said unto them, Ye know nothing at all, Nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not. And this spake he not of himself: but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation. And not for that nation only, but that also he should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad.”

Moreover, God Almighty used picture language to describe how He would use Jesus Christ to call those of the apostle' class, and through them, all people of goodwill to Himself as it is written: “Thus saith the LORD of hosts; In those days it shall come to pass, that ten men shall take hold out of all languages of the nations, even shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you.” (Zechariah 8:20-23) The “Jew” is Jesus Christ. “The skirt” refers to the anointed Christians who constitute the body members of Christ. (1 Corinthians 12:27) The “ten men” that would take hold of the skirt stand for all people who love truth and righteousness from all parts of the world, that is, “the Other Sheep” who are gathered to God through the preaching of the apostles.

The inspired words of the prophet Zechariah found fulfillment when Jesus Christ came to the world and started the work with the 12 apostles as recorded in Luke 6:12-15; 12:32 and Mark 3:14. Before his passion Jesus Christ stated: “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.” (John 12:32) After his resurrection therefore, he anointed and commissioned the apostles to continue the work of gathering the people of God “both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria and unto the uttermost part of the earth.” (Acts 1:8) The gathering of people of other nationalities to God besides the natural Jews took a major dimension on the day of Pentecost when Peter and other apostles preached the word, and people of diverse nations were converted. (Acts 2:1-41) Indeed the Lord had begun to fulfil His promise through the prophet Isaiah to wit: “The Lord GOD which gathereth the outcasts of Israel saith, Yet will I gather others to him, beside those that are gathered unto him.” (Isaiah 56:8) In other words, both the natural Jews who were dispersed abroad and the gentiles will be gathered to Jesus Christ. See also 2 Thessalonians 2:1.

God used other apostles who were called later, such as Stephen, Paul, Cornelius among others, to continue the work. St. Paul affirmed that God had through Jesus Christ committed the work of reconciliation to the apostles when he said: “And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God.” - 2 Corinthians 5:18-20; see also Ephesians 2:11-22.

The gathering work did not end in the days of the early apostles. Jesus Christ said at the time of his second presence, he will choose the remnant of the saints from all parts of the world. (Matthew 24:31) These are the “fishers” and “hunters” whom God will send to rescue His people “from every mountain and from every hill and out of the holes of the rocks.” (Jeremiah 16:16) The complete number of the apostles' or saints' class is 144,000. - Revelation 7:4-8; 14:1-5.

The Kingdom of God

God promised to set up His Kingdom on earth in this period known as the last days into which He will gather His people through the remnant of the saints as it is written: “And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it.” (Isaiah 2:2) “The Mountain of the Lord's House” symbolizes God's Kingdom belonging to Jesus Christ and his body members (the apostles or saints) who constitute the spiritual house or temple of God according to Luke 12:32; 22:28-30; 1 Corinthians 3:16, 17; Hebrews 3:6. The “mountains” represent satan's entire organization both visible and invisible. The hills denote worldly clubs and societies. “All nations” stand for all lovers of truth and righteousness the world over. What the prophecy is saying in effect is that in this age we are now living, known as the last days, the Kingdom of God belonging to Jesus Christ and the saints will be established on top of satan's entire organisation and that this Kingdom will in course of time outgrow all other worldly societies and clubs as all people of goodwill will flow into it, obviously for safety and protection. Ultimately, all individuals and institutions outside the Kingdom of God will be destroyed. The signs of the times now staring everyone in the face show that we are now in the last days and that the prophecy has fulfilled. -Daniel 12:4,8-10; Matthew 24:3-8,21; Luke 21:25-36; 2 Timothy 3:1-5.

The Bible shows that any church that preaches the truth in any part of the world in this age of the end of the world, having been set up by one of the remnants of the saints is the Kingdom of God. By virtue of the fact that she preaches the truth unmixed with lies, having been founded by one of the remnant of the saints in person of St. Gideon Meriodere Urhobo, we have no doubt in our minds that the God's Kingdom Society (GKS) the Church of the Living God is part and parcel of God's universal Kingdom which He promised to set up in these last days as stated in Isaiah 2:2. Giving account of His call in February 1933 he stated "After three and half years' diligent and prayerful studies of the Holy Bible, Jesus Christ revealed himself to me in a vision and commanded me to go and proclaim the good news of God's Kingdom (or 'Gospel of Peace') to all nations as the only remedy for all human sufferings and woes; to expose all the false doctrines which Satan had used to deceive the people and to keep them in ignorance of God's Kingdom and purpose of creation; and to pronounce God's written judgment against all wickedness." In spite of intense persecutions, the GKS was set up in the year 1934 in Lagos. She has since been championing the revealed truth of the Bible as expounded by Saint Urhobo.

It is of utmost importance that those gathered to God should strive to do His will at all times else they will not be saved. Our Lord Jesus Christ emphasized this so clearly in the parable of the nets as well as that of the wheat and tares, on which, in concluding he said: “The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.” - Matthew 13: 24-30, 39-43, 47-50.

Moreover God admonished His children through His prophet Zephaniah: “Gather yourselves together, yea, gather together, O nation not desired; Before the decree bring forth, before the day pass as the chaff, before the fierce anger of the LORD come upon you, before the day of the LORD's anger come upon you. Seek ye the LORD, all ye meek of the earth, which have wrought his judgment; seek righteousness, seek meekness: it may be ye shall be hid in the day of the LORD's anger.” - Zephaniah 2:1-3; Isaiah 26:20,21

May the Almighty God JEHOVAH help those gathered to Him to prove themselves worthy of their calling by holding fast to the end by God's grace so that He will fulfil on them “all the good pleasure of His goodness” through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. - 2 Thessalonians 1:11.

WHY DOES GOD ALLOW THE CONFUSION OF DIVISION AMONG THE CHURCH

There is no church group that says it is founded by the devil. All claim to have been founded by God and Christ. Most of the preachers propagate conflicting doctrines and adopt different method of worship; and under the cover of a prophet, apostle or workers of miracles, some of them commit heinous sins and claims. Many people are wondering whether they are all really chosen by God, and if it is so, "why does God allow the confusion of divisions among the Churches?" some do ask.

It will amount to self- deceit to pretend not to know that there are false prophets, and these are always in majority. There are good reasons therefore for people to examine the prophets carefully in the light of the scripture so as not to be deceived. Thus it is written: "Behold, believe not every spirit, but try the spirit whether they are of God: because many false prophet are gone out into the world." – John 4:1.

And the guideline whereby the prophets or religious ministers are to be examined were given by the Lord Jesus Christ and his chosen apostle. Jesus Christ said: "Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them. Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven." - Matthew 7:20, 21.

The fruits by which the true servant of God can be identified today, are not mere seeing of vision, prophesying or casting out of devils or working of miracles in the name of Jesus Christ. This is so because false prophets do see visions, perform wonders and prophesy lies in the name of God.- Jer . 14:14; Matt 24:11, 24: 2 Cor. 11:13-15.

Said Jesus Christ: "Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity." (Matthew 7:22, 23) Rather the fruits by which the chosen servant of Christ can be known are primarily the TRUTH of God's word which they preach without adulteration, and the practice of righteousness based on Christian love, Jesus himself said, "the TRUTH shall make you free". (John 8:32) He did not say miracles will make you free. The importance of right doctrines, therefore, cannot be overstated – 1 Timothy 4:13,16;6:3-5.

God does not and cannot contradict Himself. And the Bible says. He is not the author of confusion but of peace. (1Cor 14:33) Therefore, He cannot raise up false prophets to oppose the true ones He has chosen and thus cause confusion and divisions. False prophets and their denominations are the products of the devil. - Matt 13:36-43. That is why they preach false doctrines, perform wonders pretentiously in the name of Jesus in order to deceive their followers and lead them to destruction in the end.- Jer. 14:14; 27:15; Hosea 4:6; Matt15:14.

Briefly, why God allows “the confusion of divisions among the churches” is because the time for Him to kill the devil and all his followers has not come and so He makes His sheep appreciate that He is the God of justice, and see for themselves the differences between His servants and those of the devil. They are to exercise the freedom to choose for themselves whom to follow or serve, and the misled ones are afforded the opportunity to repent before He will kill the unrepentant ones and the devil who is using them at an appointed time that will soon reveal itself. – Deu.30:15-20; Joshua 24:15; Zeph. 1:14-18; 2 Peter. 3:9-14.

You are therefore warned in your own interest against religious misleaders and false prophets who, though they are savage wolves, come to you in sheep’s clothing and seduce the mind of the simple with smooth and fair speeches and bogus claims. If you follow them or give them your support in any shape or form you stand the danger of losing your soul.—Isa. 9:16; Matt 15:14; 2 John 10, 11.

YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED! And the hands of the GKS, by the grace of God, are free from the blood of those who may scorn. May God help His children everywhere to serve Him in truth and do His will always so that they may be saved. Amen

Being the Freedom Day Message of late GKS President, Brother E. T. Otomewo, October 1976

BELIEF IN JESUS CHRIST DOES NOT SAVE ONE INSTANTLY

Certain crusaders, revivalists, divine healers, apostles, evangelists or whatever else they call themselves, have been heard preaching at the top of their voices saying: “If you believe in Jesus Christ as your personal saviour, you are already saved from this moment”! To support this statement they quote Acts 16:30 wherein a warder or jail official who saw the wonders of God and His mercy and grace on Paul and Silas asked them saying: “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” And they answered him: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.” (verse 31) It is this statement that some preachers have prostituted and used to deceive or mislead simpletons and some intelligent people who love to serve God but who unfortunately have little knowledge of the Bible.

But did Christ not say that after believing in him some worshippers in his Church would do abominable or iniquitous things as did a vicar in London who abused his high spiritual office and privilege by committing adultery with a woman “75 to 80 times” as she confessed and told a Church court in London? – (vide Nigerian Daily Express, 10th April, 1961) And do some “Aladura” prophets and others who do not fear God not defile some barren women anxious to get children by deceiving them that they would invoke the holy spirit on them through their long “prayers” in the Church vestry or some other places at very odd hours in the night? Is it not iniquities such as these that Christ said would weaken or make the love of some who had believed in him but who lacked Bible knowledge to ‘WAX COLD’, or even make them fall off from God’s service? But he (Christ) counseled the faithful when he said: “He that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved”. Look up Matthew 24:12,13.

It is the love of those without faith and who have not the knowledge of God that would “wax cold”; and for such ones to withdraw from the Church of God because of the ungodly conduct of some members of the Church would be wrong in that it is not the Church that had sinned but the ungodly ones. One can only withdraw from the Church if she condones the sins of ungodly ones by not disciplining or expelling them.

If one is instantly saved on the day one accepts Jesus, notwithstanding whether one serves God faithfully or not thereafter, Christ would not have said he would expel or cast out of his kingdom fold those who still continue to commit iniquity after they had believed and confessed him as their personal saviour. He said: “As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world. The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; and shall cast them into a furnace of fire; there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear” – Matthew 13:40-43.

Did he (Christ) not also say that he came into the world to call and save sinners who repent of their sins and practice righteousness and that “Except your

righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the Kingdom of heaven”? – Matthew 9:10-13; 5:20.

Did Alexander the coppersmith not believe in Jesus Christ as his personal saviour before he did “MUCH EVIL” to Saint Paul for which the apostle prayed God to reward him according to his evil work? Does scriptures not say that Hymeneus and Alexander were expelled or excommunicated by St. Paul for evil-doing? Were they saved just because they had earlier believed in Jesus Christ as their personal saviour? Look up 1 Timothy 1:18-20; 2 Timothy 4:14,15.

There is the case too, of Demas who believed in Christ as his personal saviour but later forsook him because of worldliness or the world which he loved more than Christ. Look up 2 Timothy 4:10; 10:37,38; 1 John 2:15-17.

And did Judas the treasurer of the Saviour not prove to be a very dishonest and ungodly fellow by stealing Jesus’ money and by later selling him for 30 pieces of silver? Was he saved? But he too had earlier believed in Jesus as his personal saviour!

The question we of the God’s Kingdom Society (GKS) and other reasonable people with Bible knowledge often ask the so-called divine healers, crusaders, revivalists and so on, and which they have been unable to answer till this day, is: “If one is saved instantly on the day one believes in Jesus Christ as one’s personal saviour, why the warning by Jesus Christ that it is those who endure and serve him faithfully till the end that would be saved? And why did Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, say that he was not misbehaving himself in the service of God in that it was those who were disciplined in God’s service and who did what was preached to them or who faithfully kept God’s commandments till the end that would be saved?”

He stated categorically that if he himself did not behave as a good Christian by doing the will of God or by doing what he himself had preached to others, he would not be saved in the end. “But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means,” said he, “when I have preached to others, I MYSELF SHOULD BE CAST AWAY”! (1 Corinthians 9:24-27) Why should he again be “CAST AWAY” if he had been saved instantly on the day of his conversion?

If one is instantly saved on the day or moment one accepts Jesus Christ as one’s personal saviour as some preachers teach, why did St. Paul exhort the faithful in Philippi who had long accepted Christ and who according to the so-called crusaders had been saved since their conversion date, to still “work out their own salvation with fear and trembling? (Philippians 2:12) What is the need of still working to obtain salvation whereas they were saved on the day they accepted Christ as their personal saviour?

A careful reading and understanding of the above will no doubt make any honest and unbiased reader of this pamphlet who wants to be truly saved, to appreciate the fact that mere belief in Jesus Christ as one's personal saviour does not save one instantly. It does not even save one at all, EXCEPT one serves Christ faithfully, doing the righteousness or the will of God till the end as he himself said. – Look up Matthew 5:20; 6:33; 7:21-29; 4:12,13.

Paul and Silas did not say that one is saved instantly when one believes in Jesus as one's saviour. What they said was, "thou SHALT be saved", and NOT "thou art instantly saved or saved from this very moment". This is so because after believing, so-called believers do abominable or sinful things contrary to the will of God and Christ by still drinking heavily, committing fornication and adultery with foolish and ungodly spinsters, housewives and so forth. Will they be saved with all these iniquities hanging over their heads? Scripture says categorically that the unrighteous will not inherit God's Kingdom: "Know ye not that the unrighteousness shall not inherit the Kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind (homosexuals), nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God' – 1 Corinthians 6:9,10.

We therefore advise those who wish to serve God sincerely and in truth in order to be truly saved to beware of the so-called crusaders, divine healers, revivalists, apostles and so on, who preach false doctrines or what St. Paul rightly called "doctrines of devils", thereby misleading people – Isaiah 9:16; 1 Timothy 4:1,2,16. See also Matthew 15:14.

May God give you, dear reader, the understanding of this pamphlet so that you may serve Him sincerely and in truth by believing in His right doctrines or the truth preached fearlessly and without corruption in the GKS or any other true Church so that you may be saved. Amen.

WHY IS THERE NO REDUCTION IN SIN AND CRIME RATE DESPITE THE RAPID INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF CHURCHES?

Like an ever-widening spiral, churches are multiplying at such a breathtaking pace that it is difficult to keep track of them. What an irony it is however that despite this explosion in numbers, the rate of sin and crime has been on the upward swing, meaning that the churches are being set up for motives other than for promoting the truth and righteousness of God. The reasons for this unnatural situation are spiritual as the revealed truth of the Holy Scriptures clearly testify.

According to the World Christian Encyclopaedia, the number of Churches in the world (distinct from the Orthodox Churches) as at 2001 was 33,820. (Vide *Time Magazine* January 29, 2001) In the *Newswatch* edition of December 3, 2001, the number of new Churches in Nigeria then was put at 1018. Obviously, the current are now far higher going by the rate at which new churches are being founded. It is because of the religious zeal seen among Nigerians that they have been rated the most religious people on earth according to a "World Values Survey" as published in the *Daily Sun* of October 21, 2003, page 7.

Indeed, churches are springing up by the day – and are still counting. Concerned about what he called "rampant supernaturalism" in Nigeria, a member of the Federal House of Representatives, Professor Sola Adeyeye complained that the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway which was constructed to serve as a rapid inland gateway to Nigeria's economic capital, Lagos, has become "the highest concentration of sectarian zealots on earth" as it is today "perennially clogged by a miscellany of ever-sprouting religious sects..." (*The Guardian* Wednesday December 17, 2003, page 65) In spite of the number of churches such evils as prostitution, women and child trafficking, armed robbery, "419", teenage pregnancies, etc., are on the rise. Nigeria is still rated by Transparency International as the second most corrupt country in the world. (*Punch* of Wednesday October 8, 2003) A Nigerian newspaper the *Daily Sun*, carried at page 20 of its July 5, 2004 edition the headline, "In Abuja, its churches everywhere, but the devil still dances in the city". The report noted that "sex, robbery incidents, ritual killings and assassinations, blackmail and fraudulent land deals occur on daily basis in the city, putting a question mark on the presence of churches in the city". That the rising figures in Church attendance does not reflect in the lives of the people shows that the bases for their existence should be located elsewhere.

Proliferation not from God

The devil is responsible for the rapid increase in the number of Churches today. The proliferation is part of his grand design to lead many people astray by making it difficult for them to identify the true ones. It is the devil, “the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2) that is using all miracle workers whether they know it or not. Indeed apostle Paul did not leave anyone in doubt that the devil and his agents disguise as ministers of righteousness and that the working of satan is marked by “signs and lying wonders”. – 2 Corinthians 11:13-15; 2 Thessalonians 2:7-12; Revelation 13:13,14; 16:13,14.

Besides, our Lord Jesus Christ asserted that one of the signs of the last days will be the profusion of false prophets making miracles. He declared: “**And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.**” (Matthew 24:11,24) The prophecy of Jesus Christ is no doubt fulfilling to the letter ! Indeed, both the new and older churches now are falling over each other in promising people miracles. Outside the regular programmes of most radio and television stations in the country, there is hardly any other item being aired except church programmes advertising miracles. Some people even discharge their patients from the hospitals to seek cure at crusade grounds only to return them in worse conditions to the hospitals where they are rejected by the obviously exasperated hospital staff! Even at these crusades those who claim to have been healed are not people known to residents in the immediate vicinity contrary to what obtained in the days of Jesus Christ and the apostles. (John 9:18-21; Acts 3:10; 4:14-16, 21, 22)

If truly these preachers have power to heal, why are they shying away from going to the hospitals and clinics to heal or even relieve the pains of the sick and dying members of the society? Do these healers not ply the Lagos-Benin express way where scores of lepers, living in makeshift ramshackle tents eke out a living by begging for alms at a certain point along the road? If they have the gift of healing and are not using it, is that not sin on their part? Did the Bible not say “therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin”? (James 4:17) On the other hand, if they do not have the powers they claim to have are they not deceivers of the first order who should be exposed in the strongest terms possible?

Writing in the Op-Ed page of *The Guardian*, a contributing editor Mr. Okey Ndibe stated: “As Nigeria’s economic and social conditions become bleaker, many desperate Nigerians have turned to religious leaders for succour. The sick troop to churches that advertise themselves as miracle factories. The destitute turn to pastors hawking jejune prosperity abracadabra. The psychologically scarred and

mentally afflicted embrace “men of God” who promise to release them from “bondage”. All kinds of animist and pseudo-religious gurus are cashing in on the misery and desperation abroad in the land. These practices ought to invite contempt and condemnation...” (*The Guardian* Thursday November 6, 2003 page 65) Professor Adeyeye complained that “under the guise of religious fervour, we have imbibed the arrant falsehood and silly superstition that God will heal Nigeria via endless night vigils and religious jamborees.” - *The Guardian* Wednesday December 17, 2003, page 65.

Thank Goodness, some people are seeing through this charade hence the directive by the National Broadcasting commission banning from the airwaves all miracle claims that cannot be verified. We commend the NBC management for their courageous step as it would go a long in saving many Nigerians from the dubious activities of these false prophets.

How does one know the true Church? It is by the doctrines they preach. The devil can do miracles but he will never preach the truth unmixed with lies. In 1 Timothy 4:1-5 it is stated “Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, GIVING HEED TO SEDUCING SPIRITS, AND DOCTRINES OF DEVILS; Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth...” The inspired words of St. Paul just quoted show that one can identify the churches that are under the influence of “seducing spirits” by the false doctrines they preach. Speaking through the prophet Jeremiah God Almighty declared: “I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran: I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in my counsel, and had caused my people to hear my words, THEN THEY SHOULD HAVE TURNED THEM FROM THEIR EVIL WAY, AND FROM THE EVIL OF THEIR DOINGS” (Jeremiah 23:21,22; Jeremiah 14:14) One could see from the words of God through Jeremiah that if these pastors imparted the truth to the people, those who are righteously inclined among them will turn to righteousness; but this is not the case. Rather, they are more interested in large congregations and hefty donations than righteousness. God Almighty sternly rebuked these false religious leaders who close their eyes to sin because of “filthy lucre”. (Isaiah 56:10,11) These deceivers are the counterparts of the Pharisees of old whom Christ cursed thus: “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves.” (Matthew 23:15) Those who love to serve God should therefore reject these people

because God did not send them. They should like the people of Berea search the scriptures diligently whether what they are being told is in line with the Bible. (Acts 17:10,11) The Bible says “the prudent man looketh well to his going” (Proverbs 14:15) and that we should “prove all things; hold fast to that which is good”. (1 Thessalonians 5:21) In the end it is those who refuse to hear the truth that will continue to be deceived by false prophets and who would suffer destruction. – 2 Thessalonians 2:10-12; Matthew 15:12-14; Isaiah 9:16.

Wickedness

The reason why the rate of sin and crime is rising in this age known as the “last days” is that the devil, having been cast down from heaven and knowing that his time to live is short, is bent on dragging as many people as possible with him into destruction. (Revelation 12:7-12; John 8:44; 10:10,12,13) The account of Daniel says that at the time of the end, “the wicked shall do wickedly” (Daniel 12:10) while St. Paul in his letter to Timothy spoke of the last days as “perilous times” when many vices will abound. (2 Timothy 3:1-5) And in verse 13 he added: “But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving , and being deceived.”

Furthermore, Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour, emphasized that people living in this age will be given to godlessness. (Luke 17:26-30) He also stated: “And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved.” -Matthew 24:12,13.

Itching Ears

The truth is that churches are proliferating not because people want to do righteousness but because they want solutions to their material problems and want to be told only what they want to hear. In such a situation the people can never be edified. The prophet Isaiah had a similar experience and God Almighty declared: “That this is a rebellious people, lying children, children that will not hear the law of the LORD: Which say to the seers, See not; and to the prophets, Prophecy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophesy deceits.” (Isaiah 30:9,10) God Almighty through the prophet Jeremiah declared: “A wonderful and horrible thing is committed in the land; The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; **and my people love to have it so** and what will ye do in the end thereof?” (Jeremiah 5:30,31) These false prophets make false predictions colouring it to suit the mood of the people as it was in the days of prophet Jeremiah for which God was angry with them. -Jeremiah 14:13-16. See also Jeremiah 23:1,2,21,22,31,32.

Moreover, St. Paul in his letter to Timothy made it clear that the time will come when people “will not endure sound doctrine” (the truth) but “after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.” (2 Timothy 4:3-4) The *Living Bible* renders the account thus: “For there is going to come a time when people won't listen to the truth but will go around looking for teachers who will tell them just what they want to hear. They won't listen to what the Bible says but will blithely follow their own misguided ideas.”

Many a church house is today nothing but a house of merchandise or a den of robbers. (John 2:13-17; Matthew 21:13) These are the sort of people St. Peter had in mind when he declared: “But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of. And through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you: whose judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not.” – 2 Peter 2:1-3

True Pastors

Despite the prevalence of false prophets God Almighty had promised through the prophet Jeremiah that he would give His people true pastors who shall feed them knowledge with understanding. (Jeremiah 3:15) And Jesus Christ declared that God will send His angels to gather His elect from “the four winds”, meaning all parts of the world, to commission his chosen servants, the apostles whom He will use to establish His true Churches. It is there people will be fed with truth and saved in the end by God's grace. These apostles are all men. They are not taught by men in seminaries in order to understand the mysteries of God. By the grace of God we are privileged to have one of such Pastors in the person of St. G. M. Urhobo of the blessed and eternal memory. It is such organisations represented by God's Kingdom Society in this part of the world that is the way of holiness where people will learn righteousness.

It is the unadulterated truth of the gospel preached by these anointed servants, that reforms people's character, hence it is symbolized as water. (Ephesians 5:26). Since the Churches do not have the truth they cannot positively affect the lives of their adherents. Job the prophet asked: “Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? not one.” (Job 14:4) Emphasizing the cleansing power of the truth the prophet David stated: “Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed thereto according to thy word. Thy word have I heed in mine heart, that I might

not sin against thee.” (Psalm 119:9,11) And our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ added: “Ye are clean by the word which I have spoken unto you” and “Sanctify them through thy truth the word is truth”. - John 15:3; John 17:17; see also Psalm 19:7-11

It is evident therefore that there can be no reduction in the rate of sin and crime despite the rapid increase in the number of churches because of the influence of satan the devil who has intensified his activities in these last days. The false churches founded by the devil preach lies and so can never reform people’s character. It is only those who love truth and righteousness that will find the way of truth and be cleansed by God and saved in His Kingdom fully established by God’s grace.

End

It is evident therefore that the devil is the one responsible for the rapid increase in the number of churches and for the escalation in the rate of sin and crime in the world today – he having intensified his activities in these last days. The false churches founded by the devil preach lies and so can never reform people’s character. It is only those who love truth and righteousness that will find the way of truth and be cleansed by God and saved in His Kingdom fully established by God’s grace.

WHERE COULD PEACE AND SAFETY BE FOUND?

Why is there so much distress, uncertainty, injustice and oppression in the world? How can mankind be freed from the wars, diseases, famines, natural disasters and violence that make each day a horror to contemplate? Will there ever be a place and time in which present fears and afflictions will be a distant memory? How will a new order of peace and security come to this earth? These are the most urgent questions facing humanity today and every intelligent person should and must seek reliable answers to them for his or her existence to be meaningful.

The word peace as defined by the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* means “calmness, quietness; freedom from anxiety or troubling thoughts; a condition in which there is no war”. Safety is defined by the same dictionary as “freedom from danger, harm or risk”.

In no part of the world are people free from fears and dangers. Infectious diseases are spreading unchecked; in various places there is a state of permanent warfare which is spiralling out of the grip of politicians; climatic change is triggering major emergencies, unpopular government policies spark off revolts; from the cold war to the rise of intra-state conflicts, from the spread of the AIDS crisis to the escalation of terrorism, hunger, ignorance, poverty and disease, religious, ethnic or cultural divides are daily multiplying the tensions and distresses among peoples of the earth.

Bible prophecies on this age

In the book of Matthew chapter 24 verses 3-8 the disciples of Christ asked him the signs of his coming and of the end of the world to which he gave them answers. The principal sign he gave them was that a time would come when “nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places.” This text does not refer, as some contend, to the dissensions, insurrections and wars among provinces that occurred in the Roman empire shortly after the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. Rather, it fulfilled in World War 1 of 1914-1918 when for the first time the whole world was engulfed in war. From that time the world has been marching into harder and harder times hence Jesus Christ declared in verse 8 “All these are the beginning of sorrows.”

Sequel to his expulsion from heaven to the earth by Jesus Christ, (Revelation 12:9) satan, in a bid to destroy all flesh plunged the whole earth into World War 1. In Revelations chapter 12 verse 12 the angel declared: “Therefore rejoice, ye heavens, and ye that dwell in them. Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea! for the devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time.” Thus, the devil is the one responsible for the troubles of the world today. – Ephesians 2:2; 1 John 5:19; 1 Peter 5:6,9.

Also during his earthly ministry our Lord Jesus Christ spoke of these last days as a time of such great and overwhelming calamities that there would be deep anxiety among people at the impending evils. Many of the people would not know what to

do to escape. Christ stated: "And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; Men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken." – Luke 21: 25,26,28,34-36.

The desperate state of affairs in the world which create deep distress and horror among people attest to the fulfilment of this prophecy. The sea (the people) and the waves (the rulers) roaring refer to the constant disagreements or conflicts between the government and the people, a situation fostered by the confusions and injustices wrought by satan the devil and the liberalism of the modern age.

In the words of the prophet Daniel while many "shall be purified and made white, and tried" in this age, "the wicked shall do wickedly"- (Daniel 12:4,10) Writing in the same vein St. Paul, in his letter to Timothy, described these last days as "perilous times" He said it would be a time when men would be enemies of God because of carnality and dangerous to one another due to greed. (2 Timothy 3:1-5) He added in verse 13 that "evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived".

These prophecies about the grievous state the world would be in is fulfilling to the letter as could be seen from global tensions and worries over wars, global warming, terrorism, incurable diseases, natural disasters, food shortages, etc.

The situation in the world is made worse by the deceit and hypocrisy that are the hall marks of International diplomacy. Thus, though the world powers are fulsome in declaring their commitments to peace, justice, and well being of the people, they are hardly sincere as they are busy promoting their vested interests or preparing for war. The prophet David prayed: "Draw me not away with the wicked and with the workers of iniquity, which speak peace to their neighbours, but mischief is in their hearts." - Psalm 28:3.

God of Peace

It is not by the stockpiling of weapons or the strength of ones armies or knowledge of diplomacy but by the grace of God that any body can be saved. All people who love life should therefore look to God and not to man. David, speaking under inspiration of God said: "There is no king saved by the multitude of an host: a mighty man is not delivered by much strength. An horse is a vain thing for safety: neither shall he deliver any by his great strength. Behold, the eye of the LORD is upon them that fear him, upon them that hope in his mercy; To deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine." – Psalm 33: 16-20. See also Psalm 146:3,4; Proverbs 21:31. Moreover God declared through the prophet Isaiah: "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else." – Isaiah 45:22.

The Almighty God abhors confusion and disorder. He is the God of peace. (1 Corinthians 14:33; 2 Thessalonians 3:16; Romans 15:33) David the prophet was inspired to write: "The LORD will give strength unto his people; the LORD will bless his people with peace." - Psalm 29:11.

It was for the purpose of re-establishing the peace which was shattered by the fall of man at the influence of satan the devil that God sent Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace into the world to die for mankind hence his birth was heralded by angelic

acclaims of peace. (Luke 2:14) Peace was the centre-piece of the message Jesus Christ the Messiah brought and that is why the message he brought is also called “the gospel of peace”. – Romans 10:15; Ephesians 6:15.

While on earth Jesus Christ told his apostles “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” (John 14:27) He added in John 16:33 “These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”

The “peace” of the world is fraught with fears and pains; it does not give true happiness. But the people of God, will continue to enjoy the untainted peace that comes from the freedom into which He had given them through Jesus Christ.

It is only in God’s organisation where the truth of His word is preached without corruption and where righteousness is practised that peace and safety could be found. The Lord’s Organisation is the true Church symbolically called “Mountain” where God is served in truth. Jesus Christ knew that it is in this Mountain that is, God’s Kingdom Organisation in any part of the world his sheep would find peace, protection and deliverance in this period of the end of the world hence he advised his disciples to “flee into the mountains”. (Matthew 24:15,16; Ezekiel 20:40,41) Just as Noah and his family of seven found safety in the ark and as Lot and his two daughters were protected when they fled to the mountain so all those who remain in God’s organisation doing righteousness till the end will be saved by His grace. (Genesis 7:1-24; 19:1-30; Luke 17:26-30; Psalm 91:1-8,14; Psalm 27:1,5) God’s Kingdom Society, GKS is one of such organisations in this part of the world.

It must be pointed out that it is only God Almighty, not man or man-made institutions that can bring peace to the earth. This will be when satan the devil, the author of confusion in the world is killed along with his wicked followers consisting of demons and wicked human beings. - Isaiah 14:12-17; Romans 16:20.

In Jeremiah 3:23 it is written: “Truly in vain is salvation hoped for from the hills, and from the multitude of mountains: truly in the LORD our God is the salvation of Israel.”

Knowledge and Faith

To enjoy true peace and safety one must have the accurate knowledge of God. Solomon the prophet declared: “Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding ...Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace”. – Proverbs 3:13-17.

Faith comes from knowledge. One who exercises strong faith in Jehovah’s promises will be blessed with His spirit so as to be calm, steady and resolute even in times of crisis. “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” said St. Paul in Romans 5:1. Faith is exercised when the Christian “casts his burden upon the Lord” by taking his problems to God in prayer. The person must believe that God will do what is best in each circumstance (Psalm 55:20,21) Such ones then remain at ease because of their faith that with God nothing is impossible. Moreover the Bible says: “Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known

unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:6,7) Moreover, the prophet David declared: “Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them.” - Psalm 119:165; See also Isaiah 48:18

To live a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty is a deeply rooted Christian ideal. But when people fail to do the will of God they will never have peace. – Jeremiah 16:5; Jeremiah 14:11; Luke 10:1-7

To all those who have implicit trust in God the following assurance is given: “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee. Trust ye in the LORD for ever: for in the LORD JEHOVAH is everlasting strength...” - Isaiah 26:3,4. See also Psalm 4:8.

Perfect Peace and Safety

It is in God’s Kingdom fully established that mankind shall enjoy perfect peace and safety. This was typified by God’s promise to the children of Israel as it is written: “And I will give peace in the land, and ye shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid: and I will rid evil beasts out of the land, neither shall the sword go through your land.” (Leviticus 26:6) The state of the nation of Israel under King Solomon when “he had peace on all sides round about him” foreshadowed the kingdom of God under Jesus Christ “the greater Solomon” where God will reveal to His people “the abundance of peace and truth”. – 1 Kings 4:21-24; Jeremiah 33:6.

Jerusalem in Israel was only a type of God’s perfect Kingdom which He would establish on earth. (2 Chronicles 6:6; Galatians 4:26) John the apostle was privileged to see it in vision and he wrote that in that Kingdom God would remove all that would make anyone to cry or be sorrowful: “And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. (trouble) And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ... And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful.” - Revelation 21:1-5. See also Isaiah 65:17-25

Furthermore in Isaiah 32:17,18 it is written: “And the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever. And my people shall dwell in a peaceable habitation, and in sure dwellings, and in quiet resting places.” At that time every man shall sit “under his vine and under his fig tree and none shall make them afraid”.- Micah 4:4.

With this knowledge therefore it is vital for us to look to God always and not to man and to serve Him faithfully till the end in order to enjoy perfect peace and safety in His kingdom fully established by His grace. – Hebrews 12:1,28; Isaiah 45:22.

THE BLOOD OF JESUS: WHAT DOES IT SIGNIFY? (PART 2)

Following the release of this sermon in our April – June 2005 edition (Volume 3 No. 5), we have been receiving several inquiries from readers on the meaning of some other Bible texts commonly cited by those who believe in invoking the blood of Jesus, hence the release of Part 2 of this sermon. In the first publication of this topic we stated that the importance of the shed blood of Christ lies in the fact that it was the means God used to cleanse man from sin following the fall of Adam at the garden of Eden. However, it was pointed out that the blood of Jesus is not a person or being anyone should pray to. Rather, it is the Almighty God Jehovah and His Son Jesus Christ, that we should call upon in time of need. - Joel 2:32 Jeremiah 33:2, 3; Psalm 50:14,15; Isaiah 45:22; 12:2; Proverbs 18:10.

Moreover St. Paul explains in Philippians 2:9-11 that God Almighty had highly exalted Jesus Christ “and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”. This makes it abundantly clear that it is the name of Jesus Christ, who is the mediator between God and men, not his blood, that worshippers of God should hold in reverence or call on from time to time. - 1 Timothy 2:5,6; John 14:6,13, 14; 15:16.

Some Misunderstood Texts

Evidently, Jesus Christ is the One who died for mankind and through whom the sheep of God will get salvation. But as stated earlier, many professed Christians today believe that the shed blood of Jesus is a powerful tool that ensures protection and deliverance.

The advocates of pleading the blood of Jesus cite the statement of Christ in Luke 10:19 to wit, “Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you.” This assurance is similar to what Christ told the apostles before his ascension, “And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.” (Mark 16:17,18) God still guides and protects His ministers as they do the work, but the power to do miracles and speak in tongues has ceased. (1 Corinthians 13:8) God Almighty does miracles Himself through Jesus Christ and no longer through human agents. (Malachi 4:2; Jeremiah 33:6) Those who go about today gathering the sick and disabled, claiming they have the power to do miracles for them, are not sent by God. (Matthew 7:22, 23) Our Lord Jesus Christ made it clear that miracle-working would be the stock-in-trade of false prophets as a sign of the Last Days. He said, “And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.” - Matthew 24:11, 24. See also Revelation 16:13,14.

Another text being cited by those who believe in calling on the blood of Jesus is Revelation chapter 12 verse 11. This is part of the declaration by the angel when the devil was cast down from heaven. It says: “And they overcame him by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death.” The meaning of this text could be better understood by reading from verse 10 which says: “And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation and strength and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night.” Thus, verse 11 flows from verse 10 in which the angels were expressing their joy at satan's expulsion from heaven, marking the setting-up of God's Kingdom in heaven.

When the angel stated that “...they overcame him by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony” it is important to know that the pronouns “they” and “their” in the text refer to servants of God, from the time of old to the Christian era,

whom satan, before he was cast out of heaven was constantly misrepresenting before God Almighty. (Job 1:6-11; 2:3) Revelation 19:10 explains the “testimony” spoken of in Revelation 12:11 to be the word of God, the truth - “the spirit of prophecy”. See also Revelation 22:8, 9.

The next point to address is to explain what the Bible means by the expression, “...they overcame him by the blood of the lamb...” It should be understood that Jesus Christ died for the people of God on earth, the church, the first class of whom are the saints. (Hebrews 12:23) It is our Lord Jesus Christ who overcame the devil by reason of his blood which he shed for sinful mankind. What Revelation 12:11 is saying is that the servants of God (the brethren of the angels) were able to ultimately gain victory over the devil “by the blood of the lamb”, that is, by virtue of or on the strength of Christ's ransom sacrifice by which he triumphed over death and is now able to destroy “him that had the power of death, that is, the devil”. – Hebrews 2:14.

As stated earlier, Jesus Christ was sent to this earth to redeem the human race by shedding his blood, thereby affording man the opportunity to live forever. (Matthew 26:28) Revelation 12:11 therefore does not mean that we should be calling on the blood of the lamb in order to overcome our difficulties but that the servants of God (the brethren of the angels) gained salvation by exercising strong faith in Jesus Christ whose ransom sacrifice gave them life and formed the essence of their ministry on earth. In other words, the fear of death never deterred them from proclaiming the truth to the world. It is the servants of God therefore “who loved not their lives unto the death”. It should be understood that the idea of death is limited to the earthly realm. (Revelation 2:10. See also Psalm 50:5; 1 Corinthians 15:57; 1 John 5:4-5.

God Almighty and Jesus Christ

We must reiterate the fact that, it is by exercising implicit faith in Jehovah the Almighty God through Jesus Christ – not in his blood – that anyone can get salvation. (John 17:3; Isaiah 26:3,4; Jeremiah 33:2,3; Philippians 2:9-11) St. Paul stated that the builder of a house has more honour than the house. (Hebrews 3:3, 4)

Joel the prophet wrote under the inspiration of God: “And it shall come to pass that whosoever shall call on the name of the LORD shall be delivered...” (Joel 2:32. See also Romans 10:13; 2 Chronicles 7:14) Moreover, St. Paul exhorted: “Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:2) .And Christ enjoined his apostles thus: “And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the father may be glorified in the son. If ye shall ask anything in my name, I will do it.” – John 14:13, 14.

We pray God to give the understanding of His word to His sheep so that they may be delivered from the evil devices of the devil to serve Him acceptably through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STORY OF RUTH AND NAOMI

The story of Ruth and Naomi is a moving illustration of the power of faith. It is demonstrative of the blessings that abound for the poor and meek who diligently and earnestly maintain their integrity even in the most trying circumstances. Those called into the Lord's service must show like measure of faith and obedience to get a full reward in God's Kingdom fully established by God's grace and power

The story, as so fascinatingly reported in the book of Ruth, begins with the emigration of Elimelech and his wife, Naomi, both of Bethlehem (in Judah) along with their two sons Mahlon and Chilion to the land of Moab because of a severe famine in the land of Judah. While in Moab Elimelech died. In course of time, his two sons got married to Moabitish women, Mahlon to Ruth, Chilion to Orpah. (Ruth 1:4; 4:10) Unfortunately, the two sons also died, leaving Naomi with her two daughters in law, Ruth and Orpah. On hearing that there was now food in Judah, Naomi decided to go back to her people and urged the young women to do likewise so as to remarry as she did not have other sons to marry them.. She thanked the two women for their faithfulness, blessed them and bade them go back to their people. - Ruth 1:1-13.

Though they both initially refused, Orpah went back, but Ruth insisted on going to Israel with Naomi saying: "Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me." – Ruth 1:16.

The return of Naomi stirred considerable excitement among the people of Bethlehem because of her long absence. They asked "Is this Naomi?" but she said to them "call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Lord Almighty had dealt very bitterly with me" (Ruth 1:19-21) (Naomi's statement that God had "dealt very bitterly" with her does not mean that God brought about her predicament but that He allowed it. Her problems were caused by the devil. God does not visit any one with evil. [James 1:13]) Since it was time of harvest, Ruth decided to join the people who were gleaning "after him in whose sight I shall find grace". (Gleaning is the collection or gathering of crops left behind by the reapers. This was the privilege provided in the law of God for the maintenance of the poor and strangers in the land. [Leviticus 19:9; 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:21])

The field Ruth went to glean turned out to be the field of Boaz, a near kinsman who had also heard of her return and of her faithfulness to her mother-in-law, Naomi. Boaz soon enough identified Ruth from among those working for him and commended her saying: "It hath fully been shewed me, all that thou hast done unto thy mother in law since the death of thine husband: and how thou hast left thy father and thy mother, and the land of thy nativity, and art come unto a people which thou knewest not heretofore. The LORD recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust." – Ruth 2:11,12

On hearing that the field in which Ruth gleaned was that of a near kinsman, Naomi decided to work towards engaging Ruth to Boaz through the law of Levirate marriage. The Levirate Law (from Latin *levir*, "a husband's brother,") is provision in the law of Moses, by which, when an Israelite died without issue, his surviving brother was required to marry the widow, so as to continue his brother's family through the son that might be born of that marriage (Genesis 38:8; Deuteronomy 25:5-10; Ruth 3; 4:10). Since there was a relation who was closer to Ruth than himself, Boaz called a meeting of elders and presented the issue of inheriting the estate of Elimelech. The nearer kinsman was initially receptive to the idea but backed out on the issue of marrying Ruth to bring up seed for his brother, knowing that the child will not bear his own name. (Ruth 4:4-7) With his refusal, the coast was now clear for Boaz to marry Ruth. God blessed the marriage with a male child who was named Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David, through whose lineage Jesus Christ came to the world.

Significance

What makes the story of Ruth and Naomi important are the lessons of faith, diligence, longsuffering and the blessings that accrue therefrom which the story holds for believers in God. God also used the story to picture greater things that were to fulfil in the Christian era. Let us now take the characters one by one:

Naomi: Naomi had strong faith in God by reason of which she still remained steadfast in the work of God despite losing her husband and her two sons who died childless. The childlessness was no doubt at the instance of Satan the devil who wanted to interfere with the lineage of the promised seed. But Jehovah's word and name shall always triumph and no power can successfully interfere therewith.

Naomi believed that the bereavements that she suffered happened because God allowed it. (see Lamentations 3:37; Romans 8:28) She believed God will reverse things for her and so did not lose faith in God neither did she turn away from worshipping Him. The Bible says nothing should separate us from the love of God Almighty and Jesus Christ. -Romans 8:35-39; Psalm 71:20-22

Naomi never had ill-will against her daughters-in-law nor accused them falsely for their husband's death. But in many of our communities the wife is usually the first suspect once the husband dies in his prime. The widow thus has to bear the loss of her husband in addition to harassments from relations of the deceased. This is ungodly. No one who persecutes a widow will escape divine punishment. – Exodus 22:22-24.

Naomi also showed that the relationship between a mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law need not be marked by malice and mutual suspicion. The relationship between Naomi and her two daughters-in-law was very cordial. She took the girls as her own children while they took her as their own mother. While asking the young women to go back home, she blessed them praying God to deal kindly with them as they had dealt with her sons and she herself. Naomi cared for the future well-being of her daughters-in-law. She calls to mind the virtuous woman in Proverbs 31:10-31

Again, Naomi showed courage in going back to her people in spite of losing her husband and two sons and without any material wealth to show for her sojourn in the land of Moab. This teaches us that if one is in one city or trade and over time finds the place or trade unfavourable, he should with prayer to God have the courage to “change gears” and start afresh. But these days people are reluctant to accept reality by adjusting to changes in economic circumstances. A good number of people are stuck or even stranded in places where they had gone in search of fortune, especially in foreign countries, because they are ashamed to go back home. This is unhealthy, for situations at home may have improved such that returning home may be a better alternative.

From the story we could also see that it is not the beginning that matters but the end. Though Naomi was beset with series of tribulations including famine and deaths, she had a bright ending by God’s grace due to her faith.– Ecclesiastes 7:8; Psalm 112:1-3; Matthew 24:12,13.

Ruth: Though a young woman, she demonstrated great faith in not allowing the loss of her husband to dampen her belief that the God of the Jews is the true God. Truly, the series of deaths in the family were enough to give one second thoughts on the benefits of remaining in the family; but her faith in God kept her going. Unless one is prepared to remain in God service even in the face of death, he can not continue until the end. –Luke 14:26,27; 1 Corinthians 10:13.

Again Ruth refused to go back to her people and to the false religion they were practising. She told Naomi “thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God” – (Ruth 1:16) In being asked to go back to her people she was being asked to choose between God and Satan and she was in no dilemma as to what choice to make. She clave to the people of Judah, a land she did not know, believing absolutely in God’s Almightyness. She burned all the bridges behind her and was determined to go on till the end. God loves those who are wholly devoted to Him. – Deuteronomy 6:4,5; Luke 11:25-27.

It should also be pointed out that in her dealings with her Mother-in-law, Ruth was respectful, obedient, honest and truthful. She sought permission from Naomi to go and work in the farm (Ruth 2:1); She showed obedience in following instructions of Naomi in regard to getting engaged to Boaz. She told Naomi: “All that thou sayest unto me I will do”. (Ruth 3:1-5) She was honest in showing her mother-in-law the things Boaz gave her and what he said. (Ruth 2:18; 3:16) Honesty is an essential ingredient of Christian conduct and of all lasting relationships. (Ephesians 4:25) Had Ruth tried to be clever by lying to Naomi, it would have been difficult for her mother-in-law to give her effective advice and she would have lost the great blessings and the good name she now has.

Ruth was also a very hard working young woman. She did not want to sit down idly, eating the bread of idleness. (Proverbs 31:27) Her hard work attracted the commendation of the workers on the employ of Boaz as it is written: “Then said Boaz unto his servant that was set over the reapers, Whose damsel is this? And the servant that was set over the reapers answered and said, It is the Moabitish damsel that came back with Naomi out of the country of Moab: And she said, I pray you, let me glean and gather after the reapers among the sheaves: so she came, and hath continued even from the morning until now, that she tarried a little in the house.” (Ruth 2:5-7) Women should learn from the example of Ruth who did not wait for

hand-outs in her adopted country, nor took advantage of her youth to go into prostitution but on her own moved to look for a farm in which to work. But some young women today readily give the excuse of economic difficulties as reason for going into prostitution. This is untenable. Prostitution is a sin. -Deuteronomy 23:17.

Though God made the provision for the poor and strangers to get sustenance through gleaning in Leviticus 23:22, one who is not hard working and humble will not be able to do that menial work. The Lord does not allow his beloved ones on earth to starve either in material or spiritual things but permits them to have and enjoy these good things that are for their well being. But to enjoy them the people of God must keep busy. (Ephesians 4:28) The prophet Solomon stated: “the hand of the diligent maketh rich” (Proverbs 10:4) And in Proverbs 22:29 he added: “Seest thou a man diligent in his business? he shall stand before kings; he shall not stand before mean men”

God loves the poor in spirit and the stranger, in giving him food and raiment. The people of God are strangers on the earth for which reason God Himself will not be ashamed to be called their God for He had prepared for them a city.” – Deuteronomy 10:18; Hebrews 11:10,11

As a gleaner Ruth brought no profit to the owner of the field, rather she gathered so much due to the good will of Boaz. (Ruth 2:8-10; 3:15) So God receives no profit from our services. Therefore, those given the grace to work for their salvation should also count themselves as unprofitable servants..- Luke 17:10.

Because of her faithfulness and obedience, Ruth has the honour of being the great-great-grandmother of our Lord Jesus Christ. – Ruth 4: 17-22; Matthew 1:5-16.

Boaz was a man of means and influence. As “redeemer” Boaz did not delay in fulfilling his part for his dead relation. Because he was God-fearing he was not slack in keeping to the terms of the levirate marriage as stated in Deuteronomy 25:5-10 and the law that farmers should leave part of the harvest for gleaners, the poor and strangers in the land. (Leviticus 19:9,10; Deuteronomy 24:21) He was a man of integrity, who kept his words and never exploited the poverty and desperate conditions of Ruth and her mother-in-law. Rather, he fended for her and provided her with security by God’s grace. He never jumped on the opportunity for marriage offered by Ruth but insisted on giving the right of first refusal to a closer kinsman. He not only promised to follow up the matter but pursued it to its logical conclusion. In contrast to the closer kinsman, Boaz was willing to make the sacrifice of marrying Ruth to keep his brother’s name alive in keeping with the law of God. We should be ready to make sacrifices for righteousness sake. There is blessing in so doing. (Matthew 16:24,27) The high discipline of Boaz is a shining example to all.

Boaz is a firm believer in God’s providence. He had strong faith in God. He was also very liberal in providing for the indigent family of his late brother. This teaches us by way of example that we should help the widows and the fatherless in our midst and the less privileged generally.– Ruth 2:5-18; Isaiah 1:17.

Orpah was the wife of Chilion. She returned after initial reluctance to her people, and to her gods, and to the prospect of a happy married life. She turned her back on the greatest favour that could be bestowed on any creature: to dwell in the house of

Lord. By ceasing to be for the Lord one is then counted as being against Him. (Matthew 12:30) One brought into the favour of JEHOVAH and into his service who then separates himself and voluntarily seeks a place in satan's organisation, turning to "weak and beggarly elements" proves himself unworthy of the kingdom. St. Paul declared: "Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him. But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul." - Hebrews 10:38,39

It is vital to recall the warning of our Lord Jesus Christ that we should "Remember Lot's wife". (Luke 17:32) Again he declared: "No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." – Luke 9:62.

Further Interpretation

What God directs is pure and righteous. The Bible records nothing without cause and each passage has its significance and meaning. (James 4:5; Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:6,11) The principal characters in the drama Naomi, Ruth, Boaz did things orderly and decently in line with the law of God.(1 Corinthians 14:33,40) We have a lot to learn from this by allowing the principle of following laid-down rules and procedures to guide all our affairs.

In the story, Boaz stands for God Almighty, the Great Provider, Who is liberal to the faithful poor and needy. David the prophet was inspired by God to state: "But I am poor and needy; yet the Lord thinketh upon me: thou art my help and my deliverer; make no tarrying, O my God." (Psalm 40:17) God Almighty is the father of all. He gives to all meat in due season. (Psalm 104:27; 145:16) Though Boaz was richer than the near kinsman he did not use that to force matters his way. Though God has all power, yet he does not deal with man according to his sins. Rather he accommodates all in exercise of his lovingkindness "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance". – 2 Peter 3:9.

In the story, Naomi stands for the anointed Christians. These are the ones God uses to bring forth children in His organisation. St. Paul declared: "For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers: for Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel." – 1 Corinthians 4:15. see also 1 Timothy 1:2.

Ruth stands for the "Other Sheep" class. These are the poor and meek in spirit - those who were outside God's favour but who on hearing the truth, hold to God and His Kingdom without looking back until the end. – Ephesians 2:10-12; Luke 24:45-47; Acts 10:34,35.

Orpah stands for the unfaithful; those who having received the call, are unable to continue or endure but compromise with satan's organisation along the way. – Matthew 24:12,13; James 1:12; Hebrews 12:3.

In all, the story of Ruth exhibits the frank, simple manners of the times, the liberality of the laws of God and how He steps in at the right time to fulfil His unfulfilled promises to His faithful ones. Here again we see how God uses poor, ordinary and unassuming people for the outworking of His purposes. We shall be highly profited if we learn the lessons from this story for our own blessings and ultimately salvation in the world to come by God's grace.

And anyone who having been brought into favour of JEHOVAH to voluntarily seek a place in satan's organisation such thereby proves himself unworthy of the kingdom.

There must be no divided affection. God preserves and brings into his house only those who love him and serve him in spirit and in truth. To dwell in the house of JEHOVAH God is the greatest favour that could possibly be bestowed on any creature. To enjoy that favour one must earnestly and diligently seek after the Lord's house and faithfully comply with the divine requirement. – Psalm 84:10

The court

The city gate is where elders sit to determine cases at law. – Deuteronomy 21:19-21;22:15; Job 31:21; Proverbs 22:22 Ten is a complete count (Deuteronomy 25:7) It symbolized completeness of things earthly.

The near Kinsman

His name is not mentioned. He accepted to take the land belonging to his late brother to increase his holdings knowing that Naomi was past age of bearing children. But one cannot have the benefits without the obligation. He declined to exercise his right fearing a diminution of his estates or interests. He was planning and thinking exclusively for his own interests and name so it would endure after his death fearing that Ruth's child would inherit the land. Eventually he lost everything. The bible says: "The name of the wicked shall rot". (Proverbs 10:7) Again this shows that He was faithless.. He preferred to suffer the disgrace of the man who refused to take his brother's wife by having his show removed from his feet. (Deuteronomy 25:7-10; Psalm 60:8) Those who are not on the side of God refuse to have their feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace. Indeed a man who repudiates or fails to keep the law of God should be spat upon. – Numbers 12:14.

RANSOM SACRIFICE

The word "ransom," refers to the price or payment made to set free a prisoner or slave. The price is considered the equivalent of the person who is thereby freed from liabilities and charges.

"Ransom Sacrifice", is one of the ten fundamental doctrines of the Holy Bible. The sermon denotes the immeasurable love which God has for man by which He sent His only begotten son to die in place of sinful mankind. Apostle John states in 1 John 4:9,10 thus: "In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins". And in John 3:16 Jesus Christ himself states: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life".

Life lost

The question of ransom arose because of the life man lost in the Garden of Eden. After creating Adam and putting him in the beautiful Garden, God Almighty gave him a law to the effect that he could eat of every fruit in the garden except the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. (Genesis 2:16, 17) But the devil came in the form of a serpent and lured Eve into eating the fruit after which she "gave also unto her husband...and he did eat". (Genesis 3:1-6) The consequence of that disobedience was the sentence of death God passed on Adam, which among other things, reads thus: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return". – Genesis 3:16-19

As a result of the fall of Adam the entire human race came short of the glory of God, having been born in sin. (Romans 3:9,19,23) David the prophet declared: "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me". (Psalm 51:5) Because man has been in the bondage of death due to sin, Apostle Paul declared: "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned". – Romans 5:12

For man to be free from the bondage of inherited sin, there must be a remedy for the life lost in the Garden of Eden. This remedy must be equivalent to the value of the perfect life which Adam had in consonance with the divine rule that a (perfect) life must go for a (perfect) life. (Deuteronomy 19:21) It was not possible for any one among the sons of men to pay back the life lost by Adam, since they were all born in sin. Who then will pay the price for man's transgression? Who will ransom man from the bondage of sin and death? Jesus Christ was willing to carry out that duty and to him the task was assigned. - John 10:15, 17, 18; see also Romans 7:24, 25.

Shadows

It is worthy of note that even in passing the sentence on the serpent, God Almighty had in verse 15 of Genesis chapter 3 stated that though the serpent (satan

the devil) will initially bruise the heel of the seed, the seed of the woman (Jesus Christ, Galatians 3:16) will eventually bruise the head of the serpent (Romans 16:20). In several other places in the Old Testament, God Almighty, by express declarations and by picture language, gave the promise that He will redeem man from the burden of sin and death.

The blood sprinkled on the door posts of the Jews on the night of Passover, so that the destroying angel will pass over the house, (Exodus 12:1-30) foreshadowed the ransom sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Apostle Paul states: "...For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us". – 1 Corinthians 5:7.

Another pointer to the need for man's redemption was the law God Almighty gave His servant Moses while the Jews were in the wilderness on the payment to the Lord of half a shekel by every male in Israel from 20 years old and above "as a ransom for his soul". The law further states that: "The rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less" - the benefit of redemption is offered equally to all; it is not a function of money. It should also be noted that the atonement money was for the service of the tabernacle of the congregation, now represented by Jesus Christ, "A minister of the sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, and not man". – Exodus 30:15; [compare Numbers 3:40-51]; Hebrews 8:2.

Also, in time of old, the Jews used to have a Day of Atonement, which marked the end of ten days of penitence, to cleanse the individual from defilement. On that day, the priest, clad in holy linen garments, made an atonement for himself, his family and for all the assembly of Israel, killing the bullock of the sin offering, sprinkling the blood on the mercy seat, killing the goat of the sin-offering and selecting the scapegoat on whose head was confessed the transgression of Israel for the year just passed. Thereafter, the sin-laden goat was led to wander away into the wilderness. This provision was done as "an everlasting statute ... to make an atonement for the children of Israel for all their sins once a year". – Leviticus 16:1-34.

It is vital to note, that the point was consistently being made that all the people were doomed and were therefore in need of atonement to stay alive.

Christ – The Ransomer

St. Paul in a detailed treatise on the ransom sacrifice of Christ explained that sacrifices in time of old were only temporary palliatives pointing to and awaiting the coming of Jesus Christ. He wrote: "For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect...But in those sacrifices there is a remembrance again made of sins every year. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins". – Hebrews 10:1-4.

Thus, Jesus Christ had to be translated from the heavenly realm into the womb of Mary so as to be born on earth as a perfect man to pay back the life lost at the Garden of Eden. – Hebrews 2:7, 14.

John the Baptist identified Jesus Christ as the lamb of God that “taketh away the sin of the world”. (John 1:29; see also Revelation 13:8) Moreover the Bible says: “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him”. (2 Corinthians 5:21) That was why Jesus Christ while on earth stated that he came to give his life as a ransom for many. (Matthew 20:28) At the Memorial Supper he stated clearly that the bread he gave the apostles meant or represented his body, while the wine stood for his blood “which is shed for many for the remission of sins”. – Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:24.

The ransom work covers the entire scope of the sufferings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and therefore lies at the very heart of the gospel message. It is true that during his mission on earth, Jesus Christ, by his preaching and by example, taught man how to serve God. But even if they did all he commanded them to do, the faithful cannot have the liberty and salvation God promised them without the ransom paid by Jesus Christ by the forfeiting of his life.

During his first advent on earth, some of the wicked Jews reported Jesus Christ to the Chief Priests and Pharisees who were apprehensive of losing their influence and privileges due to the mass-following Jesus Christ was getting. At a meeting of the Pharisees-in-Council, Caiaphas, the High Priest declared: “Ye know nothing at all, Nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not”. Apostle John then explained: “This spake he not of himself: but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation; And not for that nation only, but that also he should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad”. (John 11:49-52) Truly did St. Paul state: “For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time”. -1 Timothy 2: 5, 6; see also Galatians 3:13; Hebrew 9:11-28; 1 John 3:4

By the death of Jesus Christ, the debt of sin against man was fully paid, not merely cancelled. His blood or life, which he surrendered as the "ransom", effectively secured the deliverance of the children of God from the bondage of sin. Having died as a perfect man so as to “taste death for every man” Jesus Christ was then in a position to redeem man from death. In one of his most lucid expositions on the subject, St. Paul said: “Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage”. – Hebrews 2:9, 14,15.

As opposed to the sacrifices made under the Mosaic law, the expiatory blood shed by Jesus Christ once made was perfect and effective for ever – it needed not to be renewed every year. St. Paul declared: “By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God...” – Hebrews 10:10-12.

By his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ led captivity captive (Ephesians 4:8) and thus paved the way for the fulfillment of the promise God Almighty made through Hosea the prophet to wit: “I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will

redeem them from death: O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction: repentance shall be hid from mine eyes". (Hosea 13:14) In God's Kingdom fully established, death, which is man's greatest enemy will be no more. – 1 Corinthians 15: 26.

Living Unto Christ

Having paid the supreme price to give the people of God liberty, the least that is expected of mankind is to show appreciation for the great sacrifice Jesus Christ made in dying that they may live. In John 15:13, 14 Christ Jesus declared: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. **Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you**". Those being ransomed must therefore be humble enough to obey the voice of Jesus Christ by living "soberly, righteously and godly, in this present world". (Titus 2:11-14; John 10: 14-18) "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him", Jesus Christ stated. (John 3:36) And Apostle John added: "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin". – 1 John 1:7.

In his letter to the Christians at Corinth Apostle Paul stated: "And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again. Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new". (2 Corinthians 5:15, 17) In his epistle, St. Peter made it clear that the proofs of true discipleship are belief of the truth and love for one another, when he stated: "Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot...Seeing ye have purified your souls **in obeying the truth** through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, **see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently**". – 1 Peter 1:18-22. See also John 13:34, 35

It must be pointed out that those who have come to the knowledge of the truth but do not keep the commandments of God through Jesus Christ will not get the benefit of the ransom sacrifice. Such ones as it were "crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame". – Hebrews 6:4-6; 10:26-29.

It is by appreciating the goodness of God in sending Jesus Christ into the world and by showing such appreciation through faithful service that those who have come to God will be in close communion with Him.

May God Almighty Who, in exercise of His love for mankind sent His only begotten Son to pay the ultimate price in order to reconcile man to Himself, help His sheep to live as true Christians by way of faithful service by His grace through Jesus Christ our Ransomer. Amen

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PASSOVER

The Passover was one of the great living pictures which in Bible symbolism, prefigured the salvation of mankind through the death of the lamb of God, the man Christ Jesus. The understanding of its significance buttresses the assertion of James the apostle that "Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world." - Acts 15:18.

Instructions

The word Passover, is drawn from the Hebrew word pesach, and the Greek word pascha, which means a passing over. The name derives from the fact that on the eve of their departure from Egypt, the angel of God passed over the houses of the Israelites who had the blood of the lamb sprinkled on the posts and lintels of their houses but passed through the houses on which the blood mark was absent. (Exodus 12:12-14) The Lord ordained that the Passover feast should be observed throughout the generations of the people of Israel.

The law given to the natural Israelites through Moses the prophet, was that on the 14th day of the month Abib or Nisan, which became for them the beginning of months, each house or houses, should select from their flocks a lamb without blemish, a male of the first year and kill it in the evening. Thus, the Passover was the first of three annual festivals of the Jews. They were further directed that the blood should be sprinkled on the two side posts and on the upper doorposts of the houses in which they intend to eat the Passover. The flesh should not be boiled but roasted with fire and eaten with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs. None of the bones was to be broken. - Numbers 9:12; Exodus 12:46.

While observing the Passover, the people were instructed to adopt the attitude of people in a haste to travel, with "loins girded, shoes on the feet and staff in hand". The instructions further stated that if any family was not large enough, they should associate with another small family to eat the Passover. The feast was to last seven days, from the 14th to the 21st of the first month of the Jews. The first and the last days were holy convocations and Sabbaths unto the Lord, the directive being that "...no manner of work shall be done in them, save that which every man must eat..." (Exodus 12:11-16) If any one was unable to keep the Passover at the time appointed, he was to observe it in the second month. But the person who wilfully neglected it, the law was that "that soul shall be cut off from Israel..." – Exodus 12:15.

St. Paul points out in Hebrews 10:1 that the law "was a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things" and that what happened in the past were "ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come". (1 Corinthians 10:11. See also Romans 15:4) The sacred festival of the Passover was both commemorative and typical. Through His visible Organisation, then represented by the nation of Israel, God Almighty, by the Feast of Passover, foreshadowed events of immeasurable significance or import to mankind. It is of first importance therefore for all people of goodwill to understand the symbolisms conveyed by the celebration of the Passover.

The Lamb

The lamb which the Jews killed during the Passover, pictures Jesus Christ who was identified by John the Baptist as “the lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world”. (John 1:29) See also Revelation 14:1; 1 Peter 1:18-20

Thus, the killing of the lamb without blemish pointed to the death of the Perfect One “who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth”. (1 Peter 2:22) St. Paul also stated, “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.” - 2 Corinthians 5:21.

The antitypical lamb, Jesus Christ, was killed on the day of preparation of the Passover, the 14th of Nisan, (that is, our April). (John 19:31. Compare John 11:55, 56; 12:1) The “cross” in the text should be properly rendered as “tree”, that is, an upright stake or beam or piece of wood.

When the soldiers came to the body of Christ, they found he was already dead and so they did not break his legs. This was a fulfilment of the type in the law of the Passover that no bone of the Passover lamb should be broken. (John 19:35, 36) The “scripture” Apostle John referred to in the text is Psalm 34:20, which states, “He keepeth all his bones: not one of them is broken.”

Ransom Sacrifice

In the typical observance of the Passover in the land of Egypt, God told the Israelites through Moses, “...when I see the blood, I will pass over you...” (Exodus 12:13) The blood sprinkled on the door posts typified the blood of Jesus Christ which was “shed for many for the remission of sins”. (Matthew 26:28). And in Hebrews 9:22 it is written “And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission.” Only the blood of a perfect man could make restitution for the perfect life lost in the Garden of Eden - for Jehovah's standard of Justice demands that a (perfect) life shall go for a (perfect) life. - Deuteronomy 19:21.

Whereas, in the literal Passover the Israelites had to kill a lamb every year, in the Christian era, the perfect sacrifice offered by Christ is sufficient for mankind. - Hebrews 10:10-13

Unleavened Bread

The unleavened bread eaten during the Passover is bread that is not mixed with yeast and symbolises the pure word of God, unmixed with lies - the truth, which Jesus Christ brought. It also means sincerity, or a pure heart condition. St. Paul, in his letter to the Christians at Corinth, stated, “Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us.” He added, “Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” (1 Corinthians 5:7, 8) St. Paul describes the people of God as “unleavened” because they are new creatures who abhor “the unclean thing” in that they give themselves to truth, righteousness and holiness. - 2 Corinthians 6:17, 18.

Roasted meat and Bitter Herbs

Roasted meat is sweeter than boiled meat. The eating of roasted meat with bitter herbs is a symbol of the fact that the person who is dedicated to the work of God

must be prepared to experience sweet and bitter things in his onward march to the Promised Land. St. Paul stated “Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.” (Philippians 4:11-13) He also stated, “For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake...” - Philippians 1:29. See also 2 Timothy 3:12.

The loins being girded, feet shod, staff in hand as people hastening to travel, symbolise zeal, willingness, and preparedness to do the will of God. (Ephesians 6:14, 15) Christians must be expeditious in carrying out the Lord's instructions for the “kings business requires haste”. (1 Samuel 21:8) They should be “fervent in spirit, serving the Lord”. (Romans 12:11) In Titus 2:14 the Bible states that Christ “gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works”.

As the Israelites observed the Passover to mark their departure from Egyptian bondage to the promised land, so Christians, having been freed by Jesus Christ from Satan's bondage, are on a journey to the antitypical land of Canaan, the kingdom of God fully established. – Compare Hebrews 2:14, 15. See also John 8:31, 32, 36.

Because Christians are in the world but are not of the world, they are referred to as sojourners, pilgrims and strangers in the earth. - 1 Peter 2:11; 1:17. See also Psalm 39:12; Hebrews 11:13-15.

Eating the lamb whole

The Jews were further directed to eat the lamb completely, wholly; that nothing should remain until the following day. (Exodus 12:10) Eating the lamb completely typifies the worshippers' total dedication to the service of God. In the work of God there is no room for hypocrites and spiritual adulterers - those who serve God and mammon, who are “partakers of the Lords table and of the table of demons” (1 Corinthians 10:21; Matthew 6:24; Mark 12:29, 30) Furthermore, eating the lamb whole signifies that the work of God involves fulfilling “all righteousness”, that is, doing all that is required of us in God's service. (Matthew 3:15; Matthew 23:23; James 2:10, 11. See also Luke 17:10.

The Death of the First born

The death of the first born is a prophetic picture of the destruction of this evil world called “Egypt” (Revelation 11:8; Isaiah 30:1-3; 31:1). The obstinate, arrogant and wicked Pharaoh stands for Satan the devil, whose visible representative he was at that time. The fate of Pharaoh and his cohorts in the Red Sea typifies the doom that awaits the devil and all those wilfully opposed to the Lords Organisation in Jehovah's day of vengeance now impending. – Exodus 9:16; Zephaniah 1:14-18; Isaiah 27:1; Revelation 20:1-3, 7-9.

When the slaying angel, at the command of Jehovah's Executive Officer, the greater than Moses, Jesus Christ, begins his destruction work, only those who have the mark – faith in the shed blood of Jesus, accurate knowledge, righteousness, etc., – shall be spared. Just as the Israelites were protected in the land of Egypt on that

Passover night, so the children of God will be protected when the world will be destroyed. (Isaiah 26:20, 21. Compare Exodus 12:23; Ezekiel 9:6; 2 Peter 1:5-11) Surely, the Battle of the Great Day of God Almighty will spell doom for the antitypical firstborn of Egypt.

Exhortation

Though the Passover feast should not be celebrated in the Christian era, Bible understanding shows that true Christians are today eating the Passover lamb spiritually. In other words, they are serving Christ, the Passover killed, in truth and with sincerity, in order to obtain salvation in the end. Therefore all those who want to be on God's side of favour must walk in harmony with Him and identify themselves with the Lord Jesus Christ till the end so as to pass from this evil world to the third world of perfect peace and happiness. This lively hope has become possible, because as St. Paul, stated, "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us" - 1 Corinthians 5:7.

RANSOM SACRIFICE

The word "ransom," refers to the price or payment made to set free a prisoner or slave. The price is considered the equivalent of the person who is thereby freed from liabilities and charges.

"Ransom Sacrifice", is one of the ten fundamental doctrines of the Holy Bible. The sermon denotes the immeasurable love which God has for man by which He sent His only begotten son to die in place of sinful mankind. Apostle John states in 1 John 4:9,10 thus: "In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins". And in John 3:16 Jesus Christ himself states: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life".

Life lost

The question of ransom arose because of the life man lost in the Garden of Eden. After creating Adam and putting him in the beautiful Garden, God Almighty gave him a law to the effect that he could eat of every fruit in the garden except the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. (Genesis 2:16, 17) But the devil came in the form of a serpent and lured Eve into eating the fruit after which she "gave also unto her husband...and he did eat". (Genesis 3:1-6) The consequence of that disobedience was the sentence of death God passed on Adam, which among other things, reads thus: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return". – Genesis 3:16-19

As a result of the fall of Adam the entire human race came short of the glory of God, having been born in sin. (Romans 3:9,19,23) David the prophet declared: "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me". (Psalm 51:5) Because man has been in the bondage of death due to sin, Apostle Paul declared: "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned". – Romans 5:12

For man to be free from the bondage of inherited sin, there must be a remedy for the life lost in the Garden of Eden. This remedy must be equivalent to the value of the perfect life which Adam had in consonance with the divine rule that a (perfect) life must go for a (perfect) life. (Deuteronomy 19:21) It was not possible for any one among the sons of men to pay back the life lost by Adam, since they were all born in sin. Who then will pay the price for man's transgression? Who will ransom man from the bondage of sin and death? Jesus Christ was willing to carry out that duty and to him the task was assigned. - John 10:15, 17, 18; see also Romans 7:24, 25.

Shadows

It is worthy of note that even in passing the sentence on the serpent, God Almighty had in verse 15 of Genesis chapter 3 stated that though the serpent (satan the devil) will initially bruise the heel of the seed, the seed of the woman (Jesus Christ, Galatians 3:16) will eventually bruise the head of the serpent (Romans 16:20). In several other places in the Old Testament, God Almighty, by express declarations and by picture language, gave the promise that He will redeem man from the burden of sin and death.

The blood sprinkled on the door posts of the Jews on the night of Passover, so that the destroying angel will pass over the house, (Exodus 12:1-30) foreshadowed the ransom sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Apostle Paul states: "...For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us". – 1 Corinthians 5:7.

Another pointer to the need for man's redemption was the law God Almighty gave His servant Moses while the Jews were in the wilderness on the payment to the Lord of half a shekel by every male in Israel from 20 years old and above "as a ransom for his soul". The law further states that: "The rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less" - the benefit of redemption is offered equally to all; it is not a function of money. It should also be noted that the atonement money was for the service of the tabernacle of the congregation, now represented by Jesus Christ, "A minister of the sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, and not man". – Exodus 30:15; [compare Numbers 3:40-51]; Hebrews 8:2.

Also, in time of old, the Jews used to have a Day of Atonement, which marked the end of ten days of penitence, to cleanse the individual from defilement. On that day, the priest, clad in holy linen garments, made an atonement for himself, his family and for all the assembly of Israel, killing the bullock of the sin offering, sprinkling the blood on the mercy seat, killing the goat of the sin-offering and selecting the scapegoat on whose head was confessed the transgression of Israel for the year just passed. Thereafter, the sin-laden goat was led to wander away into the wilderness. This provision was done as "an everlasting statute ... to make an atonement for the children of Israel for all their sins once a year". – Leviticus 16:1-34.

It is vital to note, that the point was consistently being made that all the people were doomed and were therefore in need of atonement to stay alive.

Christ – The Ransomer

St. Paul in a detailed treatise on the ransom sacrifice of Christ explained that sacrifices in time of old were only temporary palliatives pointing to and awaiting the coming of Jesus Christ. He wrote: "For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect...But in those sacrifices there is a remembrance again made of sins every year. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins". – Hebrews 10:1-4.

Thus, Jesus Christ had to be translated from the heavenly realm into the womb of Mary so as to be born on earth as a perfect man to pay back the life lost at the Garden of Eden. – Hebrews 2:7, 14.

John the Baptist identified Jesus Christ as the lamb of God that “taketh away the sin of the world”. (John 1:29; see also Revelation 13:8) Moreover the Bible says: “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him”. (2 Corinthians 5:21) That was why Jesus Christ while on earth stated that he came to give his life as a ransom for many. (Matthew 20:28) At the Memorial Supper he stated clearly that the bread he gave the apostles meant or represented his body, while the wine stood for his blood “which is shed for many for the remission of sins”. – Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:24.

The ransom work covers the entire scope of the sufferings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and therefore lies at the very heart of the gospel message. It is true that during his mission on earth, Jesus Christ, by his preaching and by example, taught man how to serve God. But even if they did all he commanded them to do, the faithful cannot have the liberty and salvation God promised them without the ransom paid by Jesus Christ by the forfeiting of his life.

During his first advent on earth, some of the wicked Jews reported Jesus Christ to the Chief Priests and Pharisees who were apprehensive of losing their influence and privileges due to the mass-following Jesus Christ was getting. At a meeting of the Pharisees-in-Council, Caiaphas, the High Priest declared: “Ye know nothing at all, Nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not”. Apostle John then explained: “This spake he not of himself: but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation; And not for that nation only, but that also he should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad”. (John 11:49-52) Truly did St. Paul state: “For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time”. -1 Timothy 2: 5, 6; see also Galatians 3:13; Hebrew 9:11-28; 1 John 3:4

By the death of Jesus Christ, the debt of sin against man was fully paid, not merely cancelled. His blood or life, which he surrendered as the "ransom", effectively secured the deliverance of the children of God from the bondage of sin. Having died as a perfect man so as to “taste death for every man” Jesus Christ was then in a position to redeem man from death. In one of his most lucid expositions on the subject, St. Paul said: “Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage”. – Hebrews 2:9, 14,15.

As opposed to the sacrifices made under the Mosaic law, the expiatory blood shed by Jesus Christ once made was perfect and effective for ever – it needed not to be renewed every year. St. Paul declared: “By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God...” – Hebrews 10:10-12.

By his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ led captivity captive (Ephesians 4:8) and thus paved the way for the fulfillment of the promise God Almighty made through Hosea the prophet to wit: “I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will

redeem them from death: O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction: repentance shall be hid from mine eyes". (Hosea 13:14) In God's Kingdom fully established, death, which is man's greatest enemy will be no more. – 1 Corinthians 15: 26.

Living Unto Christ

Having paid the supreme price to give the people of God liberty, the least that is expected of mankind is to show appreciation for the great sacrifice Jesus Christ made in dying that they may live. In John 15:13, 14 Christ Jesus declared: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. **Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you**". Those being ransomed must therefore be humble enough to obey the voice of Jesus Christ by living "soberly, righteously and godly, in this present world". (Titus 2:11-14; John 10: 14-18) "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him", Jesus Christ stated. (John 3:36) And Apostle John added: "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin". – 1 John 1:7.

In his letter to the Christians at Corinth Apostle Paul stated: "And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again. Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new". (2 Corinthians 5:15, 17) In his epistle, St. Peter made it clear that the proofs of true discipleship are belief of the truth and love for one another, when he stated: "Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot...Seeing ye have purified your souls **in obeying the truth** through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, **see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently**". – 1 Peter 1:18-22. See also John 13:34, 35

It must be pointed out that those who have come to the knowledge of the truth but do not keep the commandments of God through Jesus Christ will not get the benefit of the ransom sacrifice. Such ones as it were "crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame". – Hebrews 6:4-6; 10:26-29.

It is by appreciating the goodness of God in sending Jesus Christ into the world and by showing such appreciation through faithful service that those who have come to God will be in close communion with Him.

May God Almighty Who, in exercise of His love for mankind sent His only begotten Son to pay the ultimate price in order to reconcile man to Himself, help His sheep to live as true Christians by way of faithful service by His grace through Jesus Christ our Ransomer. Amen

UNDERSTANDING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

During his earthly ministry, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ chastised the Pharisees and Sadducees for their inability to discern the signs of the times. The account as recorded in the book of Matthew chapter 16 verses one to four, states that the Pharisees and the Sadducees – the leaders of the Jews in those days - desired that Jesus Christ should show them a sign from heaven. In other words they wanted him to perform a miracle or wonder to prove that he is actually the son of God. The question was of course not borne out of faith but was meant to tempt him: after all, he had by words and deeds shown enough proof that he is the son of God.

In view of the absurdity of their question, Jesus Christ rebuked them for being skilful in reading the indications or signs for good or bad weather, whereas they were unable to discern the signs of the times. He added: “A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given unto it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas...” (Matthew 16:2-4) What the Lord was saying in essence was that it was because the Pharisees and Sadducees were not spiritually minded that they were unable to recognize or appreciate the fact that he is the promised messiah. For the fact that their eyes were closed to spiritual things, no other sign would be given to them than the three days and three nights that the Lord would be in the grave.

The word “understand” as used in this sermon means “to know or realize why significant events happen” while *signs* refer to things that show the presence or coming of something else. “The times” in this context refer to a period or era.

Bible students know that God speaks to His people in various ways: by allowing extra-ordinary events to take place and by talking to His people through His servants. Those who love righteousness and the salvation of God, would be able to read these signs and embrace the truth by His grace. At the time of Jeremiah the prophet, God Almighty emphasized that it is important for His people to know His will and to do what is required of them at each point in time. In rebuking them for their carelessness God stated, “Yea, the stork in the heaven knoweth her appointed times; and the turtle and the crane and the swallow observe the time of their coming; but my people know not the judgment of the LORD”. – Jeremiah 8:7.

The wayward, selfish and wicked ones will continue to ignore the signs of the times to their own peril. David the prophet warned, “I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go: I will guide thee with mine eye. Be ye not as the horse, or as the mule, which have no understanding: whose mouth must be held in with bit and bridle, lest they come near unto thee.” - Psalm 32:8, 9.

Signs of the Last Days

In the days of our Lord Jesus Christ the unbelieving Jews could not understand that Bible prophecies were already fulfilling – just as so many people in these last days do not know, from the signs unfolding before their eyes, that matters of great spiritual significance are already taking place.

Jesus Christ gave his disciples clear and indisputable signs of the end of the world. That was when the disciples of Jesus Christ met him privately as he sat in the mount of Olives saying, “...Tell us when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of

thy coming and of the end of the world?” In answering these questions our Lord Jesus Christ told them of the coming of false Christs and of wars and rumours of wars but pointed out that these were not the signs of the end or of the last day. In verses 7 and 8 he gave definitive signs of the end of the world saying: “For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places. All these are the beginning of sorrows.” These signs foretold a global conflict that would be accompanied by food shortages and outbreak of diseases as well as earthquakes in various parts of the world.

As everybody knows the first time that nations of the world fought against one another was during the First World War of 1914-1918, otherwise called World War 1. The War was fought between two great military alliances – the Allied powers which included France, Russia, Britain and eventually the United States; and the Central Powers made up of Germany, Austro Hungary and later the Ottoman Empire. By the end of World War 1, nearly 10 million troops had died and 21 million soldiers wounded. From 1918 to 1919, the world saw the worst pandemic in recorded history, the Spanish influenza, which resulted in the death of between 20 million to 50 million people – a figure historians say, was two to five times as high as deaths from the war itself. See World War 1, Wikipedia Encyclopedia, History And Life The World And Its People, pages: Readers Digest: Great Events of the 20th Century.

The outbreak of World War 1 and the events that accompanied it were signs that the last days or end of the world which our Lord Jesus Christ spoke of had begun. As a matter of fact, the anger of the nations expressed in that war was a fulfilment of what Christ revealed to Apostle John in the Island of Patmos as recorded in Revelation 11:17, 18. The cause of the war was purely spiritual as it was the devil’s attempt to destroy all flesh following his expulsion from heaven by the forces of God Almighty under the command of Jesus Christ. (Revelation 12:7-12) Following the devil’s defeat and expulsion from heaven, a voice was heard saying, “Therefore rejoice, ye heavens, and ye that dwell in them. Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea! for the devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time.” (Revelation 12:12). The ‘short time’ spoken of by the angel refers to the end of the world, also known as the last days, the latter times or the time of the end.

Our Lord Jesus Christ in the same book of Matthew chapter 24, spoke of the emergence of false Christs and false prophets who would claim to have powers to do miracles whereas in actual fact they are out to make merchandise of men. (Matthew 24:11, 24) Today, the activities of false Christs, fake miracle workers, false prophets, diviners, clairvoyants and spiritualists who are preaching different things and misleading many people, are unprecedented in world history. Besides, our Lord also predicted that the last days would be an age of anxiety when worries and fears would rise to very high levels. Our Lord Jesus Christ stated, “And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; Men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken.” (Luke 21:25, 26) In the text just cited, the waves refer to the rulers while the sea refers to the ruled. These would be in frequent disagreement.

For instance, in the last two years, people from different walks of life in various parts of the world have held rallies in protest over the high cost of living, unemployment, corporate greed, injustice and so on. At a time, these protests, known as the “Occupy Wall Street campaign” spread to 900 cities in the world from New York to London and from Stuttgart to Tel Aviv and Johannesburg. Also, in what is now known as the Arab Spring, the countries of the Arab world including Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Yemen, Algeria, Oman, Syria, Bahrain, among others, have witnessed large scale street protests that have led to the fall of the governments in some of these countries, while others are still engulfed in civil war. Here in Nigeria the country was shut down for about a week (from January 9, 2012) as the people protested the removal of fuel subsidy by the Federal Government on January 1, 2012.

Fears are widespread today about the danger of terrorists. The major worry of many security experts is that religious fanatics now have access to weapons of mass destruction which they could unleash on innocent souls in the guise of fighting for one cause or the other. The use of a passenger aircraft to bring down the World Trade Centre Towers by fundamentalists in 2001 is still terrifying, even in retrospect.

Also, people are being tormented by wars, famines, diseases and natural disasters. According to experts, a total of 314 militias, guerrillas and separatist groups are involved in wars in 61 countries while six regions or provinces in Africa, 19 in Asia, six in Europe and two in the Middle East, are struggling for independence. These wars have resulted in the displacement of millions of persons. The resulting losses in human lives and properties can hardly be quantified. See www.warsintheworld.com

According to the article “Modern Menace: Emerging and Re-Emerging Infectious Diseases”, ailments which were thought to have been conquered such as tuberculosis, rabies, malaria, and pneumonia “are evading traditional therapies and are now on the comeback”. In addition to the diseases that are known, people are now facing grave challenges following the emergence of HIV/AIDS and at least 30 other new infections. See website (<http://www.healthmedialab.com/html/about.html>)

Perilous times

St. Paul stated that the last days will be marked by dangers due to the prevalence of godlessness in different parts of the world. He wrote: “This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away.” - 2 Timothy 3:1-5.

As the Apostle of Christ stated, there are many today who are cruel and inhuman in their disposition. They hate righteousness and oppose those who have identified themselves with God and Jesus Christ. They are as proud as peacocks even though they are spiritually empty. They are carnal and do not believe in any future judgment. Some of them pretend to be pious or godly whereas they are wolves in sheep’s clothing and hypocrites to the core. Truly did St. Paul state: “But evil men and

seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived.” - 2 Timothy 3:13

Another sign of the last days given by our Lord Jesus Christ is that many people will be preoccupied with personal pleasures than righteousness. He stated, “And as it was in the days of Noe, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of man. They did eat, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark, and the flood came, and destroyed them all. Likewise also as it was in the days of Lot; they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded; But the same day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all. Even thus shall it be in the day when the Son of man is revealed.” (Luke 17:26-30) The craze for materialism and for personal pleasures at the expense of spiritual things today has reached alarming proportions. This certainly proves that we are in the last days.

Increase in Knowledge

Long before the Christian era, Daniel the prophet was privileged to be shown in vision the signs of the last days, in the course of which he was told: “But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time of the end: many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased.” (Daniel 12:4) In essence the prophecy is telling us that in “the time of the end” there will be such an explosion of knowledge that no one will be left in doubt that a new era had dawned on mankind. That things previous generations thought belonged to the realm of mythology and make-belief are now available for man to use are fulfilments of the prophecy of Daniel. People can now travel in relative ease, comfort and safety, from one part of the world to another by air, sea, land and even under the sea and underground. Certainly, the scientific discoveries and inventions that have made these facilities possible are evidences of the increase in knowledge spoken of by Daniel the prophet as one of the signs of the end of the world.

The world is now a global village due to the dawn of the information age in that whatever happens in any part of the world could be seen live within a matter of minutes or even seconds. The mobile phone and the social media that are with the Internet are now common even in the remote parts of the world. Man had not only been to the moon but has also explored neighbouring planets with unmanned crafts.

Watch and Pray

In view of what have been stated so far, all people of goodwill need to be diligent in studying the Scriptures so as to understand the signs of the times and to do what God requires of them time by His grace. St. Paul charged the Christians in Ephesus thus: “See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is. And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit.” (Ephesians 5:15-18) Moreover St. Paul stated: “But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. Ye are all the children of

light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation." – 1 Thessalonians 5:1-8; Romans 13:11-13; 1 Peter 4:7.

Also, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ charged Christians not to live carelessly but to understand the signs of the times and to live soberly in the fear of God in this sin-ridden world. He stated: "And take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and so that day come upon you unawares. For as a snare shall it come on all them that dwell on the face of the whole earth." He added: "Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man." - Luke 21:34-36.

The same point of doing things in the way acceptable to God so as to be given the grace of salvation had earlier been made by Zephaniah the prophet. He declared: "Gather yourselves together, yea, gather together, O nation not desired; Before the decree bring forth, before the day pass as the chaff, before the fierce anger of the LORD come upon you, before the day of the LORD'S anger come upon you. Seek ye the LORD, all ye meek of the earth, which have wrought his judgment; seek righteousness, seek meekness: it may be ye shall be hid in the day of the LORD'S anger." (Zephaniah 2:1-3) St. Peter also exhorted us saying: "But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer." – 1 Peter 4:7.

May God Almighty continue to endow His children with His holy spirit to enable them understand the signs of the times so as to serve Him diligently and faithfully until the end by His grace through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

JUSTICE MANIFESTED

Justice is one of the infinite qualities or attributes of God Almighty. It is with justice that He manifests His righteousness and vindicates His holy name. Without justice, there would be no order in the universe and it would not be possible to realise Jehovah's grand purposes for creating mankind.

According to good dictionaries - the word "justice" means "the quality of being just; rightness; fairness, especially in the way people are treated and decisions are made". It is an indisputable fact that God Almighty is the embodiment of absolute justice. His laws or judgments are equitable and are not grievous, and He is just and true in all His ways. Moses the prophet declared, "He is the Rock, his work is perfect: for all his ways are judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he." (Deuteronomy 32:4. See also Revelation 15:3) Many years ago, David, a king and prophet in Israel was inspired to declare that Justice and judgment are the habitation of the throne of God. (Psalm 89:14) Because God is immortal and does not change (Malachi 3:6), He should be absolutely trusted to give His people their due reward. - Hebrews 6:18; Isaiah 40:8.

The fall of Adam and Eve

The justice of God was clearly manifested in the Garden of Eden. It would be recalled that after man had been created, God Almighty gave him a law, the violation of which carried the death penalty as it is written: "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." (Genesis 2:16, 17) When the devil appeared to Eve in the form of a serpent and lured her to eat the fruit, she told him of the law of God and the consequences of violating it. But the devil countered her, saying, "Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil." - Genesis 3:4-5.

The great blunder the woman made was that she listened to the lies of the devil and was deceived. The Bible says: "And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat." - Genesis 3:6.

Sequel to their breaking the law given to them, God Almighty summoned the man and the woman for judgment, thus giving them a full and fair opportunity of defending themselves. (Genesis 3:8-13) From this example we learn the divine principle in executing judgment, which is that the laws, offences and the guilt should be clearly established so that those involved would be convinced of their transgressions. (Job 36: 9) From the fair hearing which God Almighty gave the first couple, has grown the law of **Natural Justice**, the traditional name for legal standards of basic fairness, the breach of which will lead to the decision being set aside or judicial review being granted. The requirement is that persons affected by an action should be afforded a fair and unbiased hearing before the decision to act is taken and that one cannot be a judge in his own cause.

Punishment

The punishment meted to Adam and Eve by God Almighty was according to the order in which they committed the offence. The first to be punished was the serpent. The Bible says: "And the LORD God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life." (Genesis 3:14) Furthermore, God Almighty declared: "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel." (Genesis 3:15) The curse is thus targetted primarily at the Tempter, Satan the devil. The devil will be cast down from his exalted position, his empire will be destroyed, before he will receive a fatal bruise in the head.

The bruising of the serpent's head, refers to the killing of the devil by Jesus Christ, the seed of the woman (Galatians 3:16) as St. Paul explained in Romans 16:20. Before the devil is killed, he will attack or persecute "the woman", (God's Organisation), but he cannot prevent the work of God from going on. - Hebrews 2:14; Ezekiel 28:12-17; Isaiah 14:12-15; Revelation 12:17.

The next to receive punishment was Eve, and the Bible account says: "Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee." (Genesis 3:16) Evidently, child delivery by the woman was meant to be painless and stress free; but thenceforth it would be a hazardous, agonizing or laborious affair. It is not surprising therefore that a woman who is about to deliver is said to be "in labour". The woman's subjection to the man was deepened by the fact that she had to depend on him for her upkeep, since the couple were, from that time, to labour for their food.

The Bible shows that although the woman Eve was deceived, the man was not deceived. (1 Timothy 2: 13, 14) Adam deliberately broke the law given to him by God. But while under trial, he blamed the woman for his sin and even God Almighty for giving him the woman. He was guilty of self-justification. People of God should not do that. See Job 31:33, 40

In passing the sentence on Adam God Almighty stated further: "And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life." - Genesis 3:17.

For not being manly enough to resist the overtures from his wife to eat the fruit, the ground would not be as fertile as it was meant to be. The various food items which were specially made for the nourishment of man were no longer to grow spontaneously but through long and hard labour. Weeds and thorns would be growing more readily on the land than food-bearing plants. Adam started subsisting on imperfect food and became subject to continuous degeneration and ultimately to death.

Some may ask: "Why did Adam not die the very day he sinned?" The Bible shows that a day with the Lord is as a thousand years. Thus Adam, who died at the age of 930 years, died within God's "one day" - which is about a thousand years. (Genesis

5:5; Psalm 90:4; 2 Peter 3:8) Indeed, “the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” - Romans 6:23.

Inherited Sin

All the children of Adam became sinners due to his fall. They became subject to sufferings, sickness, fears, sorrows and death. (Romans 3:23) That was why David declared: “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.” (Psalm 51:5) Also, Apostle Paul stated: “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.” (Romans 5:12) The Bible asks, “Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? Not one.” - Job 14:4.

It could therefore be understood why the posterity of Adam had to inherit his sins as well as the sentence of death passed on him. However, they do not have to inherit his punishment permanently - for God Almighty would not allow people to suffer endlessly because of circumstances over which they have no control. That was why God sent Jesus Christ as a ransom for man, so that those who do not follow Adam’s path of disobedience will have life, by His grace. – Deuteronomy 19: 21; Galatians 3: 13; 1 Peter 2:22,23; 2 Corinthians 5:21.

The goodness of God in sending Jesus Christ to save mankind is evidence of his justice. The Bible states: “For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:7, 8) St. Paul added: “For if by one man's offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ. Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.” - Romans 5:17-19.

We should repose absolute trust in God Almighty, the embodiment of perfect justice, Who will always do what is right for His people. He deserves adoration and worship.

May God Almighty “the Judge of all the earth”, continue to guide us to do His will at all times, so that we may have life in the end by His grace through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS AS SEEN THROUGH THE HOLY BIBLE

Millions of people all over the world do mark with uncommon zeal and ceremony their birthdays, defined by the *New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language* as “the day of one's birth or the anniversary of this day”. During such occasions, the celebrant spares no expense in order to host and fete friends and well-wishers who attend to share in the merriment that marks the occasion. The guests in turn shower the celebrant with good wishes, compliments and gifts.

For the fact that the celebration of birthdays is seen as a symbol of sophistication, a number of television stations in Nigeria devote special programmes to birthday celebrations in which they invite all children born within a certain period to attend the party on payment of specified amounts. Also, the practice of post-humous birthday celebrations is now increasingly in vogue, such that the birthdays of people who had died decades ago are still remembered with lots of activities.

Also, the ritual of observing birthdays has crept into the Church with many clergymen celebrating their birthdays with wide publicity and special thanksgiving services. As we proceed in this sermon we shall, by God's grace, determine whether it is natural and proper, in the light of the Scriptures, for men to celebrate their birthdays.

Custom of unbelievers

The custom of venerating the day of one's birth has been practised from ancient times by people who did not know God. It is on record that the ancient Greeks celebrated the birthdays of gods and prominent men. Josephus, the Jewish historian, refers to Titus' celebration of his brother's and father's birthdays by slaughtering Jewish captives. Astrologers attach special importance to birthdays believing that the day of birth determines the person's character and future and that “starting to do anything of major importance on a birthday has the extra solar boost of a once-a-year infusion of universal goodwill and luck.” (See the article “Why we celebrate birthdays” from the website www.jeremysilman.com) But available records show that the natural Jews abhorred the celebration of birthdays. The Imperial Bible Dictionary in its comments states: “The ... Hebrews looked on the celebration of birthdays as part of idolatrous worship, a view which would be abundantly confirmed by what they saw of the common observances associated with these days.” The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia pointedly affirms that not only is there “no evidence for the celebration of birth-days in Israel in pre-Hellenistic times” but that “the early Christians did not celebrate birthdays because they considered it a pagan custom”.

Misleading Views

Some scholars do make reference to the account of Job, where it is stated that his children held special banquets in turns in their houses as proof that “in early

times the birthday was observed with great solemnity and rejoicing". In the book of Job chapter 1 verses 4 and 5 it is written: "And his sons went and feasted in their houses, every one his day; and sent and called for their three sisters to eat and to drink with them. And it was so, when the days of their feasting were gone about, that Job sent and sanctified them, and rose up early in the morning, and offered burnt offerings according to the number of them all: for Job said, It may be that my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts. Thus did Job continually."

Those who use this text to support the celebration of birthdays believe that the phrase "every one his day" refers to the turn of each of the children of Job to celebrate his or her birthday. But this is not correct, in that if it were so, then the Bible record would have also spoken of when the sisters celebrated their birthdays to which they would invite their brothers.

It is not true that the meals eaten together by the children of Job were birthday parties. They only gathered from time to time to eat together in order to strengthen their bonds of unity, and to thank God for His goodness on them. Their manner of life was akin to the ways of the early Christians who "breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart". (Acts 2:46) Certainly, the early Christians were not eating together from house to house because of birthday celebrations! The truth is that people of God are not prohibited from inviting their friends, to occasions of merriment. They are only advised to do things in moderation and godly fear. Scripture says: "Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God." - 1 Corinthians 10:31. See also Philipians 4:5.

It must be understood that Job being a prophet, had deep understanding of the purpose of God and kept the faith even under intense persecution. Indisputably, he and his children, as people of God, were distinct in character from their neighbours. It was therefore a measure of his devotion to God that he took it upon himself to pray for God's favours on them, after they had had their banquet.

If birthdays were important to Job, he would not have, at the time of his temptation, profusely cursed the day he was born. He stated among other things: "Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived. Let that day be darkness; let not God regard it from above, neither let the light shine upon it." - Job 3:3,4.

Pharaoh and Herod

The Holy Bible makes direct reference to two birthday celebrations, that of Pharaoh, king of Egypt and that of Herod the Tetrarch. In the first instance, Pharaoh, executed his chief baker in fulfilment of the dream, which Joseph correctly interpreted. The Bible account states: "And it came to pass the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, that he made a feast unto all his servants: and he lifted up the head of the chief butler and of the chief baker among his servants. And he restored the chief butler unto his butlership again; and he gave the cup into Pharaoh's hand: But he hanged the chief baker: as Joseph had interpreted to them." - Genesis 40:20-22.

In the second instance, it happened that on the birthday of Herod, when he made a supper to his lords, the daughter of Herodias, his wife, pleased him so much by her

dancing at his birthday, "Whereupon he promised with an oath to give her whatsoever she would ask". (Matthew 14:6, 7) She, being before instructed of her mother, asked for "John the Baptist's head in a charger". The Bible states: "Though the king was sorry nevertheless for the oath's sake, and them which sat with him at meat... he sent, and beheaded John in the prison". (Matthew 14:9,10) It should be pointed out that John was put in prison for daring to criticise Herod for using his position to marry Herodias, his brother's wife, while his brother was still alive. Herod had earlier wanted to put John the Baptist to death, but had refrained from doing so because he feared the multitude, in that they counted him as a prophet. - Matthew 14:1-5.

It was because Herod and his wife had no regard for God that they, without prick of conscience, imprisoned a widely acclaimed servant of God and even killed him. Herod, being an enemy of God and His work, observed birthdays because it was in keeping with his pagan roots. It could be seen that he preferred to violate the law of God than to lose face with mortal men who were guests at his party. This is in total contrast to the character of the people of God who do things, to please God Almighty and not mortal men. - Galatians 1:10; Romans 2:11.

Notably, these instances of birthdays in the Bible involved the shedding of blood, which are proofs that such observances originated from satan who was "a murderer from the beginning". (John 8:44) Evidently, birthday celebrations have pagan origins and those who participate in such observances should be aware of its implications. The Holy Bible says that we should avoid pagan ceremonies. "Thus saith the LORD, Learn not the way of the heathen ... For the customs of the people are vain." (Jeremiah 10:2,3) A true worshipper of God must therefore be careful as not to do anything just because others are doing it, otherwise he would find himself entangled in the web of human traditions, customs or philosophies which are contrary to the will of God. The Bible says: "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ." - Colossians 2:8. See also Exodus 23:2.

That many people are doing something does not mean that it is right in the sight of God, for the fact that men love "darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil". (John 3:19) Our Lord Jesus Christ also declared, "...that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God". - Luke 16:15.

Bible view

We must note that when the prophet Abraham "made a great feast", for his son Isaac, it was not a birthday he was celebrating, in that it was not held on the day of his birth or circumcision, but on the day of his weaning. A man like Abraham could not have imitated the manners of the Gentiles by marking the birth of his son. It should be noted that Abraham did not hold any other such celebration for his son Isaac.

As many discerning people know, no one can tell the type of life a newly born child is going to live, whether it is a life that will bring glory to God and blessing to his people or one that would be contrary to the will of God which will bring pain and anguish to people. No one can gainsay the fact that, except for the saints who are predestinated, it is only at death one can tell the type of life lived by an individual,

not at the time of his birth. In other words, it is by virtue of the works a man had done while alive that people will remember him, for good or for ill. It was on this score Solomon stated: "A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death than the day of one's birth." - Ecclesiastes 7:1.

In addition it should be pointed out that observance of birthdays bestows undue importance on the individual. All mankind are born in sin, into a world full of trouble. (Job 5:7; 14:1) No human being should therefore be unduly exalted. (1 Corinthians 8:2) The Bible says "For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away" and that "every man at his best state is altogether vanity". 1 Peter 1:24; Psalm 39:5.

It was because of this understanding that servants of God in ancient times did not emphasize, the day they were born, but their end. David the Psalmist wrote: "Lord, make me to know my end, and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know how frail I am, Behold, thou hast made my days as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before thee: verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity." (Psalm 39:4,5). And King Solomon stated: "Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof..." (Ecclesiastes 7:8) Solomon, the prophet said that the end is better than the beginning because, as earlier stated, it is at the end of one's life that his manner of life could be assessed, whether the man lived "soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world" or whether he gave himself to eating "the bread of wickedness", "the bread of idleness" and drinking "the wine of violence. - Titus 2:12; Proverbs 4:17; 31:27.

Moreover, it is an unnecessary exercise to stick to a particular day to express joy and gratitude to God for the preservation of one's life. Thanksgiving needs to be done every day. David, the sweet Psalmist of Israel stated: "I laid me down and slept; I awaked; for the LORD sustained me." (Psalm 3:5; 4:8) In Psalm 104:33 he added: "I will sing unto the LORD as long as I live: I will sing praise to my God while I have my being." Also, Jeremiah the Prophet stated: "It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness." -Lamentations 3:22, 23.

Another point against birthday celebrations is that they involve the expenditure or investment of so much time, energy and money. It is not unusual for those celebrating their birthdays to hire a standing band or a Disk Jockey, photographers, public address system and to sew special attires. They also make giant cakes, print cards, buy gifts, drinks, foods, arrange for vehicles to convey some of the guests, and place adverts in print and electronic media. In these difficult times, such money could be put to better use, if not for the benefit of the individual concerned but for others who are in need.

It needs also be pointed out that though some say they do not celebrate birthdays, they give and receive birthday cards, best wishes, and, gifts, which amount to observing the day as special. Christians should learn to avoid such gifts and explain to their friends that they do not observe birthdays, in line with the understanding of the Holy Bible. - Romans 1:32; 1 Timothy 5:22.

Christ's birth anniversary

Some people have asked why we of the GKS mark the birth anniversary of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ when we are so opposed to birthday celebrations. The point that must be made clear is that we do not observe his birthday but commemorate his birth, which occasion the GKS calls Freedom Day. This we observe by way of divine services on all Sundays in October.

Jesus Christ was different from all mortals in that he was born without sin and lived and died sinless. The Freedom Day Divine Service gives us the opportunity to express appreciation to God Almighty for His goodness in sending His only begotten son to die for the sake of redeeming mankind from sin and death. Unlike mortal men who are born in sin and whose end no one can tell, the birth of Jesus Christ had been prophesied of long before he was born. - Romans 5:12-19; Isaiah 7:14; 9:6,7; Micah 5:2.

The Freedom Day celebration also enables us to give honour to God Almighty and His Son Jesus Christ, in harmony with the command of God in Philippians 2:9-11. Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ declared: "That all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which hath sent him." - John 5: 23.

From all that has been said in this sermon, it could be seen that celebration of birthdays is a carryover from the days of ignorance, when people did not have the accurate knowledge of God. Now that the light has come, those who want to be on the side of God and righteousness should shun such pagan practices as birthday celebrations and honour God Almighty and His son Jesus Christ exclusively, for their blessings and salvation in the end. (Isaiah 25:6, 7; Acts 17:30,31) Scripture says: "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty." - 2 Corinthians 6:17, 18.

IS MARY THE MOTHER OF GOD?

One of the doctrines that has not ceased to generate controversy in the Christian world is that of the veneration of Mary, the mother of our and Saviour Jesus Christ as the mother of God. She is said to have been born without the stain of original sin and that at death she did not suffer the indignity of corruption but was carried by angels to heaven.

For this, the proponents of the doctrine argue that she should be paid a more eminent honour than men or angels because she is the mother of the second person of the Trinity and therefore the mother of God!

To understand what the teaching of Mary being the mother of God entails we need to refer to publications of the Catholic Church to that effect. The booklet *What Catholics Believe* published by the Catholic Truth Society states thus “Among our intercessors in Heaven is one whose office, holiness, and power with God place her far above the Angels and Saints. It is Holy Mary, the Mother of God.” The publication adds that “Mary is truly Mother of God, because she is Mother a divine Person, because her Son who took human nature from her is truly God. In raising Mary to so wonderful a dignity, God has exalted her above all other creatures; the highest angel is His servant; she is His Mother.” (written by Mother Mary Loyola) It could be seen therefore that Mary is regarded as the mother of God because of the belief that Jesus Christ is God Almighty.

Moreover, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* with imprimatur of Most Revrend William E. Cousins “The central point of the theology of Mary is that she is the Mother of God. It is because of the fact that Mary had been foreordained by God from the beginning to her divine motherhood and that she was conceived “full of grace” and thus placed in the singular position of being the most perfect human being that an omnipotent God could create. She was immaculately conceived; as God’s Mother she cooperated in our redemption; she was our Lord’s most intimate associate while He was on earth; and upon her death she was assumed bodily into heaven where she is queen, reigning over heaven and earth.” It adds ““From Mary, God the Son took His human nature, and He will forever remain the son of Mary and she will be forever the Mother of God. Finally we read of the place of Mary in heaven at the throne of God. (Rv. 12) and we see her in glory as no other.”

From the above references it could be seen that the doctrine of the Immaculate conception of Mary and of her bodily assumption to heaven lay the foundation for the veneration of Mary as the Mother of God.

As to how they came about this doctrine the *The Encyclopedia* states that: “The Church, studying, searching, and interpreting both the Scriptures and tradition has defined those doctrines concerning Mary about which the Scriptures are not specific.” Rev. Fr. Anthony Mario Ozele stated at page 2 of the booklet *Why Catholics Honour Mary* “True, if one searches the pages of the Bible from Genesis through Revelation for a categorical and specific injunction asking Christians to pray to or through the Virgin Mary, one would meet with utmost disappointment.”

In spite of this fact the Catholics believe that “From apostolic times, tradition, the Church, and the faithful have accorded to Mary, the Mother of God, the second

highest degree of honour, hyperdulia. ...The name of Mary, because she is the Mother of God, is honoured with multiple titles: she is the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Co-Redemptrix, the Mediatrix of all Graces, the Blessed Mother. Catholic Encyclopedia pages 374 and 375.

Puerile arguments and Refutations

To support the teaching. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* states that the doctrine about Mary is derived from “the Scriptures and dogmatic tradition”. Reference is made to Genesis 3:15 which says “And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.” While the seed is Christ (Galatians 3:16), Mary, the Mother of Christ, described as the “Second Eve” and “the mother of all in the spiritual order (Romans 9:7,8) is the woman who is designated to crush the dominion of the devil over men”. Reference is also made to Psalm 45 where Mary is said to have been presented as queen.

Great premium is also placed by Catholics on the fact that Mary pleaded with Jesus Christ to assist the marriage Feast at Cana when the wine ran out. By turning water into wine at Cana of Galilee, Mary was already becoming an intercessor: a mediatrix for all who were seeking for the fullness of joy” It is true that hat the angel Gabriel greeted Mary saying “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women.” and told her “thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women”. (Luke 1:28, 30) but does that in any way justify the teaching of Immaculate conception, that she was born without sin?

The truth however is that the woman in Genesis 3:15 does not refer to any individual but to God’s Organisation which is perpetually opposed to the devil and his organization. The promised seed of the woman is Jesus Christ through whom God will bruise the head of the serpent or kill the devil. – Revelation 20:1; Romans 16:20.

Rev. Bertrand L. Conway, (C.S.P) in his book *The Question Box* says in answer to a question on the immaculate conception of Mary “**The Scriptures nowhere expressly teach this doctrine,** but Pius IX cites two passages, (Genesis 3:15; Luke 1:28) from which it may be inferred, if they are considered in the light of Catholic traditionThe proclamation of Mary, following the conception of Elizabeth in her old age is held up as “the first miracle brought about by Mary” that of “the sanctification of St., John the Baptist in the womb of Elizabeth” ! On that same occasion (Lk 1:43) Elizabeth greets Mary as the “Mother of my Lord”.

Responding to the question as to why Catholics call Mary “the Mother of God instead of the Mother of Jesus” he cited Bible portions where angel spoke to Mary and the words of Elizabeth in Luke 1:31-35; 43, etc. adding “This belief was so firmly accepted as divinely revealed, that the Council of Ephesus in 431 made it the standard of orthodoxy, excommunicating the Nestorian heretics who dinied it”.

As our mothers are not called the mothers of our bodies but simply our mothers, because the soul directly created by God is united with the body in a human personality, so the Blessed Virgin is not called the Mother of the human nature of Christ, but simply the Mother of God, because the divine nature, eternally begotten of God the Father, is united with the human nature in the divine personality of Jesus Christ.

TEACHING THAT MARY was free from all actual sin “because of divine tradition confirmed by the Council of Trent, which says “If anyone says that man once justified can during his whole life avoid all sins, even venial ones, as the Church holds that the Blessed Virgin did by special privilege of God, let him be anathema.”

Assumption of Mary “ On November 1 1050, Pope Pius XII solemnly declared: “We pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma: that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory.” “Catholic then believe that Mary was taken up to heaven, body as well as soul, at the end of her life on earth./ pages 285 -286. He confesses that “Scripture contains no explicit testimony to the fact of the Assumption, but several texts give a legitimate and solid foundation – especially when viewed in the light of Patristic interpretation and other Church teachings regarding Mary. (Genesis 3:15, taken together with several texts of St., Paul (e.g) Rom 5) and the constant tradition of Mary as the new Eve, show us Mary closely associated with Christ in His victory over sin and death.

QUEEN OF HEAVEN: Great numbers of Popes have spoken explicitly of her as Queen, e.g. Pius IX: “She has been appointed by God to be the Queen of heaven and earth, and is exalted above all the choirs of angels and classes of saints.” (Ineffabilis Deus, 1854

A woman might be given the honorary title “queen” for her beauty and a ship metaphorically styled “queen of the sea” for its speed. And in this sense, too, Mary could be called queen by reason of her excellence being “full of grace” (Luk 1:28. But Mary’s queenship is not limited to this. She is queen in the real and proper sense – any by two different claims to the title. 1. She is mother of Christ the King, of whose “Kingdom there will be no end” (Luke1:31,-33) and every mother of a king merits the title of queen by natural right. (2) Just as Christ, king already by birth, has another claim to kingship by His conquest of sin and the devil, so Mary, by sharing with her divine Son in this victory, merits by an acquired right her name as queen (implied in Gen. 3:15, especially as seen in the tradition of the early Fathers: Mary is the new Eve who helps the New Adam, Christ, undo harm wrought by the first Adam and his co-helper Eve.)

Regarding Matthew 12:46-50 – Here Jesus was using the opportunity to teach the great Christian mystery that relationship does not depend merely on flesh and blood, but on union with ?Divine nature through grace. Page 11.I think Christ approves of our going to him through Mary because in Jhn 2:2-11 He performed His first miracle after a request from His mother. The word of God makes it clear that the saints will intercede for us before God’s throne if we ask them to. Cf. Rev. 8:3-4 The saints and Mary are in the presence of God; they live in the spirit and so are not confined to space and time. John 17:24; Luke 23:43; John 11:26; 2 Corinthians 5:8; Phil. 1:23; Heb. 12:23; Rev. 6:11. It is not a must that we should go to Christ through Mary or the saints, but it is highly beneficial to go through her, or the saints. (page 19)

Reference was made to John 19:26,27 “When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home. (John 19:26-27 KJV)

“Would it not be strange for Jesus to hand over his mother to a disciple if really he had other brothers and sisters? This is a clear indication that Jesus Christ was the only child of the blessed Virgin Mary.

Roman Catholicism – Sebastian Bullough – Nihil Obstat of Fr Thomas Gilby and Fr Kenelm Foster

NO PROOF.

BUT NOTE Christ in answer to her request said Woman why turn ye to me...John 2:4

Genesis 3:15 – and Galatians 4:4 “reveals the fact that the seed of the woman referred to in Genesis is Jesus Himself, and the woman is Mary.

A new outline of Catholic Doctrine – By Father Abraham Ojefua OCSO

Now since we are sons of God by adoption and are, therefore, brethren of Jesus, Mary cares for us all, defends us against dangers and prays for us. Therefore, the Blessed Virgin is invoked by the Church as Advocate, Mediatrix, Co-redemptrix” (Vatican 11) – 76,

TEACHING IS FROM PAGANISM

The teaching and practice of the Church of Rome in India – Reverend W. P. Hares

“In Wilhelm and Scannel, vol ii, p, 220, we read: “Mary’s corporeal assumption into heaven is so thoroughly implied in the notion of her personality as given by Bible and dogma, that the Church can dispense with strict historical evidence of the fact.”

“As regards the assumption of Mary to heaven the Early Church was entirely ignorant about it, and there was no early tradition to which men might appeal. It is not probable that God at a later period made a special revelation about this to the Roman Church. 320 He quoted Epiphanius, Bishop of Constantia (403) described the story of the assumption of the Blessed Virgin to Heaven in the following words: “The whole thing is foolish and strange, and is a device and deceit of the devil. Let Mary be had in honour; let the Lord be worshipped, Let no one worship Mary Mary’s body was holy indeed, but she was not a deity, She was a virgin, too, and honoured but not given to us for worship.” -319

Secrets of Romanism by Joseph Zacchello

The worship of the Virgin Mary was introduced to meet, to gratify and to attach itself upon, the superstition which had long prevailed amongst the heathen in respect to Issis, Diana, and other goddesses, who had their millions of worshippers” – The As-One-Ment Between God and Man, Elder Russel page 69,

“Yes it was to satisfy the superstitious minds of former heathens, who had become converted, that she was introduced as a powerful intercessor, who could equal, and even surpass the supposed powers of Isis, Diana, etc, and that she should then be worshiped and invoked instead of their former heathen goddesses. And to further

satisfy the coverts, statues of the Blessed Virgin were made, just as there were statues of Isis, Diana, etc. before which there were to kneel and pray – not to the statues themselves, but to the one they represented, just when they were yet heathens they had been accustomed to doing before heathen statues, which they prayed directly.” Zachello

“By that it may be seen how the Catholic Church substituted for the heathen or pagan gods the Blessed Virgin and the saints, who were then worshiped and invoked in place of the pagan gods, thus substituting one error for another. “ Zachello quoting from *How I Became a Non-Catholic*

Devotion to Mary, then has always existed in the church. However, devotion to Mary is not and should be equated with the adoration reserved for God the Father, His Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. The reason being that after all Mary is still a creature of God, not God.

On Mathew 12:46-50; Mark 6:1-3 comparison was made with Mark 15:40, Matthew 27:55,56

“Now if James and Josef, mentioned in Mark 6:3 as “brothers of Jesus “ are the sons of another Mary, and so would mean that they are the cousins of Jesus, the argument now comes down to mean that Simon and Jude are also very likely cousins of Jesus.

“In the thirteenth century it was worked out explicitly that amid the honour paid to creatures, that paid to our Lady is “more *eminent* than that paid to other creatures, because she is the mother of God” -153

The doctrine of the Assumption, which means that our Lady’s body did not have to await the general resurrection but was at once raised and taken with her soul into glory, follows in a similar way upon the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Death and corruption in the tomb are part of the penalty of original sin. If our Lady had no original sin, there was no reason for body to suffer the indignity of corruption. The Immaculate Conception was a freely bestowed privilege, granted in view of Christ’s redemption, to fit Mary for her task of being the Redeemer’s mother. The Assumption is a similar privilege, granted in consequence of the Immaculate Conception.” – pages 154-155

“The Church teaches that no stain of sin, original or actual, ever touched her. She was brought into being like other children, but, unlike all others, she was preserved from the original stain, and came into existence fair and pleasing in God’s sight.

Note : All generations shall call me blessed, Mary

From all that has been said, you can see that the Blessed Virgin deserves our honour, We know that she is a human being. But we also know that God has honoured her more than all men and all angels. God made her His Mother. She was a virgin Mother and remained ever a Virgin. Mary called the Son of God her own Son and He is truly her OWN. Can there be any honour greater than that? – 76

It would be recalled that after proclaiming the doctrine of the Universal Queenship of Mary on Nov. 1, 1950, Pope Pius XII declared “the doctrine of Our Lady’s Assumption”. Then towards the close of the Marian Year (1954) on Dec. 8, the pope

declared and established a feast, that of Mary, Queen, now celebrated as a memorial on Aug. 22.

. They are: I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed; he shall crush your head, and you shall lie in wait for his heel.” (Genesis 3:15) Christ and His mother are both spoken of as enemies of Satan and of sins: He, absolutely sinless as the Son of God, and she sinless, or full of grace, by God’s special prerogative and gift.” For which reason the Catholic Church declared Mary’s Immaculate Conception. (Papal bull, *Ineffabilis Deus*, Pius IX 1854).

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