



TRUTH

“... thy word is truth” (John 17:17)

March 2010

QUESTIONS TO ASK MYSELF WHEN I STUDY THE BIBLE (3)

In this series of studies, let us now consider a third question that we should ask ourselves as we study God’s word: “Were there any special circumstances that existed at the time a statement was made that might help explain a particular term or entire verse?”

Jesus once told His apostles, “*Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand’*” (Matthew 10:5-7). Are we also restricted from preaching to non-Jews, and should we be telling folks that the Lord’s kingdom is at hand? Jesus’ charge on this occasion to the twelve was limited to that period of time. The mission of Jesus Himself was to go “*to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*” (Matthew 15:24). So, it should not surprise us that his apostles temporarily focused their attention on the Jews, too. Later, that would change when the Master sent them to be witnesses all over the world (Acts 1:8). In addition, in our day the kingdom already exists. In fact, it was already in existence when Paul wrote to the saints in Colosse in the first century (Colossians 1:23). For a brief period of time, the apostles worked under “the Limited Commission” (Matthew 10:5-7). Now you and I are living under “the Great Commission” – the charge of our Lord to preach to all people in all places (Mark 16:15,16).

A second example of unique circumstances is found in 1 Corinthians 7, where Paul speaks extensively about matters pertaining to marriage. He wrote that unmarried people care about the things of the Lord, while the married care for the things of the world (7:32,33). The tenor of several statements in that chapter seems to be that, for a member of the church, remaining single is a better choice than getting married. All such instructions must be taken in view of what is written in verse 26: “*I suppose therefore that this is good because of the present distress – that it is good for a man to remain as he is.*” There was some kind of distress, some type of special situation that existed at that “present” time. What it was, Paul does not explain. Surely the saints in Corinth knew what Paul had in mind. It may have included some form of severe trials, even persecution. Paul said that such could cause “*trouble in the flesh*” for married Christians (7:28), so in view of the potential for severe stress on one’s maintaining his faithfulness to both his mate and the Lord, Paul wrote that it would be better

for some not to marry. Do not lose sight of Paul’s motive, as he clearly had their best interest at heart: “*And this I say for your own profit . . . that you may serve the Lord without distraction*” (7:35). With his apostolic authority, Paul neither spoke against nor forbid marriage. He simply wanted the brethren there to weigh their choices carefully, always making decisions that were best for them spiritually.

Consider a third New Testament example of special circumstances that contributed to the message that we read in the biblical text. In Paul’s second letter to Timothy, the apostle exhorted him, “*Be diligent to come to me quickly*” (2 Timothy 4:9). He went on to say, “*Do your utmost to come before winter . . .*” (4:21). What was so urgent that Paul twice pleaded with his friend and fellow gospel preacher to come to him quickly, even before the arrival of winter? Paul was in a Roman prison at the time he wrote this epistle (1:16-18). Paul’s time on earth was coming to an end. Hear him: “*For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith*” (4:6,7). In view of such a scenario, Paul pleaded with his good friend to come to him, and to do so as quickly as possible, bringing along some personal items for the aged apostle (4:13).

Here is another example. The New Testament plainly teaches that physical circumcision is not required in order to be saved (Galatians 5:6; 6:15). Titus, a co-worker of Paul’s, was a Gentile. He was not circumcised, despite the fact that some of the Jews claimed that such was necessary in order to please the Lord (Galatians 2:3). On the other hand, Paul dealt differently with a second co-worker of his, Timothy: “. . . *he took him and circumcised him . . .*” (Acts 16:3). Why would he take such an action that, on the surface, appears to be inconsistent with not circumcising Titus? The very same verse in Acts 16 tells us that Paul circumcised Timothy “*because of the Jews who were in that region, for they all knew that his father was Greek*” (Acts 16:3). Timothy’s mother was Jewish, so the circumcision of Timothy was to make him more acceptable in the Jewish culture. Thus, Timothy’s circumcision was a matter of culture and becoming all things to all men (1 Corinthians 9:22), and had nothing to do with Timothy’s personal salvation.

-- Roger D. Campbell

WHAT WAS THE EARLIEST RELIGION CALLED?

This topic has been mentioned to me more than once in the last couple of weeks. It is an interesting line of questioning, would you not agree?

If we want to obtain reliable information on such a matter, then we need to search the Scriptures. *Before* the flood of Noah's day, in what deity did the earth's earliest inhabitants believe? In what kind of worship did they engage? What message did they follow as a guide for their conduct? What about *after* the great flood came to an end? Let us turn our attention to the early chapters of the Book of Genesis to learn what the Lord tells us about that period of time. At the same time, we will also find it helpful to look at additional information that is found in other Bible passages.

Would it not be natural to start with the first two human beings, Adam and Eve? The Creator of the universe, identified in Genesis 1-3 as "God" and "the LORD God," made both of them in His image (Genesis 1:26,27). He communicated with them. He expressed His desire for them to have dominion over the animal kingdom and to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:27,28). He forbid them to eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, while He allowed them to eat of every other tree in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:16,17). When God gave these instructions about food, the Bible says that He "commanded" such (Genesis 2:16). Adam and Eve were living under the law of the God of heaven. When they disobeyed God's instructions, they were involved in "transgression" of His will (1 Timothy 2:14; 1 John 3:4). The bottom line: Adam and Eve knew of only one God. He is the One Whom they served, and it was from Him that their guidelines for living came.

What about Adam and Eve's children? Cain and Abel worshipped "the LORD" by bringing an offering to Him (Genesis 4:3,4). The Bible says, "*By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain . . .*" (Hebrews 11:4). Note three relevant truths that we learn from this verse. First, Abel (and Cain) worshipped God, the same God that created their father and mother and whom their parents served. Second, Abel's sacrifice was counted as "more excellent." That indicates that there was some standard that determined what was acceptable and what was not. God was the standard setter. His will determined what was acceptable, and what was not. Third, since Abel offered his sacrifice "by faith, and since it is the case that faith comes by hearing God's word (Romans 10:17), then it must be the case that God had revealed to Abel (either directly or indirectly by giving instructions to Adam, Cain, or others, who in turn passed it on to him) how He wanted him to worship Him. Do not miss these points: the first family in mankind's history believed in, received instructions from, served, and worshipped the one, true God of heaven. No official "religion" tag is placed on their beliefs or actions. It is plain, though, that in the earliest period of man's history, no man-made religion had yet

come on the scene. Do not miss that point.

In Genesis 5 we are introduced to Enoch, a man that "*walked with God*" (Genesis 5:22). Like Abel before him, Enoch is mentioned in Hebrews 11 as one that lived "by faith," the Bible saying that "*he pleased God*" (Hebrews 11:4). Again, the fact that he pleased God indicates that there was some standard that determined what was right and wrong. In addition, Enoch helped spread God's message to mankind. We reach that conclusion when we read that "*Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied . . .*" (Jude 14). So, Enoch walked with God, pleased God, and spoke (as a prophet) on behalf of God. Which God would that be? The Creator – the same God that Adam, Eve, Cain, Abel, and others served. He is the only true God (Isaiah 44:6), and the only acceptable way of serving Him was, and is, made known to humans only through communication from Him.

What about Noah? He, too, walked with God (Genesis 6:9). He "*found grace in the eyes of the LORD*" (6:8). Where did Noah get the idea to build a huge boat-like structure? "*. . . God said to Noah . . . Make yourself an ark . . .*" (6:13,14). That is just what he did, "*according to all that God commanded him, so he did*" (6:22). Yes, he built that ark "by faith" (Hebrews 11:7), meaning that he responded with submission to God's instruction. Then, after the flood concluded, what do we find Noah doing? The first-recorded action that he took after leaving the ark – what was it? "*Then Noah built an altar to the LORD . . . and offered burn offerings on the altar*" (Genesis 8:20). Let us summarize. Noah received instruction from the God of heaven. He believed in and obeyed the God of heaven. He served the God of heaven, and he served as a preacher of righteousness for Him (2 Peter 2:5). No official religious name was given to what Noah did, but in his life he served, worshipped, and told others about the great Creator of the universe.

To my knowledge, the first time that the Bible mentions humans worshipping "other gods" came in the days of Abraham's father, Terah. Hear the message of Joshua 24:2: "*And Joshua said to all the people, 'Thus says the LORD God of Israel: 'Your fathers, including Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, dwelt on the other side of the River in old times, and they served other gods.'*" How interesting that "*the father of all those that believe*" (Abraham, Romans 4:11) came from an idolatrous background.

Yes, in the course of time, humans, by their own imagination and foolishness, began to serve other "gods," making up their own rules about proper living and proper worship. They went from truth to falsehood (Romans 1:22-24). In the beginning, though, it was not so. In the beginning, it was service to the God of heaven, and no other. Do not forget: the God Whom Christians serve is the very God that created the world and Whom the earliest humans served (Hebrews 1:1,2).

-- Roger D. Campbell

BE AN ANDREW!

In both the Bible and in modern-day lessons, the apostle Andrew is often referred to as "the brother of Peter." That he was. Yet, there is more about Andrew that we need to remember than just the fact that he was Peter's brother in the flesh.

An enlightening episode in Andrew's life is recorded in the first chapter of the Book of John. There we learn that Andrew, before he began serving Jesus, was a disciple of John the Baptizer. Andrew and another of John's pupils met Jesus. "*And the two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus*" (John 1:37). The record goes on to say: "*One of the two who heard John speak, and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his own brother Simon, and said to him, We have found the Messiah (which is translated, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus. Now when Jesus looked at him, He said, You are Simon the son of Jonah. You shall be called Cephas (which is translated, A Stone)*" (John 1:40-42).

Did you notice the four actions of Andrew that are mentioned in the above passage? There is nothing in any of those four items that is complex to understand, but when the four of them are joined together, they present a powerful picture. Let us highlight those four matters. What did Andrew do?

First, Andrew **FOLLOWED** Jesus (John 1:37,40). Some people just followed Jesus from place to place, whether out of curiosity or to benefit from His healing powers (John 6:1). Others, though, followed Him in the sense of becoming His disciples. Andrew was in the latter category. What is the greatest decision that a person can make in life? Is it not the choice to follow Jesus?! The Master said, "*If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me*" (John 12:26). The Christ also said, "*My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me*" (John 10:27). True followers of the Christ must deny themselves and take up their cross daily for Him (Luke 9:23).

Next, Andrew **FOUND** his brother, Peter (1:41). The text in John 1 seems to indicate that Andrew sought his brother for a purpose. What might that be? To let him know about the wonderful Teacher that he had met. It is a blessing to be able to get together with our loved ones for meals, holidays, reunions, vacations, or other pleasurable activities. At the same time, though, we do not want to neglect to take the opportunity to approach our family members about spiritual matters. That is what Andrew did with his brother.

Third, Andrew **TOLD** Peter about the Christ. What exactly did Andrew tell his brother? "*We have found the Messiah. . .*" (1:41). Can you imagine the excitement that must have been in Andrew's heart and voice as he shared this message? The one and only Christ, about Whom the prophets had foretold and for Whom the Jewish people had been waiting century after century, here He was in the first century, living among men, and Andrew had had the privilege of meeting Him face to face! Is it not possible for you and me to repeat Andrew's action in our generation and tell others that the Messiah has come into the world? We might be tempted to think, "But everybody I know has already heard about Jesus, so what else is there to tell them?" We must be clear on this point: to tell others about the Christ includes informing them what the Bible says about His eternal kingdom (Colossians 1:13; Acts 8:12), as well as His teaching about what a person must do to be saved (Mark 16:15,16).

Fourth, Andrew **BROUGHT** Peter to Jesus (1:42). No doubt, Peter had had some great days in his past life. This day, however, the day when he met the Savior of the world, was the greatest day of his life! And, to a certain extent, he owed it to Andrew. Yes, Peter was indebted to his brother for bringing him to Jesus. Should you and I not be busy doing the same thing today? We understand that since Jesus is no longer walking on the earth, but now sits at the right hand of the Father (Colossians 3:1), it is not possible for us to literally bring someone to Him in the sense that Andrew did Peter. But, we would ask: should you and I be seeking opportunities to teach the gospel to lost people in order to try and help them know the Lord and His will? Indeed, we should! Remember, it is through the gospel that calls men unto salvation (2 Thessalonians 2:14).

Once again, what did Andrew do on the occasion that we have considered? He *followed* Jesus, then he *found* Peter, he *told* Peter, and he *brought* Peter. Brother, you can be an Andrew! So can you, dear sister. Come to think of it, so can I, along with every other member of the body of the Christ. Would it not be great if the church was filled with people like Andrew?! We can all be active in trying to help our loved ones, as well as others, to know and follow the Lord. Now that we have seen how Andrew did it, what should we all be saying to ourselves? Answer: "*Go and do likewise*" (Luke 10:37).

-- Roger D. Campbell

John 20:30,31 - THE RECORDED MIRACLES OF JESUS

In the last two verses of John chapter 20, it is written, “*And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.*” What lessons can be learn about Jesus’ miracles from these familiar words?

Jesus did signs. In the Bible, the word “sign” is often used interchangeably with the word “miracle.” A miracle was a sign, and a sign was a miracle. After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, some correctly referred to it as a “miracle” (John 11:47). Nicodemus, though he was not an open follower of Jesus at the time, admitted that Jesus did “miracles” (John 3:2). In one instance, John wrote about Jesus doing “miracles” (John 2:23), but he also called them “signs,” as we read in our text (John 20:30). The Greek word from which we get the word “miracle” literally meant *power*, while “sign” pointed to the fact that the power was a demonstration – a demonstration to get people’s attention.

Jesus did real signs. Folks, that is a historical fact that no scoffer or atheistic university professor can change. Jesus’ signs were not make believe. They were not fake. They were not some form of deception by which Jesus’ hand was quicker than the eye of the beholder. They were not legends or fables. They were genuine demonstrations of divine power. His signs bore witness of Him, showing that the Father sent Him (John 5:36). Thank God that He gave us a record of them in His book! We still marvel at the miracles of the Christ, though we have heard and read about them over and over. They never lose their “punch!” Let us look further at our text.

Jesus did many signs. Not just a couple or a few, but “many.” Even Jesus’ adversaries made this confession about Him: “. . . *this Man works many signs*” (John 11:47). Jesus’ signs were both many in number as well as many in kind. He did a wide variety of miracles in a wide variety of places under a wide variety of circumstances. The multitude and quality of His signs left no doubt that He was, indeed, Whom He claimed to be!

Jesus did signs that others saw. The text of John 20:30 says that He did them in the presence of His disciples. Other Bible texts indicate that on numerous occasions, multitudes were witnesses to

His wonders. The fact that they were done in someone’s presence was an indication that they were open to investigation and scrutiny. The way of the Christ was not proclaimed “*in secret*” (John 18:20), nor were His signs “*done in a corner*” (Acts 26:26). Don’t you know that if someone could have discredited the signs of Jesus, it would have been done in the 1st century?! Let not your heart be troubled, my dear brothers and sisters: the signs of Jesus’ pass all tests and investigations! Jesus did *real* signs, He did *many* signs, and He did them for others to see and investigate. No arrogant, loud-talking blasphemer of our day could ever overturn those historical truths.

Jesus’ signs are recorded in the Bible for a purpose. What is that? Here is God’s answer: “*But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name*” (John 20:31). God wanted Jesus’ signs recorded in order to cause readers of the Bible to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Well, what would be God’s motive in wanting us to believe in His Son? That we might have life through His name. There you go – we have a record of Jesus’ signs as part of God’s message to save souls from sin, that is, to give life to those who were dead in sin. Brothers and sisters, do not brush off the signs of the Master. Do not skim over them or rush through them. They are part of God’s scheme to redeem us! They are written down to cause us to believe and to keep on strengthening our faith.

Not every sign that Jesus did when He lived on the earth is recorded in the Bible. That is what the Bible says, right? “*And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book*” (John 20:30). Well, why not? Why is it that we do not have a record of every single sign that Jesus did? First of all, there were just too many of them (John 21:25). Second, those that *are* recorded are sufficient – they give plain proof that Jesus was, indeed, the Messiah, the Son of the living God, just as He claimed.

By the Holy Spirit, John recorded signs of Jesus in order to produce faith in the hearts of Bible readers. Let us thank God for those signs, for His written record of them, and for their power to produce soul-saving faith.

--Roger D. Campbell

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