

THE AUSTRALIAN ANABAPTIST

God's solid foundation stands firm. 2 Timothy 2-19

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Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel,
but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in
the house.

Matthew 5:15

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For A Conservative Anabaptist Perspective

From The Editor's Desk

A reminder to our readers: The Bible Translations used in the Australian Anabaptist are those used by the originators of various articles and may vary from speaker to speaker.

A THOUGHT FOR THE NEW YEAR

I do not know, I cannot see
What God's kind hand prepares for me,
Nor can my glance pierce through the haze
Which covers all my future ways;
But yet I know that o'er it all
Rules HE who notes the sparrow's fall.

I know the Hand that hath me fed
And through the year my feet hath led;
I know the everlasting arm
That hath upheld and kept from harm.
I trust Him as my God and Guide
And know that HE will still provide.

So at the opening of the year,
I banish care and doubt and fear,
And clasping His kind hand will go forth
To walk with God from day to day,
Trusting in Him who hath me fed,
Walking with Him who hath me led.

Farewell, Old Year, with goodness crowned
A hand divine hath set thy bound.
Welcome the New Year, which shall bring
Fresh blessings from my God and King
The Old we leave without a tear,
The New we hail without a fear.

Anonymous



From the Pulpit

*Number 11 of 12 expository messages from:
The Book of Ecclesiastes by:
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Generous Faith in a Sovereign God

It is good to be in the house of the Lord.
Turn with me if you would to Ecclesiastes chapter 11.

We are nearing the end of our study in the book of Ecclesiastes, as we come to the end of this book we find that things get clearer and the focus is better in terms of where the author, the preacher in the book of Ecclesiastes is going with all of this.

We have noted throughout the book that one of the main themes of this book is that of the Sovereignty of God, that God is in control.

So often in our life, even in our life under the sun, we need to be reminded that there is someone outside of our little world, there is someone above the sun, we tend to get wrapped up in us and our stuff and we forget God. This is the God who started all of this in the first place, this is the God who is even now in control and a God who will one day completely judge all that we have done.

This is what we mean by a Sovereign God, we have been talking about the God who is Creator, a God who is ruler, a God who provides and a God who judges.

Now there is much we cannot understand about how God works, there is much of this that is simply beyond our comprehension and our text today in verse 5 will indicate this to us and so what do we do with that? What do we do with that dilemma of not knowing completely, of not understanding completely?

Well this calls us to faith, now faith as it is described in the book of Hebrews is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction or the evidence of things not seen, but this faith is totally meaningless if God is not Sovereign.

You see our faith is not dependent on how well we can blindly trust the unknown, that is not faith, that's insanity, but our faith is dependent on the reality that God is trustworthy that He is faithful, that He is good, that He is Sovereign.

Now sometimes we are tempted to think that the quantity or the quality of our faith is what matters the most, if only I could have enough faith, if only I can believe well enough, then everything will be okay. No, no, that's not what matters the most, what matters most is the object of our faith.

Who are you trusting in? Is your god the God of the Bible or is your god one that you have fashioned for yourself? A god that is more in tune with your desires and your imagination?

The antidote to lack of faith, the biblical term for lack of faith is unbelief, the antidote for unbelief is not to try harder, the antidote for unbelief is not to suspend rational thought, the antidote to unbelief is to know God, to know him as He is revealed to us in his word. That is the antidote to unbelief.

Now some people say that this doctrine of the Sovereignty of God is nice and it is theoretical and it is important to theologians and people who have enquiring minds but it doesn't really make much difference in how we live our lives, in fact these are some of the same people that claim God isn't really Sovereign after all that He waits for us to make our decisions and then He responds accordingly.

And this believe is called open theism, that's the terminology that is used to describe it, and what these people have done they have attempted to re-fashion a god in our image, to refashion a god that is like us and as such they undermine the faith of many and contrary to what they say this doctrine of the Sovereignty of God does affect the way we live, it powerfully affects the way we live and this text today in Ecclesiastes chapter 11 will demonstrate this in 3 particular ways.

In verses 1 through 4 we will see that a generous faith in a Sovereign God will enable us to give generously.

In verses 5 through 6 we will see that a generous faith in a Sovereign God will enable us to work diligently.

And in verses 7 through 10 and even into chapter 12 we will see that a generous faith in a Sovereign God will enable us to live for eternity.

So let's read the text, Ecclesiastes chapter 11.

Ecclesiastes 11:1-10 Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days. ² Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth. ³ If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves on the earth, and if a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie. ⁴ He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap. ⁵ As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything. ⁶ In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good. ⁷ Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun. ⁸ So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity. ⁹ Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment. ¹⁰ Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity.

Let's pray.

Our Father we come before you and your word today with humility of heart realising that we are but dust in the mighty scales and balance of your creation yet you have seen fit to reveal yourself to us in special ways, you have sent your Son Jesus to this earth to save us from our sins and you have promised us that if we trust in him life eternal is ours. And so we want to hear from you Lord, we want to hear who you are, we want to hear what you expect of us, we want to learn to trust you more completely.

We pray in Jesus name, Amen.

In chapter 10 of Ecclesiastes we looked at the reality that life is risky, that wise living comes with the risks and that we need to carefully prepared, we need to plan, we need to deal with these risks not to eliminate them but to recognise them and plan accordingly.

And now in Chapter 11 we see that risk and reward take on a bigger dimension when God is in the picture, you see this is not all up to us so the instructions are for us, yes, to take some risks not in a careless way, not in a reckless way but in a confident way, not confident because we have it all together, not confident because we understand how it's all going to work but confidence because we trust in God, the God who is ultimately in control, the God who will reward as He sees fit.

And so verse 1 here counsels us, instructs us to cast our bread upon the waters, to trust God that the rewards will come in good time.

Now some important things to note here, there is a disagreement among commentators and translators as to exactly how these verses should be applied and some say that these verses are to be applied to trade or business, so diversify your business interests, spread your risk out. Perhaps applications can be made in that way but today I want to apply this text in the way that the older Hebrew interpretation applied it and that was in the giving of alms in the sharing with others and giving generously to help others.

The principles here are the same, whichever way we want to apply it, the principles are the same and so we can apply this in a couple of different ways but today I want us to focus primarily on the application that deals with giving and being generous.

This bread that it is talking about, cast your bread upon the waters, bread refers to that which gives sustenance that which gives life it is used this way throughout the Scriptures, food.

Now if you look back in chapter 10 we see in one of the closing verses there it says in verse 19 that bread is made for laughter and wine gladdens life and money answers everything. Okay.

So money, especially in our culture and economy, money is that which is needed to buy bread, cake, money is that which provides for us so we are to cast or we are to give that which is necessary to life and in this context I believe we could say that that could be food, actual food, that we might give to someone, but we might also give them other necessities of life we might even give them money as part of this casting our bread upon the waters. In any case we see here that we are to give, we are to give what is ours to give it says cast your bread, you are not to cast someone else's bread on the water, you are not to give generously what belongs to someone else,

no, no, what is yours to give, it means we don't give other people's money, we don't rob from Peter to give to Paul, we only give that which rightfully belongs to us and we are to give generously and broadly, not stingily.

Now the reason we can do this is not because we understand exactly where this is going to go or how it is going to be used or what the reward will be for us, no we don't know that, but the reason that we can give generously is because we know God, we know that God knows, we know that God provides, we know that He will reward as He sees fit.

Jesus says in Matthew 6 thus when you give to the needy sound no trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets that they may be praised by others. Truly I say to you they have received their reward. They got what they were after, they wanted attention, they wanted the notice of men they've got it! But you, when you give to the needy do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that your giving may be in secret and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

So the reason given to cast our bread upon the waters is not because we know that this will work, that this will have the desired effect in terms of what we want, but we do it because we know that God is the giver of good things and God will prosper and God will reward.

Now sometimes we are overly concerned about where our money is going or what it will accomplish, one of the reasons I think we are tempted in this way is because we don't trust God, we don't believe that He is really Sovereign and we need this reminder from Isaiah 49 that says, but I said I have laboured in vain, this is what we tend to say, I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity yet surely my right is with the Lord and my recompense with my God.

In verse 2 (Ecclesiastes 11) we are reminded that we don't know what all is going to happen, we don't know what all trouble will come, there is no way for us to prepare for all potential disasters and the reference to 7 or 8 portions here can again be applied to diversifying our business interests but I want to apply it today to our giving.

The terminology of 7 or 8 is a literary device used in Scripture to indicate not a specific number but to indicate an unlimited amount or a liberal gen-

erosity, we find similar language in Job 5:19 where God promises that He will deliver you from six troubles, in seven no evil shall touch you.

So there are these two numbers given but they are really representing something that extends beyond, indefinitely, so in other words we should not be so concerned with measuring up to a particular amount or quantity or number or standard rather we should give generously. Jesus says to the one who begs from you do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. We are to have an open hand with the stuff that God has given us.

And the reason is that we don't know what kind of evil lurks around the corner, we don't know what kind of disaster may happen on the earth and yet God does know all these things and He knows what we have need of, and therefore do not be anxious saying what shall we eat what shall we drink or what shall we wear, for the Gentiles seek after all these things and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all but seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all of these things will be added to you.

In fact Jesus said that we should use the resources at our disposal in this life under the sun we should use these resources to share with others so that when trouble comes they will be in a position to help us. Jesus says in Luke 16:9, I tell you make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous or earthly wealth so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

The day maybe near when you will need the help of those whom you have been bound to by your kindness and generosity.

The very argument that covetous men use against generosity namely that bad times might come, things might get bad so I had better not give because I want to make sure I have enough for myself, that very same argument that covetous people use against generosity the wise man uses for it, the difference is that the wise man trusts God, the wise man knows that God knows what He is doing and God will provide. The foolish man thinks that it is all up to him and his shrewd and skilful thinking and planning and preparation and the foolish man hoards to himself while the wise man gives to others.

The difference between the foolish man and the wise man is a generous faith in a Sovereign God.

Which kind of person would you rather be? Which kind of person would you rather be around?

Verses 3 and 4 remind us of another principle of God's Sovereignty which is that God has set things in motion as a part of creation as a part of the order of the world, He has made things work in a certain way, this is a part of his providence for us, this is a part of his care for us.

There is a law of cause and effect, there is a law of sowing and reaping, this applies our giving as well as to our business endeavours to other aspects of life.

The natural evidence given here in verse 3 is that of clouds full of rain.

What happens when you see a cloud that is dark and heavy and full of rain, what's going to happen?

It is going to unload that rain; eventually it will dump that moisture. It's the way it works in the world. And the rain falls on everything in its path and the Bible talks about this as a part of the providence of God, this represents God's good providence even to the unjust, even to the undeserving, He sends rain on the just and the unjust, this is the way it works in his world, the clouds get full and they unleash the rain but they don't just unleash it on those who deserve it but they unleash it broadly, generously.

A 2nd application here is found in this tree falling.

Now this principle deals with the permanence of what happens, once the tree has fallen down it will never stand back up, once the tree has fallen down in one direction it cannot stand up and fall in another direction, once it is down it is down and that's where it's going to stay.

Adam Clarke has an interesting description of this and I cannot improve upon it so I will quote him;

“Death is at no great distance; thou hast but a short time to do well. Acquire a heavenly disposition while here; for there will be no change after this life. If thou die in the love of God, and in the love of man, in that state wilt thou are found in the Day of Judgment. If a tree about to fall leans to the north, to the north it will fall; if to the south, it will fall to that quarter.

In whatever disposition or state of soul thou diest, in that thou wilt be found in the eternal world. Death refines nothing, purifies nothing, kills no sin, helps to no glory. Let thy continual bent and inclination be to God, to holiness, to charity, to mercy, and to heaven: then, fall when thou mayest, thou wilt fall well.”

How are you going to fall? When your tree falls where is it going to lie? Well that is predicated upon how you live your life, whether you seek God in this life or you reject him.

Now this reality of the Sovereignty of God and the finality of life, this law of sowing and reaping, and this law of permanence, should not cause us to freeze up in fear, no, the opposite in fact should occur.

Now if we are focused on something other than God we will freeze up, we will fear, we will be anxious. It says here if we look at the wind and we try to wait until we have just the right moment till the conditions are just perfect, if we wait for that we will never get it done, it will never be just right.

If you think well I'll wait to give until I make sure I have everything under control, I'll wait to give till I am financially secure, I'll wait to give till I have some money saved away in the bank to take care of the what ifs, the problems, the potential disasters, if you wait till then to give you will never give. If you wait till you are financially secure before you bless others you will not get it done, if you wait until the horizon is all clear and there is no trouble in sight then you will never find a good opportunity to sow and neither will you reap.

If you wait until the weather is just perfect your crop will never be harvested it will spoil before you get it.

Now in contrast the one who looks to God, the one whose focus is on God will sow and reap in faith. Sometimes God asks us to give, sometimes He asks us to take risks even when the wind appears to be blowing in the wrong direction. Who are you going to trust? Who do you think knows best? You or God?

Sometimes we doubt that God knows what He's doing we want to make sure that the money we are giving is going to a deserving individual or place or institution when in fact God might want to use it to bless an unde-

servicing individual, He sends the rain on the just and the unjust, maybe He wants to use you to rain on the unjust, who are you to stand in judgement on God?

A generous faith in a Sovereign God empowers us to give generously without partiality.

And this brings us to the middle section of this passage a generous faith in a Sovereign God empowers us enables us to work diligently.

You see the reality is that we don't understand the ways of God, we do not understand and so we should not stand in judgement on what God is doing and here is a for instance that comes from verse 5, how many of you understand how it is that the spirit of a person is joined to the mass of cells that is developing in a woman's womb, anybody understand that how that happens, what that process is?

I didn't think so and modern science for all its glory and goodness doesn't understand either. But God knows! Psalm 139, Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written every one of them, the days that were formed for me when as yet there were none of them.

That friends is the Sovereignty of God, Creator, Sustainer, Provider, Ruler, Judge.

The same kind of work, the same kind of spiritual work is what happens in our conversion and again it is not explainable in scientific terms it must be accepted and known by faith by a generous faith in a Sovereign God. Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3 that the wind blows where it wishes and you hear it sound, you know it's there, you see it working but you do not know where it comes from and where it goes, and so it is with everyone that is born of the Spirit.

We do not understand the ways of God.

There are some people who believe that the Sovereignty of God is nothing more than fatalism and that it makes null and void any and all human activity. Nothing could be further from the truth.

That view of the Sovereignty of God is far too small, far too narrow, our God is bigger than all of that, in fact our God works through our activity to

accomplish his work in the world, our God works through our decisions and shares our actions and through our choices through our thoughts and our minds just as God works through the very physical and biological functions of childbearing to bring a new soul into the world so He works through our decisions and our efforts and our thinking to bring new spiritual life into being.

This is a God who is truly Sovereign!

And this should give us great confidence, great confidence to go out and sow diligently and broadly, we do not need to be afraid that our efforts will be in vain, we can sow the seed beginning in the morning and sow it all day and still be sowing at night withholding not our hand. The fact of the matter is that we do not know what the results will be and that's okay, we sow here and we sow there and we don't know whether that is going to grow and prosper or not but we are not responsible for that, that's God's work, we are responsible to sow diligently and we can do it with confidence trusting in faith knowing that God will work that He will accomplish the purposes that He has in mind that as his word goes forth He will cause it to accomplish that which He has chosen.

We can sow the seed diligently, we can sow it liberally even when it looks like things are against us because we know that God is God and He is trustworthy even in the midst of suffering and pain we still trust him.

Psalm 126, Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy, he who goes out with weeping bearing the seed for sowing shall come home with shouts of joy bringing his sheaves with him.

And the reason for this confidence is that we know, we know both who supplies the seed and the rain to water it; we know that God works all things together for good to those who love him. And we trust him to do his work to increase the harvest of our righteousness and we confidently and diligently do what He has asked us to do with joy.

How can we have this confidence? How can we give in this way, what should motivate us to give? What should motivate us to spend and be spent for the glory of God?

Well the message of the Gospel compels us here, our trust in God frees us to spend our life in generous ways because we know He who did not spare

his own Son but gave him up for us all how will He not also with him graciously give us all things.

If God was gracious and good enough to send his beloved Son, his most precious Son, into this world to die on our behalf for our sins, if God did that then what makes you think that He doesn't care about the little things in your life? Don't you think He can take care of everything else too?

Why are you so stingy? Is it because you don't really know this God, you don't really trust him? Maybe you have been trusting in another god; maybe you have been trusting in yourself.

A generous faith in a Sovereign God who equips us and motivates us to work diligently trusting God with the results and it also equips us to live in light of eternity.

Verses 7 through 10 and the first part of chapter 12 remind us that we will need to face this Sovereign God one day, in the Day of Judgement all that we have done will be judged, we are going to be held to account for what we have done in this life and because our God is Sovereign He knows everything.

Now again this should not cause us to freeze up in fear, it should not cause us to be anxious and it really shouldn't cause us to be reckless, it should cause us to trust in God for all the days of our life. And the picture given in verses 7 to 10 is that of light and darkness.

We currently live in the light of life under the sun, we have awareness of our surroundings, we have awareness of what it is that is going on in our world but there is coming a day, and the day is not too distant, there is coming a day that we do not know that we cannot see, that is referred to in the scriptures as the day of darkness. There is coming a day when our useful life here on earth is going to decline and after that is the great unknown, the great darkness, we would do well to live our lives in this light of life that we have now with the realisation that the dark days, the unknown days, are many more than the days we have here.

This could be very depressing much as it was to Job when he said why did you bring me out from the womb, why was I born? Would that I had died before any eye had seen me and were as though I had not been carried from the womb to the grave. Are not my days few?

Yes they are Job.

Then he says, cease and leave me alone that I might find a little cheer before I go, I shall not return to the land of darkness and deep shadow, the land of gloom like thick darkness, like deep shadows without any order where light is a thick darkness.

There is a man who is depressed, a man who wishes that he had not been born, he does not value the light of life.

But the preacher in Ecclesiastes points us to a different way, a way of living by a generous faith and a Sovereign God, a way of seeing the momentary days that we have here on earth as a gift to be enjoyed, a gift to give to others and he says rejoice in your youth, live it up, live life to the fullest, let your heart cheer you, do what you enjoy but do this in the context of the certain judgement of God knowing that you will be held to account for this. So seek God first and his ways and then you can do exactly what your heart desires.

If you desire to do God's work, if you desire what God desires then you can do whatever your heart desires and it will be joy to you.

Don't be anxious, put away evil and pain from your body, for this brief life will soon be over and then we commend our spirit into the hands of the Sovereign God who made us who has provided for us and who will judge us.

Ah, but there is a bit of a problem! He is going to judge us and none of us will measure up to God's standard, none of us are perfect just as our Heavenly Father is perfect.

So how in the world are we to live joyful lives in the light of eternity, in the light that judgement, in the light of that impossibility?

Remember our God is bigger than we think, our God thought about this a long time before we were born, He thought about this even before He created this world and He has a solution, He has provided a way for the light of eternity to enter our experience, to dwell within us through his Son Jesus Christ.

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God, He was in the beginning with God, all things were made through him and without him was not anything made that was made, in him was life and the life was the Light of men. The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

The light that we really need is not this light, life under the sun, the light that we really need is the Light of Jesus Christ.

He is the answer to our dilemma; He is the way that we can live well in the light of eternity, a light of the generous faith in a Sovereign God who provides for our redemption.

Galatians 2, Through the law I died to the law so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

That is the way we live in the light of eternity!

So how about you, are you giving generously of that which God has given to you, your time, your money, your talents? Or are you stingy and selfish? Maybe you are anxious, maybe you are worried or are you a bit reckless?

Or what are you living for, who are you living for?

That might give you a little clue into why you are anxious or worried or why are you living recklessly with little care for eternity.

What you need is a healthy dose of a Sovereign God, the God who made you, the God who provides and cares for you both spiritually and physically and the God who will judge you when this life is over.

You know the happiest most joyful people that I know are the ones who really do believe and trust in a Sovereign God.

Now their lives are not without pain or without sorrow, in fact it is often through pain through sorrow and through suffering that we really come to know God and his providence.

The most generous people that I know are the ones who confidently give who confidently act and trust in a Sovereign God.

The most holy people that I know have a deep seated trust in a God who has acted on their behalf through the personal work of Jesus Christ so that they can live a life, a generous life, a life of faith in a Sovereign God.

Now make no mistake about it there will be no excuses when you stand before the judgement seat of Christ, no excuses.

Yeah I know I didn't share generously with others, I was too concerned with making sure the right people got it at the right time and looking good while I did it.

Yeah I didn't sow the seed because I was waiting for just the right circumstances.

Yeah I lived the years of my youth in reckless rebellion because I wanted to enjoy myself regardless of the consequences.

And the God of all the universe the Sovereign ruler of every speck of dirt will say to you, I made you, I gave you everything that you had, gave you everything you had, I designed every circumstance and every gift and every trial so that you would blossom and flourish and live and serve. I gave you all the pleasures and pains of your life for your ultimate good, I even sent my Son Jesus to take away your sins and provide eternal life with me in my heaven for ever and you did what?

Then He will say to those on his left: Depart from me you cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.

Then they also will answer and say Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger would naked or sick or in prison and did not minister to you?

Then He will answer them saying, Truly I say to you as you did not do it to one of the least of these you did not do it to me. And these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life. Matthew 25:41-46

Let's pray.

Eternal Sovereign God, we tremble at your greatness, we tremble at your demands and yet we rest in faith, in confidence that you are a good God, a God who has provided for us, a God who has created us and made us, a God who has given us all things richly to enjoy, a God who has given us his most precious Son so that we can live with you for ever.

O God may you enlarge our hearts, enlarge our understanding of who you are and how you act in our world and in our hearts, motivate us to be generous, to be liberal with our stuff, to be diligent in our work and to live this short life here on earth carefully so that we can benefit and enjoy you for ever.

We pray in Jesus name, Amen.

THESE LAST DAYS—JESUS IS COMING

Jesus Christ will return. That is one of the great issues of the gospel. Jesus Himself, and the apostles, gave much testimony to this truth. Shortly before the crucifixion, Jesus said to His disciples, "And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" Matthew 24:30, and "I will come again, and receive you unto myself" John 14:3. In the dark hours of Jesus' trial, when assailed by the angry rejection and fierce hatred of the Jewish council, Jesus testified, "Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven" Matthew 26:64.

After His resurrection, Jesus met with His apostles for the last time, at which time He gave them instructions concerning things to follow: "And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go up into heaven" Acts 1:9-11.

Scripture also speaks of Jesus return in these verses:

"For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel" 1 Thessalonians. 4:16

"The Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire" 2 Thessalonians 1:7-8

"Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints" Jude 14

"Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him" Revelation 1:7

A composite of the preceding passages depicts an event of unimaginable power and effect. Revelation 6:15-17 further describes the effect: "And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and the rocks of the mountains; And said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: For the great day of his wrath is come, and who shall be able to stand?"

Every eye shall see him, because this will also be the time of the general resurrection. Jesus said, "Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, to the resurrection of damnation" John 5:28-30

"And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt" Daniel 12:2

When Jesus returns, the final and great judgment will take place. His own words are as follows: "When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats: And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" Matthew 25:31-34. "Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels" (v. 41).

The preceding passages have given the church a solid basis for its belief concerning the events of the end of time: One powerful return of the Lord, one general resurrection of all the dead, of all time, and one great judgment day for all people who have ever lived. The mighty developments that we are absorbing from the Scriptures will come about in one great finale, and it will be the end of the world. This event is referred to as the day of the Lord, 1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Peter 3:12, and what a day it will be! These revelations constitute a mighty doctrine, and no other interpretations have exceeded it. It is doctrine that can be understood, and it is based upon clear scripture.

Revelation is a book that was given at the close of the apostolic period, to "shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass" Revelation 1:1 This book also has powerful descriptions of things to come before and at the judgment. Some of it is quite easily understood. However, much of the book is written in highly symbolic language. This is true of the twentieth chapter. In particular the terminology of "a thousand years" has been subjected to a variety of interpretation.

Papias, an early writer, is reported to have said that the "days will come in which vines having ten thousand branches will grow, in each branch

there will be ten thousand twigs, and in each shoot there will be ten thousand clusters. Each cluster will have ten thousand grapes, and each grape will give twenty-five metretes of wine when pressed ... In like manner, a grain of wheat will produce ten thousand ears" (*A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, p. 451). This prophecy was in relation to a future literal thousand years.

The understanding that the thousand years of Revelation 20 is included in the present reign of Christ, before His second coming, that He will come one more time, suddenly, that every eye shall see Him, that then the resurrection of all the dead shall take place, that at that time the great and final judgment will take place in this great and final day, has always been the belief of the true church, this has also been the belief of most orthodox, nominal Christian churches since the time of Christ.

During the nineteenth century, a belief called dispensationalism came into being. Around 1830, a teaching developed that the return of Christ would be in two events. The progression envisioned is something like this: Jesus will return and catch up His saints, in what has been called the rapture, and take them out of this world to heaven for seven years. During this time the Holy Spirit will be taken from the world. The antichrist will take control of the world and bring about a terrible tribulation. When the seven years are over, Jesus will return with His saints. Then the resurrection of the dead will take place. Jesus will go to Jerusalem and together with King David will rule the world from there for a thousand years. The redeemed saints of all ages will reign with Him. Resurrected and unresurrected people will live together on earth through the millennium. This thousand years will be a time of indescribable bliss and prosperity all over the world. The Jews from all over the world will return to Jerusalem. They will be converted to Christ and become a great evangelizing agency. Animal sacrifices will again be practiced as in Old Testament times.

Chiliasts admit that this interpretation concerning the millennium is largely taken from and put together from Old Testament scripture and that the New Testament does not portray the development that is envisioned. No doubt there are variations among chiliasts concerning developments expected. (*Chiliasm belief is in an actual physical 1000 year reign on earth by Christ also known as millennialism*)

In all these fanciful interpretations concerning the last times, there is one striking prophecy that is not given much attention. That is the prophecy of

Revelation 20:7-9 concerning the loosing of Satan. It is not hard to understand why the chiliasts somewhat pass over that prophecy. In the first place, it is difficult to reconcile such negative developments as the loosing of Satan with this wonderful projected reign of Christ on earth for a thousand years. Also, since it is not to take place until after a thousand years, which has not yet begun, why be so concerned about that now?

But for us who see the one thousand years (a specific era, yet indefinite long period of time) included in our present time frame, with most of it behind us, the prophecy of the loosing of Satan has great significance. We see that we are either entering or are in the time of that prophecy. An editorial in the February 13, 2009, issue of this paper (*The Messenger of Truth*) says it this way: "He is now loosed or being loosed." Why wouldn't we believe that?

Satan's deception is nothing new. He has always been a terrible deceiver. He is identified as "the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world" Revelation 12:9. We are told that deception will be particularly pervasive in the last times. "This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come ... But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived" 2 Timothy 3:1,13.

Satan is deceiving the nations, and he is deceiving the religious world. Among the prominent deceptions of our time is the "eternal security" concept. An example of this is a statement in a book that is finding some acceptance among us: "The fact that by grace a man does not steal, or lie, or commit adultery in no way destroys the fact that he must not, and the Christian who does these things becomes convicted by the law as a sinner. Because he is a justified believer, this sin of his does not bring him into eternal condemnation, but it most certainly brings him under the disapprobation of the Lord. That God sees no sin in the believer is true in so far as his standing (justification) is concerned, but it is a quite incorrect proposition so far as his state (sanctification) is concerned" (*Moral Law, by Ernest Kevin*). That statement is quite reflective of the mind-set of Christendom in our day. Has the tantalizing idea that what we do does not affect our salvation found any acceptance in the church in our day? That voice of the serpent says, "Ye shall not surely die [the second death]."

The depiction of conditions in the last days as defined in 2 Timothy 3 is so true to our time: "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, high-minded, lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God" (vv. 2-4).

It says "covetous." The craving for money, for riches, the tremendous adulation heaped upon financial success are so common to our time. Greed is ruining our nation. Money is one of the gods of our time. It is being served ravenously.

"Lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God." That is obvious by what the media presents. Absorbing incredible amounts of money and attention are the entertainment world and the sports world. All the excesses of 2 Timothy 3:1-7 abound in this time.

It is true that, to a measure, these conditions have always existed. However, in centuries past there have been elements of restraint. Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened." The Word of God has been a curative factor in society in the past. Societal practices that have confirmation in the Word of God have served toward restraint to mankind in many ways.

Restraints are eroding. The ease of travel, the cell phone, the Internet are removing children from the supervision of parents and contributing to the condition of "disobedient to parents," which is most destructive. The disintegrating of the moral climate is fomenting unfaithfulness in marriage. People are "trucebreakers." One half of first-time marriages are ending in divorce, Sexual perversion is rampant. (*Marriage is being re-defined as between two people by some churches who profess to be Christians: Editor*)

There are those in this world who see this, at least in part. In his book of the same title Robert H. Bork expressed our time as "Slouching Towards Gomorrah"

Mention is made that Satan, in the time of his loosing, will go out to gather the nations to battle. The nuclear and conventional arms race and buildup, the terrorist threats and actions, the violence and the wars bear witness to that part of Satan's work in the nations, "to gather them together to battle: the number of whom is as the sand of the sea" Revelation 20:8.

The loosing of Satan is not by a work of God. It is brought about or made possible by the world that is, the people of this world, letting Satan have more control, more freedom. Our world today is ignoring the Word of God. One article in a periodical dismissed Bible bases because "the Bible

is not compatible with present-day societal patterns" (my wording). But the problem is that present-day societal concepts are not in agreement with the Bible.

In the church we have plenty of reason to be aware of this development. Revelation 20:9, Satan is trying to encompass the camp of the saints about, and the beloved city. In Revelation 12:17 we see "And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ" His attack is by spiritual deception. The church dares not give place to that loosing.

None of this means that we should be defeatist. It is still true that "the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save" Isaiah 59:1, but we need to be vigilant. Jesus said, "Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come" Matthew 24:42.

HE is coming!

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THE FALLOW GROUND

Every New Year brings to us the opportunity to look forward and backward. We review the year just spent with its victories, defeats, and close calls. With the "hope that lies eternal within the human breast," we try to decipher the future. There is something in a new beginning that brings dormant aspirations again to the surface of our consciousness. It is likely that God created time, with its fresh starting points, at least partly for this very purpose. It has been said that the real tragedy of this earth is not that men die but that so many fail to live. Yes, they live their "three score years and ten," but their days are marked by unrealized potential, unharnessed abilities, and disappointed hopes. Many people fail to enter into the fullness God has prepared for them and never discover the blessing of allowing God to use them according to His purpose.

They do not know the abundant life Jesus promised (John 10:10). To all these comes the call, "Thus saith the Lord. . . Break up your fallow ground, and sow not among thorns" (Jeremiah 4:3). Fallow ground is that portion of one's life that lies unused. It has rich potential but remains uncultivated.

It has not been prepared to understand or accept God's purpose. Farm ground left uncultivated is usually grown over with undesirable weed, inhabited by snakes, wild animals, birds of prey. Similarly, fallow areas of our lives are filled, at least in part, with thorns—undesirable attitudes and deeds.

To what use have our "fields" been put? What have they yielded? Perhaps, as the New Year begins, we see areas that have been left unused. We may realize that we have brought forth but little real fruit unto God. Too many of our acres lie basking in the pleasant sunshine of orthodoxy, satisfied with the fruit once borne. We are satisfied that our fields cause our neighbours no problems. We look a bit smugly on the problems of other people. Fasting, a rent heart, and real revival are mostly vague concepts to us. If we look at all upon the poverty and heartache of others, it is from a distance.

Many fields have a sturdy fence built around them. They are closed in by the concepts of life we have developed—warm, comfortable ideas that brook no disturbance. We say to ourselves, "Good people don't suffer." "I deserve to enjoy the fruits of my good management." "I still have a long time to live." "I can only give so much of myself." "Since it takes all my time to earn a livelihood, I really can't help elsewhere."

Looking back over the terrain of the last twelve months, we may recognize fallow ground and realize it should be put to some useful purpose. Being seized with an aspiration to improve that uncultivated portion of our lives, we try to plant some good seeds.

The fallow ground, however, is not broken, and we can only sow among the old thorns and briars. We hear a call from the gate in our fence. "Who is it?" we ask. "The Master. May I come in?" is the response. Of course, we would not refuse entrance to our Lord. We hasten to open the gate into our field, and the Master enters with a plough! "I have come to break up your fallow ground," He says. We cast a quick, loving glance over the field we call our own. Can we, dare we, must we allow this to happen?

How long has it been since the Lord has had complete access to our fallow hearts? How long since our views, our orthodoxy, our self-sufficiency have been challenged, examined, and "ploughed" by Him? When have our priorities been rearranged and our loves reset by His word? How long since new goals and purposes have been established in our hearts? How long

since our righteousness has been face to face with the righteousness of God?

The breaking up of fallow ground brings some trauma and pain. God's plough, of necessity, begins to overturn our safe, ordered way of life. It disturbs some long-held concepts in which we consoled ourselves. It brings to light long-hidden selfish motives, doubts, and hurts. Old attitudes of self-reliance and independence are overthrown and buried by the newly-turned earth. The plough, however, also unearths new vision and new direction. We see God and His purposes much more clearly. We see again the stark reality of our own neediness and of our dependence on God. We see our fellowmen, not like "men as trees walking" but as individuals of potential and worth. Humility and compassion begin to grow in the new light. We feel the gentle foot and sense the hand of the Master as He walks upon the newly-turned soil, carefully sowing seeds that will bear the fruit of His righteousness. "Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby" (Hebrews 12:11). Few of us invite or welcome the plough. Yet most Christians would say, "I am thankful that my fallow ground was broken up. It was after that time that I really grew spiritually. I would never trade what I have now for my old life of self-reliance and independence."

Many people hold tightly to ways which, to them, seem tried and true. Continuity, predictability, and "my way" are their treasure. They cling tightly to it and guard the "field" that holds it. How sad it is that in refusing to allow the plough into their lives, they never unearth the hidden treasure or the pearl of great price. What a tragedy it is when one lives many long and pleasure-filled years but never comes to know the Giver of Life.

"Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy; break up your fallow ground: for it is time to seek the Lord, till he come and rain righteousness upon you" (Hosea 10:12). The broken, ploughed ground brings the fruit!

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