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Godliness. Reverence. Obedience. Worship.



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growth in faith and service to God



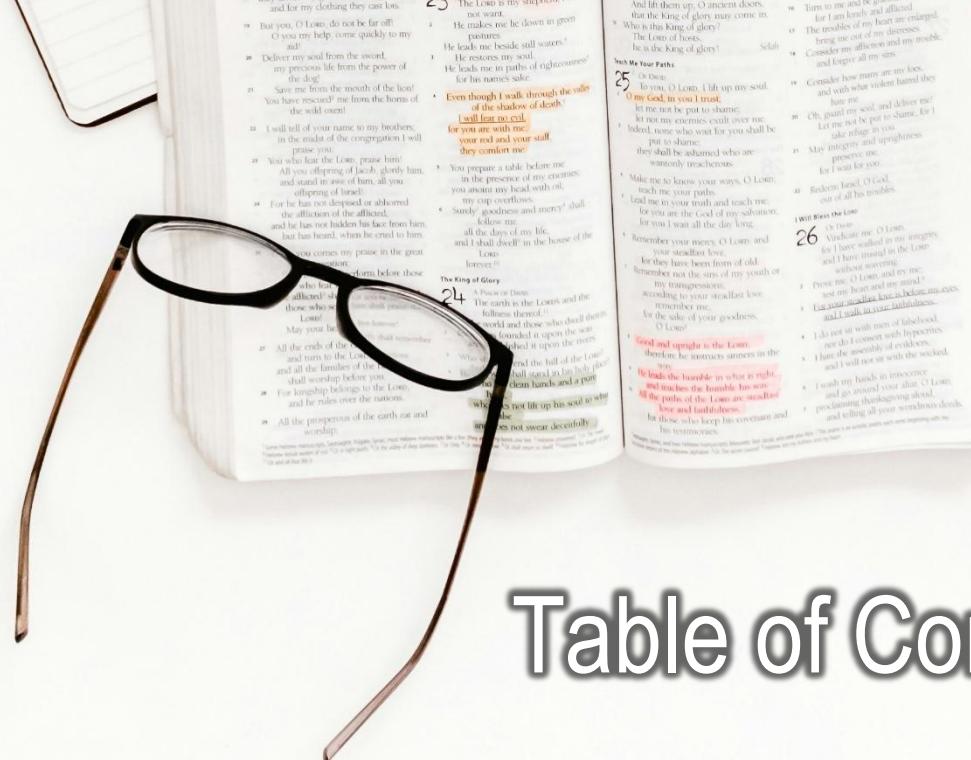


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The latter half of Nehemiah 12 records a dedication ceremony for the wall in Jerusalem. It was a time of "...gladness, both with thanksgiving and singing..." (verse 27). Two "thanksgiving choirs" were appointed and assembled on the wall, who then walked the length of the wall in opposite directions until they came together again and stood before the house of God (verses 31-40). Verse 43, says "...that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and the children also rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off." What a beautiful picture of God's people exalting the name of God. Giving thanks to God is wonderful!

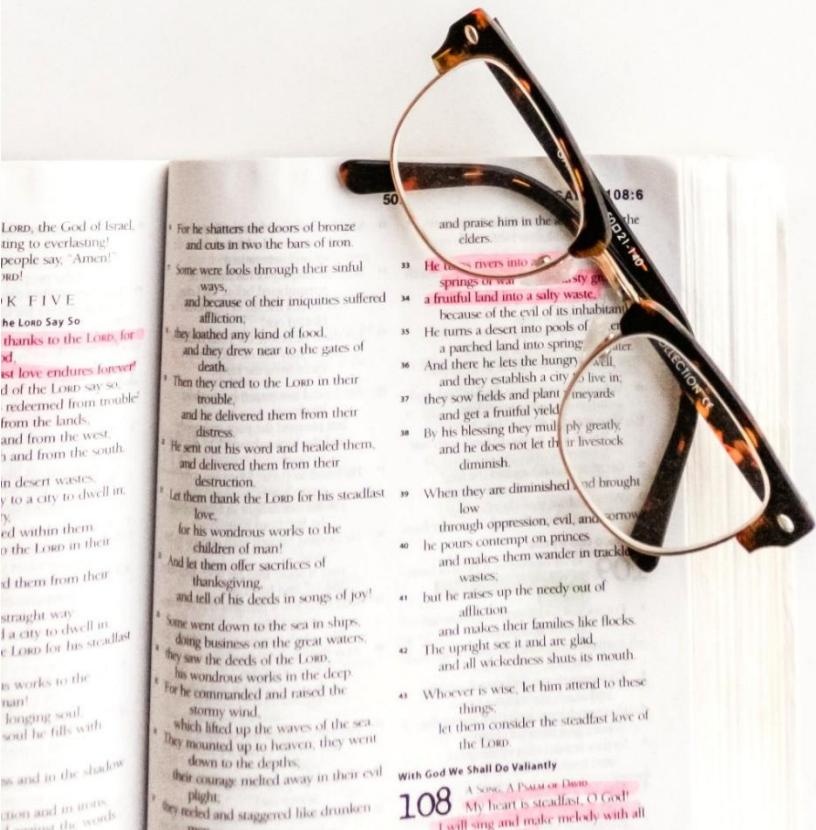
In North American culture, we have a day each year identified as "Thanksgiving Day." It is the second Monday of October in Canada, whereas it falls on the fourth Thursday of November in the United States. The name itself infers there is

Someone to whom we should give thanks – the Lord. James tells us "*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning*" (James 1:17). May we be thankful to the Lord, not just on "Thanksgiving Day," but every day!

I am thankful for the writers we have in this issue, indeed, for all of the writers who have and continue to support GROW magazine by giving their time and effort. And I am thankful to you – our subscribers and our hope is that the material herein will be a blessing to you. If it is, share it. GROW magazine is free, and so we encourage you to share it freely. Forward the email, use the "print" feature at the bottom of each article, post a link on social media, or pass along a PDF copy of GROW. If you consider the material to be profitable, pass it on.

Now, let's GROW together!

William Stewart
editor & designer



EXPOSITORY ARTICLE

Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Jesus, and Us: Hall of Faith

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Introduction

The story of Israel is the story of Jesus. God's plan for bringing Christ to the world was earnestly set in motion from the time God promised Abraham that his descendants would become a great nation. God told him,

"Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:1-3).

Later, when Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac, God elaborated on the promise concerning the coming of Jesus.

"In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice" (Genesis 22:18).

The seed promise is the culmination of the others in these passages.

"Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as referring to many, but rather to one, 'And to your seed,' that is, Christ" (Galatians 3:16).

To get to that point, the story of Israel had to go through Abraham's descendants, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Ponder three important points about these men that bring us to Jesus.

Foreigners and Travelers

Of Abraham, the Scripture says

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"By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Hebrews 11:9-10).

Note the kind of faith Abraham possessed and consider how faith like that impacted his son and grandson. His faith led him to put God above his earthly heritage, be a foreigner in a strange land, and trust in the grand Architect of the universe to lead him and provide for him. Abraham did these while not understanding the intricacies of what God was doing. Raising his son, and thus impacting his grandson, with that kind of faith gave his descendants an opportunity for strong faith in the unseen God. We need to raise our children with that same faith!

As Christians, we are, "aliens and strangers" (1 Peter 2:11) in this world. God has commissioned us "to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul" (1 Peter 2:11). Since we are surrounded on every side by temptation and sin, it is imperative that we are constantly "looking for

the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Hebrews 11:10). We must teach this to our children like Abraham and Sarah did Isaac. They taught him by example, and, no doubt, by words. We must do the same (Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Ephesians 6:1-4).

The Ultimate Sacrifice

While pondering Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22; Hebrews 11:17-19), we usually concentrate on Abraham's attitude during that process. This reveals significant information about this event. Abraham trusted God in the most difficult of human circumstances, setting an example for all to follow, including his son.

At the same time, we are given few details concerning Isaac's viewpoint of what occurred, but we can imagine the look in his eyes as Abraham prepared to sacrifice him and raised the knife.

"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son" (Hebrews 11:17).

At the beginning of the narrative, Isaac's sense of wonder surfaces.

"Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, 'My father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' And he said, 'Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?' Abraham said, 'God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.' So the two of them walked on together" (Genesis 22:7-8).

Isaac was curious, but he trusted his father. When the scene was completed, imagine Isaac's relief that God provided an appropriate animal for sacrifice! What lessons they both must have learned on this occasion!

Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his promised son foreshadows God's willingness for His Son

to experience death on behalf of humanity. Also, Abraham received Isaac back from the dead, "as a type" (Hebrews 11:19). Since God prevented Abraham from carrying out the sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham figuratively received Isaac back from the dead. That "resurrection" foreshadowed the real resurrection of Jesus, who could not have come to this earth without His earthly ancestor, Isaac. Also, without Jesus's actual death and bodily resurrection, we would have no hope, and Abraham's story would have been for naught.

Blessing the Patriarchs

One of the privileges of the patriarchs was to bless their descendants. Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph all participated in this.

"By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even regarding things to come. By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff. By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel, and gave orders concerning his bones" (Hebrews 11:20-22).

These three cases share some very important truths.

When Isaac blessed Jacob (Genesis 27), the future of the nation of Israel was described in terms similar to what God previously told Abraham (Genesis 27:27-29; cf. 12:1-3).

"May peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you; be master of your brothers, And may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be those who curse you, And blessed be those who bless you" (Genesis 27:29).

In time, God brought this to pass.

Jacob's blessing of Joseph's sons also discusses the future of the nation (Genesis 48)

“He blessed Joseph, and said, ‘The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, Bless the lads; and may my name live on in them, and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and may they grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth’” (Genesis 48:15-16).

Finally, the book of Genesis ends with Joseph giving instructions about his remains.

“Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am about to die, but God will surely take care of you and bring you up from this land to the land which He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob.’ Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, ‘God will surely take care of you, and you shall carry my bones up from here.’ So Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt” (Genesis 50:24-26).

In this, he also references God's promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob about the land.

The lineage of Abraham, and the promises God made to him concerning the land and the nation, pointed to the coming of Jesus. God blessed the nation of Israel in order to bless the world through His Son (Genesis 12:1-3). We should be thankful that God worked so patiently to bring Jesus to humanity.

Conclusion

Abraham, “...was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:10). God wants us to imitate his faith (Romans 4:12; 1 Peter 2:11). Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph lived through the unfolding of God's plan. Their faith was instrumental in bringing Jesus to this world. As a result, you and I can live in Christ and participate in these blessings and promises.

“And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect” (Hebrews 11:39-40).

May we never take this gift for granted.

How Christ Relates to the Church: Bridegroom

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The book of Revelation is filled with awesome images of suffering, judgment, and triumph. These images, in turn, frighten and inspire as we read of fierce beasts that seek to destroy the faithful and various depictions of Jesus, always victorious and always with the faithful. One such view of Jesus is in Revelation 19, tucked between the judgment of the Great Harlot who had become “drunk with the blood of the saints” (Revelation 17:6; 18:1-24), and His victory over the armies of the beast (Revelation 19:11-19). In Revelation 19:7, the voice of a great multitude (Revelation 19:6) cries out, “Let us rejoice and be glad and give glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His bride has made herself ready.” If this image were not so jarring in its context, it would be easy to overlook because of the enormity of the scenes surrounding it. A wedding announcement just before the most critical battle in the entire book? Yes, and this simple statement may help us to understand the point of the whole book.

We see Jesus referred to as a bridegroom or a husband in several passages. John the Baptist referred to Jesus as the bridegroom in John 3:29. Jesus spoke of Himself as the bridegroom when He was asked why His disciples did not fast as the disciples of John did (Matthew 9:15; Mark 2:19-20; Luke 5:34-35). Paul uses this concept in Ephesians 5:22-33 as he lays out certain principles essential to the marriage relationship. These passages seem to draw from rich Old Testament imagery in which God is portrayed as the husband of Israel.

Perhaps the most well-known Old Testament instance of this image is Hosea 1-3. God



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commanded the prophet to marry a woman he knew would be unfaithful to him and then to take her back after she had played the harlot. Chapter 2 is an extended complaint against Israel for her unfaithfulness to her husband. In Hosea 3:5, the whole image is made clear as Israel returns and seeks the Lord again. Jeremiah 3, Isaiah 54, and Ezekiel 16 also use this imagery. In Exodus 19:3-9, Jehovah and Israel enter into a covenant, and this passage is often referred to as the wedding between God and Israel.

Interestingly, Exodus 21:10-11 has been seen by Jews for centuries as a description of the responsibilities of the marriage covenant. The passage actually deals with how a female slave is to be treated by her master. The Jews reasoned that if these things were to be provided for a slave, surely they should be provided for a wife, and if the wife was to receive these provisions, her husband should as well. The provisions of the passage are food, clothing, and conjugal rights (or love).

Ezekiel 16 uses this same language to describe God’s care for Israel. In verse 8, God shared His love with Israel and entered into a covenant relationship (marriage) with her. Verses 10-13

describe the rich and luxuriant clothing He provided for her. In verse 13, He gave her fine flour, honey, and oil. The chapter paints the picture of an unloved, abandoned Israel who was cared for by one who became her husband. This husband loved her and provided for her richly, far beyond His obligations.

We should also note that the bride is an adulterer in each of the primary Old Testament uses of this concept. Hosea 1-3 is the heartrending story of a prophet the Lord commands to marry a woman he knows will be unfaithful (Hosea 12). He does, and she is. She goes so far from her husband that she becomes a harlot and ultimately is to be sold as a slave. God then tells Hosea, “Go again, love a woman who is loved by her husband, yet an adulteress” (Hosea 3:1). Hosea’s response is both heartbreakingly and encouraging, “So I bought her for myself for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and a half of barley” (Hosea 3:2). Hosea 3:4-5 make it clear that this was exactly how God would treat Israel. She committed adultery through idolatry, but God would take her back when she repented. Ezekiel 16:60-63 and Isaiah 54:5-8 express the same concept. The generosity of God as a husband to His people is best understood in His willingness to forgive them repeatedly and ultimately provide a way for their full and final redemption.

These ideas are also at the heart of the New Testament usage. When we look at Christ and what He has done for the church, His love, provision, and protection are evident and exceedingly generous. It is this very generosity that leads Paul to compare Jesus’s care for the church to the relationship of a husband and wife in Ephesians 5:22-33. Much attention has been given to verse 22 and the command for the wife to submit to the husband. This admonition has led to many today viewing Paul as a misogynist. While there is no scriptural basis for ignoring the command for women to submit to

their husbands, we would do well to note the rest of the chapter. This submission is not intended to deliver a woman to a life of enslavement to her husband. Instead, Paul commands husbands to be self-sacrificing and loving toward the wife. If anything, the passage describes a mutual submission in which each party in the relationship seeks the good of the other in a loving and mutually respectful manner (Ephesians 5:21).

It is just this sort of self-giving love that Jesus models in His relationship to the church. We should notice Ephesians 5:25, where husbands are commanded to “love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her....” While He is our head, His self-sacrifice on our behalf creates a dynamic in which there can be absolute trust on our part. Jesus is not a brutal dictator but a loving king who partakes in our suffering and provides for our cleansing. Paul emphasizes just this in verses 28-29, where he admonishes husbands to “love their wives as their own bodies...for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body.”

This passage touches on another metaphor for the church – the body of Christ. While this is not our subject in this article, the passage presents us with a powerful view of the relationship between Christ and the church. Jesus is connected to the church as the head is to the body. With this metaphor, Paul offers another reason for the church to submit to Jesus in complete trust. His leadership is always and absolutely for the good of His body.

While Jesus is God, and as God He is transcendent, He chose to come and commune with us. He does not send us to suffer and endure the pressures of temptation alone. Instead, He has endured those same trials to lead us to the safety of His salvation (Hebrews 2:9-18). Like a protective husband

who leads the way through danger, Jesus has paved the path for our redemption through His suffering.

With these things in mind, let us return to that powerful scene in Revelation 19. In the preceding chapters, we read of a great dragon who makes war with those “who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus (Revelation 12:17). While a fearsome beast rises from the sea who would also “make war with the saints” (Revelation 13:7), another beast that arises from the earth to persecute those that refuse to bow to the first beast (Revelation 13:16-17), and a great harlot, who leads men into all sorts of immorality, becomes drunk on the blood of the saints (Revelation 17:1-6). For our purposes, we do not need to identify each of these figures precisely. What we can do is understand the frightening nature of this situation. Each of these figures represents a power greater than our own, and all of them are drawn together to make war against the saints (Revelation 16:13-16). Just when it seems that there is no hope for the faithful, we see Jesus, “the Lamb,” “the Lord of lords and King of kings” (Revelation 17:14). The harlot falls immediately because she was a pretender seeking to rule over the kings of the earth (Revelation 17:18; 18:1-8). The warrior king goes to battle against the beasts and their followers in chapter 19. His victory is absolute (Revelation 19:11-21). In between these two victories, we see the wedding announcement. Why here? There may be better questions we can ask, such as “What will the Lamb’s victory look like?” “Will He

stand victorious but alone?” “How can the saints endure all of the suffering seen in the Revelation?” The answers we begin to see in Revelation 19 should fill us with hope. Jesus will not stand alone in His victory. He will stand with His bride. The saints will overcome their suffering and hardship through the protection and provision of the Lamb, their bridegroom. We often hear that the theme of Revelation is Jesus wins. This is only partly true. John shows us through this grand vision that Jesus wins — and shares the victory with His bride.

The blessings and provisions of a relationship with Jesus are reserved for those in His body, His bride, the church. He has provided us with more than we can “ask or think” (Ephesians 3:20). He asks only that we submit to Him as a loving wife to her faithful husband, that we live a life of fidelity to Him, and that we repent and turn back to Him if ever we stray from our covenant with Him.

The metaphor of Christ as the bridegroom, with the Church as the bride, offers a powerful image of the love and intimacy that God desires with each of us. Through Christ, we are invited into a deep and transformative relationship with God, one that encompasses both our individual salvation and our communal life as members of the Church. As we reflect on these truths, may we be inspired to renew our commitment to following Christ and to sharing his love with others. Let us remember that we are all part of the bride of Christ, called to live in unity and service to one another as we seek to glorify God in all we do.

Instrumental Music in the New Testament

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In a previous article, we looked at instrumental music in the Old Testament. We noted several instances of instrumental music used in worship as well as direct commands for such. Now, we want to focus on the New Testament. Do we see examples of worship with instruments? Are there any commands to play instruments in worship? What was the manner of music used by the early church as directed by the Spirit-inspired apostles?

References to Musical Instruments in the New Testament

In our study here, we will focus on Matthew through Jude. We will look at the book of Revelation in a subsequent article. In the 26 New Testament books apart from the Apocalypse, there are just a handful of references to musical instruments.

- Matthew 6:2 uses the phrase “sound the trumpet” figuratively of those who seek attention.
- Matthew 11:17 speaks of children playing a flute in a game (cf. Luke 7:32).
- Matthew 24:31 speaks of the trumpet of the Lord at judgment (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16).
- 1 Corinthians 13:1 uses the sound of an instrument to illustrate a point about love.
- 1 Corinthians 14:6-7 use the flute, harp, and trumpet to show the need for clarity and understanding in what is said.
- Hebrews 12:19 uses the sound of a trumpet to speak of God’s greatness.

Those are all the verses in the New Testament which mention musical instruments. None of them are in the context of worship. In fact, there



is not one text in the New Testament which associates instrumental music with worship.

It is a Question of Authority

The New Testament says nothing about instrumental music in worship. So what? Why should that matter? On more than one occasion I’ve heard people say, “It doesn’t say we can’t” regarding various church practices and activities, including the use of instrumental music. Does the absence of a negative command (“thou shalt not”) justify us doing whatever we want to do?

Is God’s silence licence to act or limitation from action? This is not a new question. Some in the early post-apostolic church posited that if something is not forbidden then it is allowed. Tertullian (150-222 AD) responded by saying, *“There are some things which are not to be desired merely because they are not forbidden, albeit they are in a certain sense forbidden when other things are preferred to them...”* (Tertullian). The same dispute existed many centuries later among the reformers. Ulrich Zwingli affirmed that any practice *“not enjoined or taught in the New Testament should be unconditionally rejected”* (Newman, 308). His widely known contemporary, Martin Luther, took

an opposing view, claiming, “*What is not against Scripture is for Scripture, and Scripture is for it*” (Newman, 308). Which position is right?

The answer is in Scripture itself. Repeatedly we are told to do according to God’s word, to not add to it, to not go beyond it. Here is a selection of texts:

- “*Therefore, you shall be careful to do as the LORD your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left.*” (Deuteronomy 5:32)
- “*Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.*” (Deuteronomy 12:32)
- “*Every word of God is pure; He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him. Do not add to His words, lest He rebuke you, and you be found a liar.*” (Proverbs 30:5-6)
- “*...that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other.*” (1 Corinthians 4:6)
- “*...whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.*” (Colossians 3:17)
- “*If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God...*” (1 Peter 4:11)

We can learn whether God’s silence is licence or limiting by considering examples in Scripture.

- The Law speaks of the priesthood in Israel coming from the sons of Aaron or the tribe of Levi (Numbers 1:50-53; 3:3; 10:8; etc.). However, 1 Kings 12:31 says Jeroboam “*...made priests from every class of people, who were not of the sons of Levi.*” In 1 Kings 13:33, his doing so is called evil. Why? God didn’t specifically forbid people from other tribes serving as priests. He didn’t need to. By giving the positive command for the Levites to serve as priests all others were

excluded.

- In Numbers 20:8, the Lord told Moses to speak to a rock and it would yield water for Israel to drink. Having gathered the people before the rock, Moses struck it, and it brought forth water. A few verses later, God rebuked him for not believing Him or hallowing Him before the people (verse 12). What was the problem? Water came from the rock, and God didn’t say “Don’t strike the rock.” In fact, on an earlier occasion (Exodus 17:6) the Lord commanded Moses to strike a rock to bring forth water. In Numbers 20, God told Moses to speak to the rock. That ruled out any other actions.
- In Leviticus 10, Nadab and Abihu, sought worshiping God through the burning of incense. They had their censers and incense ready, but the text says they “*...offered profane fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them*” (v 1). The source of the fire used for the burning of incense mattered. I don’t know where they got their fire; I doubt it was from the local trash pit or a pagan temple. The issue here is not that they used a fire which God had specifically forbidden; it is that they did not use the fire which He had specifically commanded. The sons of Aaron acted presumptuously, without authority. God hadn’t commanded them concerning the source of the fire yet. He would reveal in Leviticus 16:1, 12-13 that it was to come from the altar before the LORD. They needed to respect God’s silence and wait for His instruction.
- God’s word specified how the ark of the covenant was to be moved. It was to be carried by the Levites using poles installed on the sides of the ark (Exodus 25:14-15; Deuteronomy 31:9; Joshua 3:6; etc.). However, when David sought to move it from the house of Abinadab to Jerusalem it was put on a cart with tragic results (2 Samuel 6:1-7).

Uzzah, a son of Abinadab, reached out to support the ark when the oxen stumbled, and he perished. Why? God didn't say they couldn't transport it on a cart. He didn't need to. He told them how to move it – on the shoulders of the priests using the poles on the ark.

Silence is not licence. If a commanding officer at the nearby Royal Military College has a squadron of cadets on the parade square and commands them to be at attention, they must remain at attention. Even if he walks away for an hour, two hours, three hours – they must remain at attention. They are not free to act without authority. If a sick neighbour gives us \$20 to get them milk and bread at the store, we have no right to buy ourselves a chocolate bar and Coke. To do so would be to act without authority. Silence is not license.

Singing, Not Instruments

Returning to the discussion of worship in song, the absence of a New Testament text condemning the use of instrumental music does not justify their use. The New Testament authorizes us to sing.

- At midnight in a Philippian jail, Paul and Silas were “*singing hymns to God*” (Acts 16:25).

- In a context addressing corporate worship, Paul wrote, “*I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding.*” (1 Corinthians 14:15).
- In Colossians 3:16, Paul spoke of God's people “*teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.*” There is a parallel text in Ephesians 5:19.
- James 5:13 says, “*Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms.*”

These and other New Testament texts about worship say sing. Nothing is said about the use of musical instruments, but God has revealed what He desires. The consistent testimony of the New Testament is that to praise God in song, we are to sing. If our desire is to obey God's commands rather than our own will, we won't go beyond what He has authorized us to do in worship. Let us sing!

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Becoming Like Jesus: How to Handle Conflicts and Disagreements

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How often have we mishandled a conflict or disagreement with someone one? As currently practiced by our Western culture, anytime there is a conflict or disagreement, it is safe to say that an argument is likely to follow if it has not already taken place. Over the years, I started to see that I did not always have to attend every argument I was invited to. Another thing I began to realize in my life is that not every disagreement has to turn into an argument. Unfortunately, this is typically what takes place in our society.

What is conflict? It is a serious disagreement that can sometimes last a long time. Eventually it leads to a reality of incompatibility. This is a trait that must not be found in Christians. Some may quibble at the idea we must withdraw fellowship from unfaithful Christians. I am not denying that reality. Discipline in the brotherhood has taken a back seat for many and it shows. Discipline does not excuse poor behavior for anyone. Withdrawing fellowship from the unfaithful does not allow us to ignore our duties as Christians.

Those who are followers of Jesus Christ must not allow the world to influence our disposition towards others with whom we may have a conflict or disagreement (Romans 12:1-2). In presenting ourselves as alive to righteousness and holy – we are set apart for worship and active service to God. If we are conformed to this world, we are fashioning ourselves to our former lusts (1 Peter 1:14). We cannot serve two masters (Matthew 6:24). Christians must think and behave differently than the world.

Consistency helps others, for doing something



the same way gives a sense of fairness and accuracy. If we are consistent it means we will be unchanging in nature. Consistency is something that can make or break relationships. We're told Jesus is the same yesterday, and today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). Many have erroneously concluded that Jesus was permissive with poor behavior. In our "religious culture," people portray Jesus in a way that is simply not true. Some tend to think that Jesus was this extremely feeble, soft-spoken, naïve man. Some even see Jesus as a doormat to justify their evil behaviors and responses. Perhaps you've experienced this in your own life. Have you ever taken a stance on something, maybe defended yourself or another innocent individual, and the troublemakers in the situation exclaimed, "That is not very Christ like!" The issue is not that you are being unChrist-like, the problem is they are not getting their own way. Bullies are not concerned with things that are right or true. If they recognize that you are a Christian, they will use every tactic known to man to try to get their way. This is called manipulation. Jesus did not have to manipulate anything to His favor. He simply did what was right for the current

need of the moment, every single time. The same people who argue that you are not being “Christ like” when you defend truth or what is right, forgot that Jesus got a whip, turned over tables, poured out the coins of money changers, and drove them all out of the temple (John 2:13-16). Those who use manipulation only operate within the perimeters of convenience. This must not be true for Christians.

There are principles laid out in God’s word to prepare us to handle these difficult situations. Conflicts and disagreements can become intense in the blink of an eye. Sometimes we may disagree about something that has nothing to do with us personally, but still get offended because the other party to the discussion is not accepting our view. How often do we lose control of ourselves simply because we failed to keep our composure? I am reminded of the principle we have in Proverbs 15:1, telling us we need to keep our emotions in check. A soft answer turns away wrath, but harsh words stir up anger. The Apostle Paul addresses the same as he describes to us the fruits of the Spirit. Love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Further in the text, he said those who are in Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. These things (passions and desires) include behaviors and attitudes which are not to be named among us. (Galatians 5:24) Was there ever a time when Jesus became angry? Sure (John 2:13-16). Was there ever a time that Jesus became emotional? Absolutely (John 11:33,35). It was a matter of consistency with the Lord. Jesus never became unhinged or behaved irrationally. In Ephesians 4:31-32, Paul cautions us about more behaviors and attitudes: Bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, evil speaking, malice. Not once did Jesus ever exhibit these kinds of behaviors. What is our excuse? We are to be kind to one another, compassionate, and to forgive each other.

There are many instances when Jesus addressed conflicts raised by the Jews, religious leaders, and even His own disciples. There’s not enough space to go through every single one of them, but let us just consider a few.

John 5:1-18 A sign of healing occurs for a man who had been an invalid for 38 years. A conflict arose in which the Jews approached this healed man for carrying his mat on the Sabbath. They asked, “Who is this man who said to you, ‘Take up your bed and walk?’” Instead of rejoicing, they are under a false persuasion that this man has broken God’s law. They failed to acknowledge that the great healer (Jesus) had come. In their frustration, there is no doubt they are now becoming anxious. We know that we are to be anxious for nothing (Philippians 4:6). But look at their response to Jesus after finding out it was Him who healed this man. The Jews desired to kill Jesus (John 5:16,18). He doesn’t take their bait and argue with them about how healing is not a work or a violation of the Sabbath. Jesus goes the other direction and proves how He is accomplishing work and why it is acceptable, even on the Sabbath. These Jews knew exactly what He was saying. They knew that only God could work on the Sabbath. There is an old phrase that I grew up hearing all the time, “Can’t see the forest for the trees”. This is exactly what happened to these Jews. Sometimes we get ourselves too involved or too wrapped up in the details of a problem to look at a situation clearly. The Jews had the Messiah, the Son of God standing in front of them, and they couldn’t see it. They were too wrapped up in their traditions. In conflicts, sometimes it is not about answering the specific questions asked. To provide solutions, sometimes you have to go to the root of the problem. If you get a headache every single day, that is a sign that you may have a health problem. If all you do is treat the symptoms and do not try to get to the source, you will always have those headaches. Jesus is getting at the root of the problem.

Matthew 16:21-28: Jesus knew His purpose. Sadly, people today know about the death of Jesus and will go to church a few times a year to “commemorate” it. In doing so, they fail to appreciate what the death and resurrection of Jesus is supposed to mean in their lives. Even the disciples of Jesus had to learn about this. Jesus’ words to Peter may be one of the strongest rebukes in all of scripture: “Get behind me, Satan! You are an offense to Me”. Peter is fully aware that Jesus is the Christ, that He came down from Heaven, sent by God, in order to save the world. Peter was told that Jesus must go to Jerusalem and die. He then takes Jesus aside to tell Him that this could never happen to Him. Why would Peter suggest such a thing? He knows who Jesus is. Jesus had walked on water, cast out demons, fed thousands of people, healed people, and raised the dead. Surely Jesus could keep Himself from dying at the hands of these Jews?! The only way He could die at their hands is if He allowed them to do it. Jesus must lay down His Own life for God’s will. There is no doubt this was a temptation for Jesus to avoid the cross. Jesus calls Peter a stumbling block, a cause for sin.

Jesus had just said that He must go to Jerusalem but now this thought creeps in, He has the choice whether or not to go to Jerusalem. Jesus is being tempted to avoid the cross. This is not the first time that this has occurred (Matthew 4). What does Jesus do for Peter? He tells Peter that he is not thinking about the will of God. Jesus overcomes this temptation by constantly desiring to give glory to God and always thinking about the purposes of God. The mind of Jesus is set on the ways of God but at this point, Peter is not focused on God’s way. The apostle Paul reminds us to set our mind on things above (Colossians 3:1-3). Jesus consistently taught others to do the same.

I pray that this study will help in our journey of becoming like Jesus. One of the major things we see from Jesus in His interactions with others is the fact that He was consistent. Jesus was consistent with His disciples and towards the religious leaders of the day. There is no doubt in my mind that this plays a major role for us in our relationships with others. Are we willing to teach others and become active listeners to strengthen our relationships with one another?

The Great Commission

WAYNE GOFF | KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI

“And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen.” (Matthew 28:18-20)

Contextually speaking, the great commission of Matthew 28 was given to the eleven apostles (v. 16) shortly before Jesus ascended into heaven. It was not given to every Christian, but every Christian should feel the obligation to share the gospel with friends, family, acquaintances, and even foes, if they will listen. We say this because after the apostles began preaching the great commission in Acts 2, those three thousand plus who were converted *“continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine”* (Acts 2:42). Think about their situation for a minute. They were the first *“church of Christ”* on earth. None of them had ever been a member of a local congregation. None of them knew about the organization of the church, or its work, or its worship, or its importance. But the apostles taught them all of these things and much more. By the time we come to a period of severe persecution in Jerusalem, the well-taught disciples scattered and *“went everywhere preaching the word”* (Acts 8:4). Might we conclude that this was part of their teaching? Paul told young Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2, *“And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.”*



Other than the apostles’ own work of evangelism, let me suggest to you that this is **the most effective program for evangelism**. If every converted brother and sister would simply share the “Good News” with their family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and acquaintances, then sufficient evangelism would take place. We don’t know how many people were converted by those in Acts 8, but we do know that they did their job and left the results up to God, and so should we today! As Paul stated in 1 Corinthians 3:6-7, *“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is*

anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.” Sometimes we forget this truth and put too much emphasis on the “church program,” or the “preacher’s charisma,” or the method by which the gospel is spread. In my lifetime, I have spoken on radio, television, and YouTube, and I have written numerous articles for local newspapers, and I have written many articles for the brotherhood papers. Perhaps all of these did some good, only God knows. But personally, I have seen more people converted by the loving interest of other Christians who either taught them or at least introduced them to the gospel themselves. Dear reader, ask yourself if you look for opportunities to share the gospel with others. We all should be doing this, and though the present days may be difficult, there are still people starving for the powerful gospel to save their souls! We just need to find them, one person at a time.

Gospel preachers looking for a new congregation with which to work are often asked: “How many people have you baptized recently?” This is the wrong question. The correct question is: “How many people have you tried to reach with the gospel?” A good preacher should be able to reach more than he will ever convert or baptize. Let us keep in mind the Scripture of 1 Corinthians 3 when discussing the local work, and realize that the power is in God’s Word, not in the man who is appointed to present it. Preachers are nothing more than “messenger boys.” God is the Author of the message, and a faithful “messenger” will speak the truth in love, without fear or favor of man, and will add nothing to it, nor take anything from it (see Revelation 22:18-19). If we lose faith in the power of God’s Word (Romans 1:16), then we will lose confidence in sharing it with others. But Jesus said His Word would stand forever (Matthew 24:35). God’s Word will not return to Him void, but it will accomplish His intended purpose (Isaiah 55:11). It is the *dynamite* that will explode an eternal soul’s being unto

salvation or condemnation. The hearer is the one who decides on that result. The same sun that melts the butter hardens the clay. The “sun” of God’s Word reaches the souls of men for their salvation or their loss.

If we are failing to spread the Gospel as well as we should, then I feel the real problem is our own lack of **conviction**. How deeply do you and I believe in God’s Word? How sincerely do we view our “neighbors” as eternally-lost souls who need saving? How urgently do we look up and see “*fields white unto harvest*” (John 4:35)? I must say, to my own shame, that I have missed many opportunities to share the gospel with others because I was not thinking about their lost condition as clearly as I should have. Often, I have looked back on brief encounters and “saw” an opportunity after the fact that I should have seen at the time. So let us put on the “evangelistic mentality” that looks for prospects on a daily basis. Perhaps we can carry a small business card with us pointing others to the truth, or to our own e-mail or text message. It takes little courage to share that card with others as we go about our daily activities, and only God knows how much good your interest might do.

If you need a little incentive, then let me recommend the book, *Muscle & a Shovel*, by Michael Shank. This book shows how one Christian at work, slowly but surely converted Mr. Shank, by teaching him the truth, and helping him to work his way out of denominational error. So many people are “turned off” by denominational divisions, hierarchies, and so-called “pastors” who do not humbly speak the truth in love. But you and I can begin by speaking to one or more people who might show an interest. One suggestion from that book said to put 2 Thessalonians 1:8 on a card or a piece of paper with the question: “Have you obeyed the gospel?” The Scripture states that Jesus will one day return “*in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel* of our Lord

Jesus Christ." So many people have been taught that the "gospel" is nothing more than the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. So how does one "obey" that? The answer to this question certainly opens the door for those who have been misled by false teaching.

Finally, a good, careful study of the Lord's "Parable of the Sower" (Matthew 13; Mark 4; Luke 8) will convince you and me of the power of God's Word to convert, while helping us to see that our efforts will be rejected by those whose hearts are not the proper "soil."

While this truth is sad, it is also realistic. So let us go forth and sow the Seed, believing in what we are doing, and humbly encouraging those who are the "good soil" to hear, believe, repent, confess, and be baptized to their own eternal salvation. We are to spread the "seed," not count the "results." As the apostle Paul said, *"But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them,"* (2 Corinthians 4:3-4).

What is “the Mystery” in the New Testament?

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The most likely association made when “mystery” is mentioned is to the mystery literary genre. We think of authors like Arthur Conan-Doyle, Agatha Christie, and G. K. Chesterton, and their famous fictional sleuths, Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, and Father Brown. Their characters are artfully crafted. Plots are intricately woven. Facts are strategically and stingily meted to keep the reader guessing “who done it” until the great reveal at the climax of the work. Although popular and entertaining, this is not Biblical mystery.

“Mystery” may also suggest mysticism. Practitioners of Mysticism seek to become one with God, often through some sort of altered consciousness that may be drug induced. Ironically, such religions maintain that true knowledge is unattainable, or nearly so. Mystics teach that it is important to grasp for and grapple with lofty ideals. Disciples are locked in a closed loop of ever-reaching for an ever-elusive goal. This is not biblical mystery, either.

Biblical mystery is nowhere near as mysterious as either of the above. Ironically, Biblical mystery can be understood. It does not leave the reader frustrated by a closed loop of seeking that never satisfies. As with all that our Heavenly Father does, Biblical mystery is good, and right, and just.

The word “mystery” is found twenty-four times in twenty-four verses in the English Standard Version New Testament. Rather than consider each occurrence, let us focus on one pericope in which the Apostle Paul describes “the mystery” in detail.



Ephesians 3:1–12 (ESV)

1 For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—² assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you,³ how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. ⁴ When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ,⁵ which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. ⁶ This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. ⁷ Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God’s grace, which was given me by the working of his power. ⁸ To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things,¹⁰ so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

¹¹ This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹² in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.

When the Bible refers to “mystery” it refers to a fact or idea that was known by God but covered or hidden from humans. It is something God knows but is not telling, yet. Paul says that the mystery under consideration here in Ephesians “was not made known to the sons of men in other generations” (verse 5). In verse 9 Paul describes it as, “*the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God.*” In fact, God’s plan to save the world through Jesus is so old that Paul calls it God’s “*eternal purpose*” (verse 11). For hundreds or thousands of years God knew what He would eventually do, but He kept his plan hidden or covered (Romans 16:25). Being hidden or covered is what made it a mystery.

When God reveals a mystery, He uncovers something He previously covered. He reveals something He had concealed. The act of revealing is called revelation. Paul said that the mystery under consideration “*was made known to [him] by revelation*” (verse 3). Revelation sounds mysterious, but it simply means that God told Paul about His plan.

What was “the mystery” under consideration? Paul calls it “*the mystery of Christ*” (verse 4). Paul not only names the mystery but explains it in verse 6. “*This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*” Paul equates the mystery with the gospel (verse 7).

In the Law of Moses God created a separation, a wall, between Jew and gentile. Peter acknowledged this wall when he arrived in

Cornelius’ house. “*And he said to them, ‘You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation...’*” (Acts 10:28, ESV). Peter goes on to share that the wall was, at that moment, being torn down, “*...but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean.*” This verse relates the exact moment when the mystery Paul refers to in Ephesians 3 was revealed to Peter and Cornelius.

In Acts 11, the Jews’ reaction to Peter’s preaching to Cornelius’ house was surprise and initial refusal to accept that Gentiles could be saved. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, ³ “*You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them*” (Acts 11:2–3, ESV). Even though God had prophesied His plan to save the Gentiles along with the Jews (Isaiah 56:8, John 10:16), the last thing the Jews expected was for the Messiah to unite Gentiles with Jews in one body. It seems they thought that Jews would be saved one way, and Gentiles another way. It amazed them then, and it should amaze us still, that God saved Jew and Gentile alike in one body, that of His Son, Jesus the Christ. This is the gospel; the good news that Paul calls “*unsearchable riches*” (verse 8).

So “the mystery” in the New Testament is that God the Father purposed to save Jew and Gentile alike in one body, the body of His Son, our Savior, Jesus the Christ. God intends that this amazing plan, this now revealed former mystery, the gospel of Christ, should be made known to everyone (verse 10). And the church is God’s chosen agent to spread this good news (verse 10).

JANUARY 2024 PREVIEW

EXPOSITORY ARTICLE

Tyler Sams will continue our series looking at the hall of Faith in Hebrews 11, focused on Moses and his parents (Hebrews 11:23-28).

CHURCH ARTICLE

Don McClain brings the next article in our series on how Christ relates to the church, looking at Jesus as the Chief Shepherd of His people.

WORSHIP ARTICLE

William Stewart continues the series focused on instrumental music; this time looking into the book of Revelation.

APPLICATION ARTICLE

Bruce Reeves will pen our next article in the “Becoming Like Jesus,” emphasizing the need for us to be prayerful, using our Lord as the perfect example.

EVANGELISM ARTICLE

Jim Mickells will encourage us to faithful work in the furtherance of the gospel.

BEYOND THE BASICS ARTICLE

Scott Long will pen an article focused on various events and circumstances surrounding Calvary.



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