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LESSON 469

SUPREMACY OF LOVE

MEMORY VERSE: “Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment” (Matthew 22:37,38).

TEXT: Deuteronomy 6:1-25

In the previous chapter, Moses restated the Decalogue to the children of Israel. He encouraged them to obey God’s laws and remain loyal to Him. He also reminded them of the terms of their covenant with God and what He expects from them when they eventually settled in the land across the Jordan. Here in our text, Moses continued to point out to them the demands of God and the supremacy of love for Him. He stressed the importance of loving God with the whole heart, soul, and strength. He also stressed the significance of passing on the commandments to their children.

From the teaching of Moses in our text, it is obvious that all God demands from His people are whole-hearted love and devotion. Whatever a person does for God must be motivated by love for Him and His work. As a matter of fact, Jesus Christ summarized all the commandments into two broad categories: love for God and love for our neighbour: “**On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets**” (Matthew 22:40). Paul, the apostle, also emphasized this truth when he said, “**Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.**” “**And now abideth faith, hope, charity (love), these three; but the greatest of these is charity (love)**” (Romans 13:10; 1 Corinthians 13:13). A reverential attitude and supreme love for God mark the beginning of keeping God’s commandments.

Question 1: Which is the great commandment?

PERSUASIVE EXHORTATION TO OBEDIENCE (Deuteronomy 6:1-5; 5:32,33; 1 John 5:3; Jeremiah 31:31-33; Hebrews 8:8-10; Titus 2:11-14).

Moses exhorted Israel to hear God and to keep His commandments. The commandments denote the moral laws, the statutes, the ceremonial laws, the judgments and the judicial or civil laws by which the judges decided cases. The commandments used in a general sense means the totality of God’s commandments. God’s purpose for giving them the commandments is that the people “**might do them.**” It is of no use knowing, memorizing or reciting them if they were not going to be obeyed. The commandments were given in love and they were binding on everyone in the land including the immediate recipients and the future generations.

Before He ever gave those laws to them, God knew the people could keep them if they had the determination to obey, reverential fear for and total dependence on Him. When there is fear of God in the heart, practical obedience becomes possible. But disappointingly, the Israelites were not consistently obedient to these laws as has been seen in our previous studies.

The New Testament believer should note that obedience to the laws of God is enhanced by diligent study of God’s word (2 Timothy 2:15); constant meditation

on it (Joshua 1:8); and keeping God's word in the heart (Psalms 119:11); or like the apostle said, allowing it to dwell in us richly (Colossians 3:16). Believers today should appropriate the great privilege of the New Covenant whereby we are able to obey God's commandments because of His covenant to write His laws in our hearts. Although the laws given were engraved in stones under the old covenant, God promised to write His laws in the hearts of men under the new dispensation.

Question 2: Why is it necessary to have a proper knowledge of God and what should be our attitude to God's word?

Moses called upon Israel to hear the proclamation of God's word. He taught the people all that God commanded him to teach them. He was ready at all times to convey God's message to the Israelites. Unless God is known, He cannot be loved in a true sense. Therefore, Moses had to teach Israel the true nature of God and the distinction between Him and the idols of other nations. Like him, ministers of the gospel must employ all relevant methods to teach Christ's churches all He has commanded (Matthew 28:20), ensuring that the audience is persuaded to do the will of God. And hearers of the word must bear in mind that it is not enough to hear God's word; we must ensure that our attitude, as believers, to God's word is that of obedience which brings great blessings.

Moses commanded the children of Israel to love God with their whole being, that is, with all their heart, mind and strength. Since there is only one God, and that God is theirs, Israel was commanded to love Him unreservedly and totally with their whole being. Some Bible commentators describe the "heart" as the seat of the understanding; the 'soul' as the centre of will and personality; the 'might' as representing the outgoings and energies of all the vital powers." The kind of love Moses spoke about is not just the emotional love, but that which is based on a proper knowledge of who God is.

The command to love God given to the Israelites is applicable to all people of all ages and climes. God expected love from the Israelites in view of His goodness to them. For us today, the love of God is demonstrated in giving His only begotten Son, the greatest of all the manifestations of His love ever shown to mankind. In response to this unique love of God, we are expected to love Him unreservedly as our God, Creator, Redeemer, Benefactor, etc. We are to love Him at all times and in all situations, sincerely, superlatively and entirely. This is one way of appreciating His love.

Question 3: What are the proofs of love for God in a person's life?

Love for God is reflected in obedience to His commandments. Other practical ways of showing our love for God include worshipping Him in spirit and in truth, and expanding and expressing that love towards our neighbours. John the beloved said, **"If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?"** (1 John 4:20). The extent of our love for others is the true test of our love for God.

PRESERVATION OF PURE RELIGION (Deuteronomy 6:6-9; Revelation 2:1-5; Galatians 1:6-9; James 1:27).

Israel had been commanded to abhor idolatry. Now they are being told to love God supremely. This was necessary because if they were to continue worshipping God in holiness, and their worship was to be acceptable before God, they had to have true love for Him. Idolatry makes a man to give to devils the glory that is due for God; it makes a man to devote to Satan the honour and attention that God deserves.

It follows therefore that where there is supreme love for God, pure religion is preserved. A true love for God energises true believers to shun sins. No true friends will wilfully offend each other because of the love between them. The Israelites were commanded to keep the laws in their hearts. It must be stated that if the words of God are not laid up in their hearts, it means they are not as esteemed, prized and given the high and respectable place that they deserved. And if that is so, there is no hope that such individuals will be able to keep the flame of the love for God aglow for a long time.

For the preservation of God's knowledge and His ways, all Israelites were to be involved; it was not a matter left for Moses alone. Each family was to be involved in the teaching process, which was the veritable means of transferring this knowledge to succeeding generations. Each family was to teach "**thy children**" the ways of the Lord "**when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.**" They were to so make themselves at home with God's word that they could easily recall them to teach and answer their children's enquiries. With this method, the knowledge of God was to be preserved in Israel. This principle is applicable to the church also. If the holiness heritage is to be preserved, everyone, not the leaders only, must be involved.

The Lord is always not pleased with people who cannot preserve purity of religion; with people who, at every twist and turn, blend with the whims and caprices of the time. For this, the Lord, in his message to the seven churches in Asia Minor, reprovved the Ephesian church. They had let down their earlier love for God and the church. Though they still maintained the doctrines of religion, and opposed the advocates of error, the flame of their love for God was less glowing and ardent than it was at first. We must watch against anything that makes us lower the standard.

Question 4: Mention ways we can preserve the holiness heritage for future generations.

WARNING AGAINST BACKSLIDING (Deuteronomy 6:10-19; 8:10-20; 9:1-6; Proverbs 30:7-9; Ezekiel 16:10-15; Hosea 2:8,9 Proverbs 1:32).

"Then beware lest thou forget the LORD, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. (For the LORD thy God is a jealous God among you) lest the anger of the LORD thy God be kindled against thee, and destroy thee from off the face of the earth."

As Israelites made to settle down into a "great and goodly cities, houses and vineyards" in the midst of other idolatrous nations, they needed to be warned against the danger of forgetting God and tolerance of idolatrous practices by their would-be neighbours. Some believers may argue that God's people do not

need any warning but should resort to commonsense in dealing with such issues. But it must be stated that while commonsense theory may sound appealing, it does not always work. Hence, the Lord reminded them of His command. He knew the danger posed by prosperity and abundance of earthly goods to remembering the Lord and His manifestations of mercy.

This is more so when an individual or a family has suffered so much deprivations and restrictions as a result of poverty. But when God, through His mercy and favour, brings them into possession of all that they require for well-being, there is subtle danger of appropriating praise to self for diligence, hard work and doggedness. As there are glaring dangers lurking behind poverty, so there are subtle dangers lying in wait behind prosperity. If the devil was unable to make a believer fall while passing through a period of poverty, he has to be very watchful in his days of prosperity because at such times, we are in great danger of forgetting God in our dependence upon Him and our obligations to Him. If there were times we ever needed to be very cautious and strictly watch over our hearts, it is at such times.

Hence, there is wisdom and piety in Agur's prayer. **“Two things have I required of thee; deny me them not before I die: Remove far from me vanity and lies: give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: Lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the LORD? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain”** (Proverbs 30:7-9).

Question 5: What are the dangers in poverty and prosperity?

PATTERN AND CONTENT OF GODLY PARENTING (Deuteronomy 6:7,20-25; 11:19; Exodus 12:26,27; 13:14; Joshua 4:6,7,21-24; Proverbs 22:6; Psalms 78:4-6; 2 Timothy 1:5; Proverbs 6:21).

It is the responsibility of parents to teach their children the word of God. In committing to parents the training of their children, God has, in a very significant way, committed to them the formation of the future character of their children, and He will definitely hold them accountable for whatever they become. Therefore, teaching children God's word should be given prime attention by parents. There shouldn't be time or space constraint on teaching as this can be done when sitting, walking, lying down and rising up, or in a nutshell, at every given opportunity. The teaching process should be patterned after the scripture such that they grow up in godly fear and nurture.

The family altar and devotion times are important in imparting knowledge of God to children. Leisure time should be wisely employed by parents to teach their children. The word of God is to be made conspicuous in the house. Good posters and instructional materials as well as the use of audio visuals in teaching are valuable.

Children are very inquisitive. Thus, God prepared the answers the Israelites were to give in response to their children's enquiries. He gave them a ready answer. Our children may want to enquire about the word of God, the practices in the Church, and other important things as they are growing up. We are not to forbid them but rather answer their enquiries according to their levels of understanding. Some of their questions may look foolish but through patience

and thoroughness, answers should be thoughtfully provided. In any case, if we fail to provide them with answers, they will find incorrect ones somewhere, some day, especially these days of explosion of information. They should get first-hand information from parents, not from peers. A very vital instructional method was given to the Israelites. The children were to be told the testimonies of the mighty acts of God.

Question 6: What is the power of example in teaching children the word of God?

Teaching children the fear of God is better done by living exemplary lives that cannot be faulted by children. Parental example is vital to the teaching of children. Good teachings that are not backed up with practical demonstration will be a waste of time and efforts. Parents should therefore be examples both in word and practice. If children are taught love and forgiveness, there must be a practical demonstration for them to see between the parents, and between parents and neighbours. Parents should avoid contradicting the virtue they teach or what the children have been taught by their negative lifestyles. Some children may ask questions when there are any contradictions while many will not ask but will take for granted that such teachings are moral talks which should not be taken seriously or which cannot be practised. However, teaching should be diligently done to ensure that they are established in the faith.

LESSON 470

DANGER OF EVIL ASSOCIATION

MEMORY VERSE: “**Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners**” (1 Corinthians 15:33).

TEXT: Deuteronomy 7:1-26.

In God’s faithfulness to the covenant He had made with Abraham, Israel was now at the verge of entering into the Promised Land. As a token of certainty, the chapter opens with the expression, “**When the LORD thy God shall bring thee into the land whither thou goest to possess it, and hath cast out many nations before thee**”, indicating that God was looking beyond the promise to the fulfilment. Lest the people begin to question the rationale behind the warnings God was giving to them as a people through Moses, they were reminded to “**Know therefore that the LORD thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations**” (Deuteronomy 7:9).

It is against this background that Moses charged the new generation of Israel to reciprocate God’s faithfulness by remaining faithful and avoiding every possible evil association with the inhabitants of the land as they prepared to enter the land of Canaan. In our text, he instructed them on the need to remain separated and undefiled before the Lord. He warned them against entering into either social or spiritual alliance with the people who were notorious for idolatry. He also showed the Israelites how to avoid being drawn into association with dwellers in Canaan, and pointed out what would be the consequences if they refused to heed the call to remain separated.

Present-day believers are also required to maintain their identity and remain separated from the world. Evil association with people of the world, under whatever guise, will have a negative effect on the spiritual life of a believer and will attract divine judgment.

Question 1: Why should God’s people avoid evil association with the people of the world?

CAUTION AGAINST EVIL ASSOCIATION (Deuteronomy 7:1-11; Exodus 23:32,33; 34:12-16; Psalm 1:1,2; Proverbs 4:14; 22:24,25; 23:6; 1 Corinthians 5:9,11; 2 Corinthians 6:14-18; 2 John 10).

The idolatrous people within and around the Promised Land were to be utterly destroyed. Israel was not to enter into any secular or political covenant with any of them. In fact, Israel was not to show mercy to them because the cup of their iniquity was full. No one in Israel, under this circumstance of stern warning, was to consider making any friendship and fellowship with idols and idol worshippers. Those who are in communion with God must not have any communication with the unfruitful works of darkness.

This pronouncement of God against these idolatrous nations that had peopled the Promised Land is a warning to everyone that when God’s judgment

eventually comes, it is always terrible. Wherever God gives a sinner or backslider opportunity to repent but he/she refuses, then judgment will come. Therefore, sinners and backsliders should flee to God in urgent repentance so that they can receive God's mercy rather than His judgment.

Question 2: What are the reasons God commanded the children of Israel not to enter any alliance with the Canaanites?

The Jews were commanded not to enter into any form of alliance or covenant with the Canaanites. They were not to enter into marriage relationship with them nor show mercy unto them. Rather, they were to destroy them and all the emblems of their idolatrous worship. With the commandment and caution against evil association, God gave Israel the reasons why they should remain distinct and separate from the people of the land. An alliance with the inhabitants of the land would have a negative spiritual influence on them. Besides, Israel was a chosen and peculiar people. God had chosen them to be a special people and as such they were not permitted to enter into alliance with the heathen. Again, there existed a covenant between God and Israel, and this required Israel to remain distinct so that God could fulfill His promises and establish them as a nation, according to His promise to their father, Abraham. God would have Israel know that His covenant with them excluded them from making any other treaties without His express permission.

As believers, the reasons God told Israel to avoid evil association hold true for us too. We are God's chosen people, the *ekklesia* (called out ones) and we must remain separated from the world in order to retain our identity. For **"(we) are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people, that (we) should show forth the praises of him who hath called (us) out of darkness into his marvelous light"** (1 Peter 2:9). We must deal decisively with the lusts that war against our souls; let us not show them any mercy, but mortify, crucify and totally destroy them. We must not enter into marriage, friendship, worship, business alliance with unbelievers lest they influence us to sin against God.

This does not, however, mean we should avoid all contacts with unbelievers or become hermits but that we should watch the associations we keep and what alliances we enter into. Whatever contact we have with unbelievers should be used to witness to them and to bring them to Christ. But we should avoid entering into any relationships that bind us with them if we must obey God's command to be very cautious against evil association, especially in these days of ecumenism and ecclesiastical unions. We must be discerning and sensitive to the Spirit's leading, even as we partner or network with others in an attempt to achieve the goal of world evangelization.

CONSEQUENCE OF EVIL ASSOCIATION (Deuteronomy 7:4,9,10,25,26; Joshua 23:11-13; 1 Kings 11:1-11; 2 Chronicles 18:1,14-31; 19:1,2; 20:37; Proverbs 22:24,25).

God warned Israel against evil association because of the grave consequence it would bring upon them. He told them that close alliance with the Canaanites would lead them into idolatry and that would bring His anger against them. If they entered into social or religious alliance with the enemies of God, it would

make them God's enemies too and they would become accursed also. To Israel, a cursed thing was something devoted to destruction. Therefore evil association would bring destruction upon Israel. The Canaanites would be a snare or scourge and thorns in their flesh.

Question 3: What are the consequences of evil association?

A cursory look at the scriptures reveals some of the terrible consequences of evil associations between believers and unbelievers. For King Solomon, it led to backsliding and idolatry (1 Kings 11:1-11); for Jehoshaphat, it resulted in compromise, sin, inability to defend a persecuted prophet of God, business failure and peril to his life (2 Chronicles 18:1-8,14-31; 19:1-2; 20:35-37). Evil association has the tendency to corrupt good manners (1 Corinthians 15:33) and opens up a believer to evil influences and satanic affliction. Keeping company with those who harbour various vices in their lives will have a negative influence on a believer's life. For instance, keeping company with an angry person makes a believer develop an angry disposition too (Proverbs 22:24,25). This is because of the human tendency to become like those with whom he associates. If we relate with the wrong people, we will soon lose our faith in God. This is because our relationships exert a strong influence on our faith.

In view of the grievous consequences of evil associations, believers must avoid it by all means. Many people who failed to heed God's warning but went into unequal yoke in marriage or business have tales of woes to tell. Many have backslidden and some others, though still struggling to remain in the faith, are under severe pressure and the pang of their defiled conscience. It may interest you to know that there are thousands of believers in the world today who have been undone by unequal yoke in marriage or ungodly marriages. This should not be a surprise because there is more likelihood that those who are good will be perverted, than that the bad will be converted. Those who go out of the confines of the scriptures to get married to sinners because of wealth or worry cannot promise themselves to have their partners as helps meet or them. Ultimately, evil association leads to departure from God and attracts divine judgment.

Eventually, Israel did not take heed to God's warnings. They spared the Canaanites and intermarried with them, and as a result they soon began to lose their distinctiveness. **“For they have taken of their daughters for themselves, and for their sons: so that the holy seed have mingled themselves with the people of those lands: yea, the hand of the princes and rulers hath been chief in this trespass”** (Ezra 9:2).

This sin of evil association became Israel's undoing on many occasions and they were severely punished (Judges 3:5-8; Psalm 106:34-42). Let us learn from their mistake so that we don't experience similar misfortune. We must avoid evil association with worldly people whether they are in the church or outside it. Also, we must separate from false teachers and backsliders who refuse to repent of their unscriptural practices (2 Timothy 3:1-5; 1 Corinthians 5:9-11; Romans 16:17).

CONDITIONAL BLESSINGS AND ASSURANCE OF VICTORY (Deuteronomy 7:12-24; 28:1-14; Exodus 15:26; 23:25-30; Leviticus 26:3-12).

Question 4: From the text, point out the blessings which God promised His people and state the conditions attached.

God told the children of Israel that if they would hearken and obey His commandments, He would bless them abundantly. The promises of God's blessings are always conditional. When a person fulfils the conditions, spiritual and physical blessings are poured out on that individual. For their spiritual welfare God said He would keep His covenant with them, love them and be present with them to fight their battles. The greatest blessing a person can have is to enjoy God's love and presence, and to have a covenant relationship with Him. In addition to the spiritual blessings, God promised physical prosperity and victory. He said He would multiply them and their livestock, and grant them good harvest of crops. Also, God promised to keep them in good health and that there would be no barrenness either among them or their cattle.

But Israel would enjoy these blessings only if they fulfilled the conditions attached. They were expected to hearken to God's words to destroy the Canaanites with their idols. They were commanded not to take the gold or silver on their idols, neither were they to bring any of the idolatrous emblems of Canaan into their homes. If they fulfilled these conditions, God said He would give them victory in all their battles regardless of the military strength of their adversaries.

The believer's continuance in the state of favour with God depends on his faithfulness to Him and His grace. Because God is a God of justice, He will cast away anyone who rebels against His word, though He had chosen that individual through His love. **"Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off"** (Romans 11:22). This is why, **"him that thinketh he standeth [must] take heed lest he fall"** (1 Corinthians 10:12).

Believers can also enjoy the blessings of God by fulfilling the conditions which God stipulated. If believers will serve the Lord and live righteously, they can expect both spiritual freshness and physical prosperity. It is God's will that we prosper and enjoy good health (3 John 2). Therefore, a believer can ask and expect from God sufficient provision to take care of his needs for food, raiment and shelter; and also have enough to help the needy and support the work of God. Also, believers can enjoy divine health, as well as divine healing in times of sickness. They can have constant victory over all spiritual and physical barriers as they daily enjoy fellowship with God who gives the needed strength.

LESSON 471

TEST OF OBEDIENCE AND HUMILITY

MEMORY VERSE: “**And thou shalt remember all the way which the LORD thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no**” (Deuteronomy 8:2).

TEXT: Deuteronomy 8:1-20.

Moses had continued to rehearse God’s dealings with the children of Israel. He had recounted many of the trials and travails that befell them after they left Egypt to go to the Promised Land. Conscious, still, that his ministry would soon come to an end, he felt duty-bound to continue to restate God’s expectation to this generation of the children of Israel who would shortly inherit the land. In this chapter, the law-giver urged them to obey God’s law if they would possess the land and live to enjoy it. He wanted them also to appreciate God’s gracious dealings with them and His desire to prove their sincerity and commitment. Behind their tests and trials was God’s unquantifiable love, hence, the call to reciprocate the same with unqualified obedience. Believers should remember that behind their experiences on the way to heaven is God’s love and purpose which are to give them His expected end.

In the text, Moses states the requirements for possessing and enjoying all that God had promised and warned the people to beware of complacency and idolatry.

Question 1: Why was it necessary for Moses to exhort the children of Israel to obedience?

REASONS FOR OBEDIENCE (Deuteronomy 8:1-6; 6:3,18; 27:10; 4:1-14; Ecclesiastes 3:14; Jeremiah 42:6; Revelation 22:18,19; Deuteronomy 4:39).

“All the commandments which I command thee this day shall ye observe to do, that ye may live, and multiply, and go in and possess the land which the LORD swore unto your fathers” (Deuteronomy 8:1).

Understanding God’s imperative for obedience, Moses repeats this exhortation as a precondition for enjoying God’s promised blessings. Israel is here commanded to “**observe to do**” the commandments of the Lord. Obeying the Lord requires a conscious effort to observe, that is, watching something carefully and attentively in order to do it (Deuteronomy 5:32; 6:3,25; 11:32; 12:1). Except we are determined to do the will of God, several distractions would keep us away from His will.

Obedience is the key to receiving from God and the pivot on which all blessings depend. It opens the door of God’s mercies and places His people on the right course and fellowship with Him. Obedience endears believers to the heart of the Lord. This virtue earned Abraham the title: Friend of God; it anointed Christ “**with the oil of gladness above [His] fellows**”. Those who expect to receive and enjoy God’s best should be determined to obey His

commandments. Here, it is given as a precondition for the Israelites to live their lives to the full. Those who disobey the Lord or live in partial obedience to His word cannot enjoy the fullness of His blessings. A song-writer aptly captures this truth when he writes: *Just obey; Is the way; God's way*. Second, obeying the word of God will enable the people to prosper and multiply in the land. The right way into God's prosperity plan is by way of keeping His word. Third, disobedience attracts God's anger and displeasure causing Him to oppose His people. Israel must obey the statutes of the Lord in the new land if they would not experience God's frown.

Moses also challenged the people to remember God's dealing with them throughout their forty years sojourn in the desert. Among His purposes for the wilderness experience was, one, to humble them; two, to prove what was in their hearts and three, to know whether they would serve Him in spite of their constant challenges. The Lord brought them by means of distress and privations to feel their need of help and dependence upon Him. He equally brought them through hardships and placed them in such positions as would reveal the inner workings of their heart.

Israel's humiliation in the desert was not just because God caused them to hunger but He also fed them with previously unknown manna as part of their pre-Canaan training. He confined them to this food throughout the duration of the journey so that they may realize that the power to sustain life does not lie with food only **"but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD"**.

Question 2: State some reasons for believers' trials and their benefits.

Here, we find reasons why God sometimes allows His chosen people to pass through trials: one, as a test of their sincerity and commitment to godly ideals. Two, to re-orientate them as to what constitutes the true essence of living and that a man's life does not consist in the abundance of what he possesses (Luke 12:15). Three, to instil in them the principle of total dependence upon God. Four, to make His people reverence Him as the only Sustainer of life. Five, to humble the believer and make him constantly look up to God for help. Six, to be able to bring out the best in the believer. Seven, to learn the ways of God and of His righteousness (Psalm 119:71). God chastens the believer to enable him keep His commandments and walk in His ways. When believers endure trials, the experience brings out the best in them (Job 23:10); such divine training produces **"the crown of life which the Lord hath promised to them that love him"** (James 1:12). **"That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ"** (1 Peter 1:7). In this discourse, Moses faulted the notion that good living is measured by the amount of material things people can acquire to satisfy their appetite; rather, it lies in knowing and doing the will of God.

Besides the provision of manna and garments throughout the wilderness, chastisement was also God's way of preparing the children of Israel for Canaan. When necessary, God sometimes chastises His children so as to keep them in the way of righteousness and they (the children), in turn, are admonished not to despise such chastisements (Proverbs 3:11). In fact, we are counted blessed to be so corrected by the heavenly Father (Job 5:17). Those who are left to

themselves or allowed to go their own way are counted as bastards (Hebrews 12:8). All these the heavenly Father does in order that believers might be partakers of His holiness and be qualified for His heavenly Jerusalem.

REWARDS OF OBEDIENCE (Deuteronomy 8:7-9; 4:1,40; 5:33; 1 Samuel 15:22; Job 36:11).

“For the LORD thy God bringeth thee into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills” (Deuteronomy 8:7).

The land which the people were now going to inherit is here described as good and possessing everything that is desirable (Deuteronomy 8:7-9). Placed in direct contrast to their past experiences, the land was unlike Egypt where they lived under oppression and servitude nor was it like the wilderness which they had passed through with all the scarcity and hardship. But it is a land where God promised to provide everything needed for body, soul and spirit. It would be a land that knows no scarcity. Thus, in consonance with His promise to give them a land flowing with milk and honey, God reassures them of the riches and resources of Canaan.

God will not give His people less than He had promised them. In as much as He has put His people in expectation of His blessing, believers can be sure that He will be true to His Word. As Moses reiterated the soon-to-be-entered land after a trying period through the desert, those who endure to the end shall soon enter into the rest of God where **“they shall be no more consumed with hunger in the land, neither bear the shame of the heathen any more”** (Ezekiel 34:29). Heaven is a place of everlasting peace and rest where the redeemed of the Lord shall dwell in unending bliss and joy. There, we shall forget our temptations, trials and the toils of this life. We should keep on toiling for the Lord and in our toil rejoice because, very soon, we shall depart to be with Him who loves us since the foundation of the world.

Question 3: What are the benefits of obedience?

Israel stands to enjoy unprecedented abundance if they walked in the commandments of the Lord. They would enjoy both physical and material benefits which would include: possession of the land of Canaan, divine provision and protection, longevity, and fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant. In like manner, if believers **“obey and serve him, they shall spend their days in prosperity, and their years in pleasures”** (Job 36:11).

WARNING AGAINST PRIDE (Deuteronomy 8:10-18; 2 Chronicles 26:16; Daniel 4:30).

“When thou hast eaten and art full, then thou shalt bless the LORD thy God for the good land which he hath given thee. Beware that thou forget not the LORD thy God, in not keeping his commandments, and his judgments, and his statutes, which I command thee this day” (Deuteronomy 8:10,11).

If the children of Israel were to long enjoy their inheritance in the land, they were to beware of the common malady of the human nature – pride – which

comes as a result of temporal, transient upliftment. Plenty is apt to induce a forgetfulness of God, the Source of all blessings. Man's foolish heart is wont to forget that he has no power of his own and that God owns the resources of earth and of heaven and gives them to whomsoever He wills. Those who are privileged to be endowed with the wealth of this world should commit themselves to faithfulness lest when the Owner calls them to give account of their stewardship, He finds them to be unjust stewards of His endowment and charges them with folly.

The antidote to falling victim of this vice is not to "**forget**" the Lord. Forgetfulness leads to wrong judgment. We should always remember that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, and all things come of Him. We should not forget His mercy, favour, goodness and lovingkindness.

Moses reminds the children of Israel about God's manifold signs and wonders among them which include: deliverance from Egypt, the house of bondage; leading through that great and terrible wilderness filled with serpents and scorpions; provision of water from the rock and manna from heaven, among other blessings. Remembering God's goodness would enable them engage in constant appreciation and thankfulness to Him. In the same way, for believers to appreciate the goodness of the Lord, they should reflect on their past and how far the Lord has been gracious to them. "**But thou shall remember the Lord thy God for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth, that he may establish his covenant which he sware unto thy fathers, as it is this day**" (Deuteronomy 8:18).

Question 4: Enumerate the blessings for which believers should praise the Lord.

RESULTS OF BACKSLIDING (Deuteronomy 8:19,20; 6:10-12 Joshua 23:11-13; 1 Timothy 6:9,10).

"And it shall be, if thou do at all forget the LORD thy God, and walk after other gods, and serve them, and worship them, I testify against you this day that ye shall surely perish. As the nations which the LORD destroyeth before your face, so shall ye perish; because ye would not be obedient unto the voice of the LORD your God" (Deuteronomy 8:19,20).

Question 5: State the dangers inherent in backsliding.

Though Israel is a chosen race, God's continued relationship with them is not unconditional. His promises carry conditions which He expects them to fulfil so that they can enjoy them at all times. Moses therefore warns them to desist from turning after other gods; else, they would perish from the land. Believers should not make the mistake of embracing eternal security because there is no such teaching that once a person is saved, no matter what he or she does, he cannot fall from God's favour. Those who go into sin after they had been born again lose heaven's favour except they repent and come back to the faith. There are clear warnings on the need to avoid spiritual lethargy and lukewarmness which may come as a result of inability to sustain our relationship with God. Heaven-bound Christians should ensure that sin does

not come between them and God but with obedience and humbleness of heart, they serve God till the end.

LESSON 472

MOSES REHEARSES ISRAEL'S REBELLION

MEMORY VERSE: “**For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the LORD, he hath also rejected thee from being king**” (1 Samuel 15:23).

TEXT: Deuteronomy 9:1–29.

In the previous chapter, Moses had exhorted the children of Israel to be obedient to God in view of His manifold goodness and mercy which they enjoyed during their pilgrimage from Egypt. He did not want them to lose sight of the love behind God's dealings with the people throughout their journey but admonished them to reciprocate same with commitment and obedience to His word. He wanted them to learn from the mistakes for which the Canaanites were being driven out so that they could possess the land and enjoy God's manifold provisions. Before crossing Jordan, therefore, he continued with his exhortation and review of their past in order to prepare them for a peaceful, prosperous sojourn in Canaan.

The prophet points the nation's attention to their utter unworthiness of all the blessings which they had received and also the ones reserved for them in the land. He did this wisely through a review of their past disobedience and rebellion. Though he assured them of their ultimate victory, he cautioned them not to attribute it to their own merit or wisdom. The chapter ends with Moses' mediatory roles in averting divine destruction of the whole nation.

Question 1: Why did Moses rehearse Israel's rebellion again?

CONQUEST AND VICTORY IN BATTLE (Deuteronomy 9:1-3; Joshua 6:20; 8:24-26; 10:28,29,39-43; 11:7-23; Exodus 14:14; 23:27,28; 2 Chronicles 20:29; Luke 10:19).

“Hear, O Israel: Thou art to pass over Jordan this day, to go in to possess nations greater and mightier than thyself, cities great and fenced up to heaven” (Deuteronomy 9:1).

Israel was informed that they shall shortly cross the remaining barrier into the land they had hoped and laboured to see for the past forty years. Without doubt, they had come a long way through “**that terrible wilderness**” and many people of the generation that left Egypt had died in the wilderness due to their often disregard for divine instruction. They had had their moments of ups and downs that threatened to destroy the dream of a permanent homeland. At a point, the Scripture records that the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way (Numbers 21:4). Therefore, the people needed this announcement that shortly, they should enter into the land where they would be secure and have plenty without scarceness. Today, God's people need to be encouraged to press on and be reminded that the coming of the Lord is near and we shall be delivered from this present evil world and translated into the tranquil presence of the Prince of peace. Now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. Very soon we shall sing the glorious song of the redeemed in the Kingdom of the dear Son of God. Believers should hear and cheer up because

soon it shall be said, **“behold, the Bridegroom cometh, go ye out to meet him”**.

However, the children of Israel had a formidable army that must be conquered before they entered into the land. The nations they were to dispossess were mighty, **“a people great and tall”** whose cities were properly defended and **“fenced up to heaven”**. Of these giants are the children of Anak; common fame had it that there was no standing before them because of their military prowess. Thus, Israel was let into the opposition that awaited them, not to instil fear but to install faith in the power of the Almighty God. Believers should be aware also that though we are dealing with an old, stubborn adversary, with several years’ experience of cunning wickedness, our God will fight for us. We should anchor our faith in the Lion of the tribe of Judah who **“hath prevailed”** and has given us victory. **“Understand therefore this day, that the LORD thy God is he which goeth over before thee; as a consuming fire he shall destroy them, and he shall bring them down before thy face: so shalt thou drive them out, and destroy them quickly, as the LORD hath said unto thee”** (Deuteronomy 9:3). In contrast with the famed defence of the enemy, the people of God had for themselves **“The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle”** (Psalms 24:8). He is described as a consuming fire; therefore, everything in His path are as good as stubble. He defended Israel in Egypt and overthrew the armies of Pharaoh at the Red Sea. He defeated the confederacy of kings that rose against Joshua and utterly destroyed them. No man was able to stand before Joshua in battle as the Lord had promised. Today, those who lean on Him can rest in the belief that their God will fight for them no matter the number and strength of their enemies. In Christ, we have power to tread upon serpents and scorpions and there shall be no hurt (Luke 10:19).

Question 2: What should be our attitude to life’s challenges?

CAUTION AGAINST VAIN-GLORIOUS BOASTING (Deuteronomy 9:4-6; Exodus 32:9; Daniel 9:18; Romans 4:16; Titus 3:5).

“Speak not thou in thine heart... saying, For my righteousness the LORD hath brought me in to possess this land...”

The Lord warned the people against the danger of ascribing victory to their righteousness and uprightness of heart. They were to guard against the vanity of supposing that their merit procured victory for them over their enemies. Neither were they to entertain any thought that they were responsible for their conquest. Instead, they should realize that the land they were about to possess is, first, the result of God’s faithfulness to the promise He had made to the patriarchs (Genesis 13:15-17; 17:8; 26:3; Exodus 6:8). Second, it is also because divine justice dictates that the wicked will not forever enjoy the works of their hand; they will surely receive a just retribution for their wickedness (Proverbs 11:21; 16:5). It was imperative that God would visit the inhabitants of Canaan with His judgment and withdraw their inheritances from them because of their transgressions. Sinners should remember that judgment looms if they fail to repent; it does not matter how long it tarries, it shall surely come because

“though the mills of God grinds slowly... with patience He stands waiting, with exactness He grinds all”.

It is important that Moses warned the people of the danger of being self-conceited; if they did, it would amount to a gross misunderstanding of divine workings and a display of ignorance of their past which had been marred with steady disobedience and hardness of heart. He told them: **“Understand therefore, that the LORD thy God giveth thee not this good land to possess it for thy righteousness; for thou art a stiffnecked people”** (verse 6).

Question 3: How can believers be free from the spirit of pride?

Saints of God know **“that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all”** (Ecclesiastes 9:11). Daniel knew that Israel would not be delivered from Babylon except through divine intervention hence, his intercession exalted the righteousness and faithfulness of God but ascribed utter unworthiness to his people. David testified that he fought and won battles through God’s enablement and power (2 Samuel 22:30). Paul said, the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty through God (2 Corinthians 10:4). Therefore, whatever victories, successes and breakthroughs we have today are possible, **“not by works of righteousness which we have done... but a result of God’s mercy towards us.**

Question 4: Why should believers constantly praise God?

CATALOGUES OF VICIES BY THE PEOPLE (Deuteronomy 9:7-17,22-24; 1 Samuel 8:7; Nehemiah 9:26; Isaiah 59:13; Hosea 7:14).

To dislodge every presumptuous idea of their own righteousness from their heart, Moses proceeded to remind them of the rebellious acts which they committed so frequently that it had become their second nature. Their behaviour was a continual ache in the heart of God and should have earned them summary elimination but for divine pity. Therefore, he charged them to **“remember, and forget not, how thou provokedst the LORD thy God to wrath in the wilderness: from the day that thou didst depart out of the land of Egypt, until ye came unto this place, ye have been rebellious against the LORD”** (verse 7). This general statement was followed up with the specific acts of their disobedience.

Question 5: Enumerate some acts of rebellion by the children of Israel on their way to the Promised Land.

Moses made mention of the matter of idolatry at Horeb, when the people made a golden calf and worshipped it (Exodus 32:1-9; Deuteronomy 9:8). This act was committed in the place where the law was given and they were expressly forbidden from worshipping idols (Exodus 20:1-6). But while the mountain was yet burning and Moses had gone up to obtain the law, they turned aside quickly to worship the work of their hands (Deuteronomy 9:16).

Then he referred to their experiences at Taberah, where God sent fire into their camp because of their murmuring (Numbers 11:1-5; Deuteronomy 9:22); and at Massah and Merribah, when they chided with Moses and tempted God because of thirst for water (Exodus 17:1-7; Deuteronomy 9:22). Also at Kibroth-hattavah, the graves of lusts, the dainties they coveted became their poison (Numbers 11; 4,5; Deuteronomy 9:22). Mention was also made of the rebellion of Miriam against Moses, borne out of envy and jealousy. The judgment that followed made her leprous and delayed the movement of the entire congregation. Then at Kadesh-barnea, they were reminded of the twelve spies sent to preview the land of Canaan who brought back an evil report (Numbers 13:26-32; 14:1-12; Deuteronomy 9:23). He concluded with a verdict: **“Ye have been rebellious against the LORD from the day that I knew you”** (verse 24).

Question 6: How can believers avoid falling into the same mistakes that the children of Israel made?

From the foregoing, the counsel of scriptures to New Testament believers is that: **“Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them... Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand. Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.”** (1 Corinthians 10:6-11).

CONCILIATORY EFFORTS ON ISRAEL’S BEHALF (Deuteronomy 9:18,19,25-29; Exodus 17:4; Numbers 11:2; 12:13; 14:13-20; 21:7-9; Psalms 106:23).

As a result of Israel’s incessant rebellion, God was determined to disown and destroy them but for Moses’ advocacy on their behalf. Their repeated disobedience and idolatry led to their estrangement from God with the attendant consequences. Had Moses not stood in the gap between the righteous God and the continually sinning Israelites, the Lord would have overthrown the entire nation. **“Let me alone, (He thundered) that I may destroy them, and blot out their name from under heaven: and I will make of thee a nation mightier and greater than they”** (Deuteronomy 9:14). Moses’ mediatory and intercessory role was so aptly applied as to produce and deepen a godly sorrow for sin among the Israelites which in turn yielded true repentance. On God’s part, His attributes of mercy and forgiveness shone brightly as soon as the signs of contrition and repentance were noticed among His people.

The intercessor, Moses, was frequently rewarded with the granting of his heart’s desire, resulting in the deliverance of the nation. Had he not effectively utilized the privileges of the intercessory ministry, the nation of Israel would have been destroyed talk less of reaching the Promised Land.

Question 7: What can believers achieve through the intercessory ministry today?

Believers have a lot to learn from this great intercessor. One, we can be effective intercessors for our own generation today and avert God’s punishment on

sinners. When we pray earnestly for their conversion, God will hear. Two, lives can be changed and transformed if we pray to God for change. Profligates and abandoned characters can be reclaimed through the grace of God. Three, there can be reunion and healing of wounds in families whose dreams have been shattered by the enemy. Four, good governance can be birthed in nations that have hitherto been marred by corruption and other vices. Five, hitherto barred doors against the gospel can be opened for the King of glory to come in. Six, churches and denominations that have refused to embrace the sound teaching of God's word can open up to the truth. Seven, we can pray down God's revival fire in the church, setting the stage for mass conversions among the people.

God is still looking for intercessors like Moses in these last days, who will stand in the gap between Him and the people of this generation (Ezekiel 22:30,31).

LESSON 473

GOD'S LONGSUFFERING TOWARDS ISRAEL

MEMORY VERSE: "And he remembered for them his covenant, and repented according to the multitude of his mercies" (Psalm 106:45)

TEXT: Deuteronomy 10:1-22

A review of Israel's experiences with God by Moses in the preceding chapter revealed their failings and unfaithfulness to God. The essence of this review was to warn them against the likelihood of returning to a life of disobedience that attracted divine discipline. The inconsistency of their fathers' relationship with the Lord and the accompanying unpleasant experiences had negatively affected them too. To imbibe such traits that annoy God would make them miss God's plan for their lives as their fathers did. Having rehearsed the nation's collective sin in making the golden calf at Sinai and the overwhelming perplexity that made him to break the first set of stone tables in the preceding chapter, it was important to retell the matter of the second set of stone because of the vital lessons inherent therein.

Question 1: Why was it necessary for Moses to retell the matter of the rewritten laws?

God's command that Moses should make a new set of stone tables shows the cost of a congregation's sins on a committed leader. For Moses, it took a fresh forty days fast, an intense session of intercession and the rigour of hewing a new set of stone tables. This would have been unnecessary if Israel had remained faithful to God. Unlike the Israelites, each member of a Bible-believing church should avoid any act that is likely to place a needless ministerial burden on the leader. Israel's sin attracted divine wrath and displeasure: many lives were lost and there was a long delay in their journey to the Promised Land. God however bore long with them. This is evident in the condescension of the Almighty God to write the laws for the second time. It indicates that the laws constitute an indispensable element in His covenant relationship with His people.

In today's text, Moses challenged the new generation to completely comport to God's requirement in appreciation of His gracious dealings with them. He outlined the basic requirements for their continuance in the enjoyment of divine favour and concluded by describing the incomparable nature and excellent qualities of Israel's God. By this, he hoped to put an end to the nation's disturbing propensity to flirt with the idols of neighbouring nations to the shame and peril of their souls (Exodus 32:1-6; Numbers 25:1-3,9).

PROOFS OF GOD'S GOODNESS TO ISRAEL (Deuteronomy 10:1-11; Exodus 34:1-7).

Moses' speech in our text contains four major proofs of God's goodness to the nation. The first was the renewal of the covenant which the rewritten laws signify. It was proof of their restoration to fellowship with God. **"And I will write on the tables of stone like unto the first tablets which thou breakest..."** (verse 2). These laws on the second set of stone tables were exactly the same words the first set contained. This indicates that God's word is as immutable as Himself. It needs no modification or revision. It accommodates no editing or embellishment (Proverbs 30:5,6).

God's command to Moses concerning the preservation of the tables of stone was clear. **"...and thou shalt put them in the ark. And I made an ark of shittim wood and hewed two tablets of stones like unto the first, and went up into the mountain having the two tables in my hand"** (verse 2,3). The ark was made of shittim, a wood of long endurance for the purpose of preserving the laws for up-coming generations. Even though it also contained the golden pot of manna as an emblem of divine provision for the nation in transit, and the budded Aaron's rod as an evidence of divine ordination of the Levitical priesthood, it was the commandment that defines the ark - the ark of the covenant (Hebrews 9:4). This implies the preponderance of God's law over any benefit of whatever description. **"And he wrote on the tables, according to the first writing, the ten commandments, which the Lord spake unto you on the mountain out of the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly: and the Lord gave them unto me"** (verse 4). That the laws were written with the finger of God forecloses the possibility of human mutilation. As such, it was to serve as a basis of confirming the correctness of the laws to be written later by Moses and copied by the priests. It was also on the basis of these laws that the deceptions in the religious practices of paganistic neighbouring nations who claim to have relationship with the true God can be deciphered and avoided (Isaiah 8:20).

"And I turned myself and came down from the mountain and put the tables in the ark ... and there they be, as the Lord commanded me" (verse 5). The ark serves as an enclosure to protect the stone tables from dust, dirt or any defilement. Kept securely in the ark, the law is protected from external influences; and from there it guides the life of the nation. The law of God in the heart of the Christian makes him to be firmly rooted in the truth. It also directs his thoughts, actions and lifestyle the way Christ prescribes. This is why every believer should regularly fill his heart with God's word through daily Bible reading and meditation.

The second evidence of God's gracious dealing with Israel in our text was the sustenance of the priesthood. **"And the children of Israel took their journey from Beeroth of the children of Jaakan to Mosera: there Aaron died... and Eleazar his son ministered in the priest's office in his stead"** (verse 6). The central point here was the death of Aaron, the first high priest. Though he could not continue by reason of death, God graciously commanded an order of succession in perpetuity.

Question 2: What was the significance of the succession of Aaron by his son?

The reminder on the succession arrangement was to warn the nation against any insurrection or usurpation of the priesthood as previously attempted by

Korah and his company (Numbers 16:1-3,8-11). Also, the immediate succession of the dead high priest by a new one prevented the existence of any vacuum in the priesthood that might be detrimental to the nation. This foreshadows God's care for the New Testament period in which Christ our High Priest has an unceasing ministry, "**seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for us**" (Hebrews 7:25). The unchangeable priesthood of Christ affords the contemporary believer the privilege of a better and greater opportunity of securing an enduring divine favour.

Added to this is the separation of the tribe of Levi in lieu of the firstborn of all the Israelites. "**At that time the Lord separated the tribe of Levi...**" (verse 8). Though not stated chronologically, its mention is appropriate as the priesthood and the ministry of the Levites are inseparably related. The intent of this inclusion here was to remind the nation of God's choice of the Levites as His ministers on behalf of Israel. Having forgiven them for their involvement in the shameful incident of the golden calf following their swift response to Moses' call to repentance, the Lord later chose to receive them in His service in replacement of the first born sons. This shows the great benefit of prompt repentance. For the tribe of Levi, it turned the age-long patriarchal curse to blessing consequent upon divine intervention which culminated in the exaltation of the tribe of Levi above all their brethren in matters relating to the worship of the Almighty God, which is the most important aspect of human existence (Genesis 49:6; Numbers 3:11-13; 8:18,19). This reveals the great privilege of sonship and service awaiting every sinner/backslider who quickly turns from sin to receive remission through Christ (1 Timothy 1:12-14).

The work of the Levites was "**...to bear the ark of the LORD, to stand before the LORD, and to bless in his name unto this day**" (verse 8). Bearing the ark refers to the responsibility of carrying the furniture, fittings, curtains, boards and all that pertains to the tabernacle whenever the need arose (Numbers 3:23-26,29-37; 4:4,33). Standing to minister entails offering sacrifices, lighting the lamps, keeping the sacred fire burning, purifying the unclean, evaluating things devoted to God and officiating in the holy place. The last refers to the benediction ministry of the priests. Other duties included teaching the law to the people, adjudicating in conflict situations among the people, and encouraging the people on the eve of battle. Every believer in Christ is a priest to God. "**But ye are a chosen generation, royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people...**" (1 Peter 2:9). Like the Levites, he should be diligent to serve the Lord with all his ability, strength and talents (Matthew 25:14-30). He is also commissioned to teach all nations to observe all things that Christ has commanded. This places a great responsibility of world evangelization on the Christian community from our immediate vicinity to regions far beyond through personal, co-operative and corporate efforts, without minding financial implications or any other challenge. Believers are to preach repentance to sinners as well as encourage one another to brace up to challenges of the Christian calling (Matthew 10:24,25).

The third proof of God's longsuffering in our text was the acceptance of Moses' intercession on Israel's behalf. "**And I stayed in the mount, according to the first time, forty days and forty nights and the Lord hearkened unto me...would not destroy thee**" (verse 8). This was not the only time God consented to Moses' plea on the nation's behalf. He was merciful to them at the instances of the people's defection consequent upon the evil report of the ten

spies, the rebellion of Korah's company, and the murmuring of the congregation at the fate of Korah's company (Numbers 13:31; 4:12; 16:19,20,41-45). His yielding to Moses' petitions was a proof of His gracious forbearance with His people.

The fourth proof was the continuous guidance of the nation towards the Promised Land despite the wilderness wandering. In the process, he sustained them with divine provisions, preserved them from the armies of their enemies, secured for them the land of the heathen and finally settled them in the land of Canaan (Psalm 105:40-45). This shows the commitment of God to keeping His promise to the patriarchs such that from this generation forward, the nation might enjoy the blessings of the covenant.

PROFITING FROM GOD'S GRACE (Deuteronomy 10:12-16; 26:16-19; 28:15,45; Psalm 89:5-14; 112:1,2; Proverbs 3:7,8; Matthew 22:37; John 12:50; Hebrews 9:14).

“And now Israel, what doth the Lord thy God require of thee...” (verse 12,13). Being a faithful minister, Moses told the people that their continued enjoyment of God's favour was predicated on certain conditions.

Question 3: What conditions must believers fulfil in order to benefit from God's great promises?

The conditions to benefit from God's blessing in contemporary times are not different from those outlined by Moses to the Israelites in our text. One, **“to fear the Lord”**. For His majesty and mighty works which He did in Egypt, and in the wilderness, Israel needed to fear God. Being the Creator of the universe, Sustainer of its order, and the ultimate Judge of every human action, God is greatly to be feared by all. Christ forewarns us to fear God (Luke 12:5). But this does not suggest a slavish mentality or timid disposition. Rather, it implies a reverential adoration in acknowledgment of His authority. Two, **“to walk in all his ways”**. God's way is perfect. Israel as well as the Christians are called to a life of perfection in truth and integrity without hypocrisy. It implies living in the Spirit and not after the flesh; by faith, not by sight. Three, **“to love him”** supremely with the totality of one's being. It is to choose Him in preference of any carnal pleasure, earthly pursuit or worldly acclaim. Love makes one to cherish and long for the company of his object of affection. Believers should therefore desire close contact with God through fellowship and personal communion (Romans 13:10). It can also be expressed through giving. Like Israel, believers are to liberally offer their best to God.

Four, they were commanded **“to serve the LORD thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul”**. By this command, the Israelites were to regard God as a Master to whom they owed unalloyed allegiance. They were to accept the God of heaven as their national deity and hate every idol. Like the Levites were chosen to serve on behalf of Israel, the nation in turn was preferred above others to be a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:3-6). This was a mark of acceptance of the people as God's prized possession. Five, the Israelites must **“keep the commandments of the LORD, and his statutes”**. This implies performance of all that God prescribes and avoidance of all He forbids. No condition on earth excuses any one from obedience to God's commandment. One's eternal destiny

depends on how he relates to God's commandments. Six, they were required to "**circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart**". It implies the cleansing of the heart from all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness. It is the substance of what the physical removal of the male foreskin symbolizes (Romans 2:28,29).

Question 4: What are the benefits of fulfilling the conditions outlined by Moses for the contemporary believer?

Each of the conditions has a unique advantage for the believer. Godly fear is attended by the benefits of riches, honour and life (Proverbs 22:14). Walking in God's way affords the believer the benefits of exaltation, prosperity, divine enablement, longevity and peace (2 Samuel 22:31; Proverbs 10:29; Deuteronomy 5:33; Psalm 37:37). Loving God with all the heart secures great and bountiful blessings for the believer (1 Corinthians 2:9). A total submission of oneself to always attend to God's pleasures and advancement of His interest confers divine honour (John 12:26). Heart circumcision makes the heart ready to yield to God in every circumstance and be separated for sacred service. Obedience to God's commandments offers one the right to eternal citizenship in the city of God.

PROFILE OF ISRAEL'S GOD (Deuteronomy 10:17-22; 7:21; Job 37:10-12,22-24; Psalm 46:1-11; 93:4,5).

After recounting undeniable proofs of God's goodness to the nation and admonishing them on the conditions to continue to profit from God's grace, Moses then gave a resounding profile of Israel's God.

Question 5: Describe the attributes that prove the superiority of God over idols.

"For the LORD your God is God of gods..." (verse 17). This clearly shows that JEHOVAH is by far more excellent than all known gods of neighbouring nations and unknown fetishes in far away lands. It implicitly portrays the absurdity of serving any idol **"... and Lord of lords..."**. As it is in contemporary times, people refer to kings and magistrates as lords. But Israel's God is incomparably higher in status, scope of influence and tenure of office **"...yea the Lord sitteth king for ever"** (Psalm 29:10). He is more honourable than any earthly authority. Therefore, the believer needs not fear what anyone anywhere could do inasmuch as they have the Almighty God for a defence and hope. **"...And a great God and a mighty..."** This describes God's awesome power and transcendent ability. He never gets weary, faint or exhausted (Isaiah 40:28-30). So the Christian can depend on Him in any circumstance. **"And a terrible..."** This could have a two-edge connotation, depending on whether one is on God's side or against Him. The Lord had done terrible things on behalf of Israel and still promised to do more if they continued in His terms. But if they defected, He would punish them for their sin as He does for others because **"he regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward"**. Moses had to emphasize God's character of impartiality so that Israel might be careful not to go the way of the heathen and suffer the same fate like they did.

As the chapter closes, Moses admonished the nation to imbibe God's character of compassion towards orphans, widows and strangers (verse 18,19). As they had enjoyed God's mercies in Egypt, so should they show similar concern and kindness to people in similar conditions. This challenges every believer to be "**followers of Christ as dear children**" (Ephesians 5:1). Having described the incomparable attributes of God, His impartiality towards the underprivileged, Moses then reminded the people of their responsibility to fear, serve and cleave unto God (verse 20). Finally, he concluded with a testimony of God's faithfulness as a basis for the nation as well as the commonwealth of Christians to worship Him as deity, love Him as Father and serve Him as Lord.

LESSON 474

GENTILES RECEIVE THE GOSPEL

MEMORY VERSE: “**And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising**” (Isaiah 60:3).

TEXT: Acts 11:1-30.

The conversion of Cornelius and household through the ministrations of apostle Peter was a novel and phenomenal event that witnessed the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Gentiles. This incidence transcended Peter's knowledge as he contended with the initial revelation from God concerning the salvation of the Gentiles. This is because the Jews had the erroneous notion that the gospel was their exclusive preserve. Some of the apostles and brethren in Judea especially those who were of the circumcision heard of the development and wondered why Peter should take the gospel across Jewish territory. Thus, they contended with him and he, in turn, narrated the circumstances surrounding his 'unexpected' action. Before this Spirit-led action of Peter in the previous chapter which he explains in this lesson, the church did not make any concerted effort to preach the gospel to the Gentiles.

Question 1: Explain the negative effect of racial prejudice and religious bigotry on soul-winning efforts.

This happened in spite of Christ's commission that the gospel be preached to all men (Mark 16:15). This last command has overwritten His earlier instruction to the disciples that the gospel be preached only to the Jews. Thus, He went ahead to give the order and progression in the preaching of the gospel when He promised that the disciples would receive power to witness in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and continue unto the uttermost part of the earth. Again, God who gave the laws and distinction concerning clean and unclean animals is the One who relaxed it in Peter's vision. The believer needs to be spiritually sensitive to know when God restrains from certain actions at a particular period of time and gives His nod for His will to be done on the same issue at another time instead of remaining rigid and resistant to change from the Spirit of God. Believers must also avoid building racial prejudice and religious bigotry on God's holy principles so as not to inhibit the progress of the gospel or limit their own usefulness in spiritual service. It can make a true servant of God to disobey His call to win people of other tribes to the Kingdom. Racial prejudice was the undoing of prophet Jonah who initially refused God's call to preach to the people in Nineveh. Suffice it to say that it can make the believer to disobey God's revealed will in any area of life, including choice of a marriage partner.

ACCUSATION OF PETER AND HIS RESPONSE (Acts 11:1-18; Luke 24:44-48; Malachi 1:11; Galatians 2:11-14; Proverbs 15:1; 1 Peter 3:15).

The news of the conversion of Cornelius, a Gentile and his entire household quickly spread to Judea. The reaction of the apostles and brethren that heard that Peter went to the Gentiles calls for attention. Rather than praise God and rejoice that the gospel has reached them, they chided with Peter **“saying, thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and didst eat with them”**. Today, church leadership, administrators and elders should be cautious not to fall into the error of these brethren. Jesus’ mandate to **“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature”** transcends territorial, tribal, racial, religious and educational barriers. Preachers and ministries that expressly or technically restrict their outreach to towns and cities or to a specific section of the society are guilty of the same error of those that criticized Peter for going in to **“men uncircumcised”**. The target audience Christ commands that the gospel should be preached to was not qualified. The period of relevance of physical circumcision as a proof of knowledge of and relationship with God, according to the Abrahamic covenant, had expired. Even then, the Jews did not keep the covenant; they were as disobedient to the word of God as the Gentiles.

Question 2: What should be the believer’s attitude to accusations?

Peter responded to his accusers in meekness and this is instructive to believers today as to what our attitudes to criticism should be. We must use soft words to turn away wrath and pacify our accusers (Proverbs 15:1). Peter rehearsed the matter from the beginning, explaining to them that it was the Holy Spirit that led him to go to Cornelius. He objectively stated what happened to justify his actions. The points he made are that (i) he received a *vision* that nullified the distinction the ceremonial law set between the Jews and the Gentiles; (ii) he heard the over-ruling *voice* from heaven that gave him liberty against his own reservation to relate with those whom they had hitherto considered unclean as God had cleansed them; (iii) the things which he disputed were unclean in his vision were drawn again to heaven to prove the source of the revelation; (iv) *the Spirit* bade him go with the messengers Cornelius sent to him; (v) some *brethren* who had respect for circumcision went with him and were witnesses; (vi) *an angel* spoke to Cornelius also to send for him to speak to them about the salvation of their souls; (vi) as he was preaching to them, the *Holy Ghost* came on them as He descended on the Jewish believers; (vii) this was confirmed by the *word* of God that, **“John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost”** which Peter remembered while ministering to them.

Question 3: Why is it necessary to receive the Holy Spirit’s guidance before embarking on a major outreach?

Any believer who claims that God is leading him/her in any aspect of life and service need to have a clear testimony of divine approval. Though the gospel is universal – for the circumcised and the uncircumcised - it is a spiritual work and warfare that must be done with all seriousness. No believer should embark on missionary work without a clear calling of God to serve in that capacity. Note that God is still actively involved in evangelism and spreading of the gospel today. He is the Invisible Partner in the gospel work and is ever ready to instruct, lead, direct and protect His servants. He understood Peter’s

reservations about the Gentiles and hence convinced him to go with the emissaries from Cornelius. It is however important to wait patiently on the Lord for His instructions before organizing major outreaches (Acts 16:6-10). All souls are to be harvested to the Lord through the gospel, no doubt, but there is an appropriate timing to enter a particular ripened field for harvesting.

The effect of Peter's obedience and the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles is cheering (Acts 11:15,17; Mark 16:20). If all believers today will, in obedience to the Lord, preach the pure and true gospel, Christ will "draw all men" unto Himself.

To round off his defence, Peter declared that he could not have done otherwise. **"Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as he did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God?"** God, His word and will are irresistible by man. As Creator of the universe, He said, **"I will work and who shall let (hinder) it"**. No sinner, as stout-hearted as he may be, can withstand the omnipotent God and the gospel He has given to be preached for the salvation of man. Christ spoke to Saul that he could not kick against the pricks. The realization of this truth makes the believer not to oppose God's plan of salvation as that would be an impossible task.

Having heard Peter's narration of the move of God in Caesarea, the brethren **"held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life"** (Acts 11:18). They accepted Peter's explanation and surrendered to the overruling will of the Holy Ghost. The believer must not only submit to the revealed will of God concerning sinners' salvation but must make concerted efforts to win them to the Lord. It is important for believers to search the scriptures on such a thorny issue and also pray earnestly to hear from the Lord before contending with supposed offenders. Had the Jewish believers done that, they would have discovered that the salvation of the Gentiles had been prophesied in the scriptures (Genesis 12:3,5; 22:18; Psalms 22:27-31; 65:2,5; 86:9; 102:18; Isaiah 2:2,3; 9:2; Jeremiah 16:19-21; Hosea 2:23; Zechariah 2:10,11; Matthew 3:9; 8:11; Luke 13:29-30; John 10:16; Acts 1:8; 9:15). Describing their salvation as a mystery that was revealed through the Holy Spirit, Paul the apostle said that he was chosen for the purpose of preaching the gospel to them (Ephesians 3:1-8; 2 Timothy 1:11; Romans 11:11-13,17-21). In His great mercy and love, God has granted the privilege of salvation to the Gentiles. To receive this gift requires repentance from sin and faith in Christ as Saviour and Lord.

ACCELERATION OF THE GOSPEL THROUGH PERSECUTION (Acts 11:19-21; 8:4-8; Matthew 10:7,23, 26; Acts 4:18-20; 12:24).

Question 4: In what ways can persecution be profitable to the gospel?

The martyrdom of Stephen and the eventual scattering of the believers led to the preaching of the gospel to far regions such as Phoenice, Cyprus and Antioch. Though persecution makes us uncomfortable, it helps us to redirect our focus and fulfil the great commission. Both in Bible times and contemporary days, the aim of persecutors had always been to hinder the spread of the gospel (Acts 4:7) but God has always used it to accelerate the

spread of the good news. Persecution, though calculated to confound the believer, should not be allowed to intimidate the heaven-bound soldiers of the Lord for that is the lot of every child of God. The fire of persecution should rekindle our love for God and strengthen our resolve to spread the gospel diligently and faithfully.

THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL OF GRACE (Acts 11:22-20; Romans 1:16,17; Ephesians 2:8,9; Romans 6:1,2; John 15:4,5).

The news of this spreading fire of revival, engulfing both Jews and Gentiles and leaving in its trail, myriads of converts, soon reached the headquarters of the Apostles in Jerusalem. The church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch to verify the news and to organize proper follow-up of the converts. When Barnabas came to Antioch, he saw the genuineness of the conversion of the new converts as a manifestation of “**the grace of God**”. God is so merciful that He granted the Gentiles “**repentance unto life**” as the brethren who contended with Peter concluded. And having repented, they received and lived a life that revealed they had the “**grace of God**”, to which Barnabas bore witness. We are saved, sanctified and filled with the Holy Ghost by the grace of God. All the blessings that God has and gives is by His grace, not by merit. Saved by grace, we are also sustained by His grace.

That we are saved and sustained by grace does not mean we do not have any part to play in our being sustained by God. It is no wonder then that when Barnabas had seen the grace of God in the converts at Antioch that he “**exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord**”. New converts need to be taught to cleave unto the Lord or abide in Him by reading and studying the Bible, praying always, attending Christian fellowships and sharing the testimony of their conversion with others with the purpose of bringing them to Christ. But follow-up workers must be careful to have genuine testimony of Christian experiences such as Barnabas possessed.

Question 5: What lessons can we learn from the life and ministry of Barnabas?

“**For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith**”. Barnabas efforts at following up the Jewish and Grecian converts complemented the soul-winning work of the disciples. He was fruitful as “**much people was added unto the Lord**.” The ministry of Barnabas resulted in the growth of the Antioch church. Basic Christian experiences of salvation, sanctification and Holy Ghost baptism are required of a believer who seeks to be as fruitful as Barnabas was. Besides, faith, prayer and knowledge of the word of God will make the believer excel in establishing new converts in the faith. Nicknamed earlier as a son of consolation, Barnabas went to “**seek Saul**” who had previously gone to Tarsus and brought him to join the church at Antioch. New converts must be sought out and integrated into the body of Christ. Barnabas did not only integrate Saul into the body of Christ but also mentored him. Both of them “**taught much people**”.

The resultant transformation of life and character of believers at Antioch was glaring: “**the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch**”. Christian

leaders need to take follow-up work more seriously as the early church did. As believers, we must live to let others see Jesus in us.

Antioch soon became a centre of spiritual activity as prophets from Jerusalem came there. In one of their meetings, Agabus prophesied of an impending famine which came to pass in the days of Claudus Caesar. In response, the disciples in Antioch sent relief materials to the brethren in Judea. It is evident that the church in Antioch was spiritual and responsive to the needs of other believers. Thus, the disciples lived up to their name as 'little christs' or 'christ-like' in meeting the needs of others. Believers need to bear other people's burden and so fulfil the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2).

Question 6: With reference to the believers in Antioch, state the characteristics of a true believer.

LESSON 475

PETER'S DELIVERANCE AND HEROD'S DEATH

MEMORY VERSE: "And when Peter was come to himself, he said, Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent his angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews" (Acts 12:11).

TEXT: Acts 12:1-25

The vision and commission Peter received from the Lord to take the gospel to Cornelius' household in the preceding chapters opened the door of salvation to the Gentile world. This happened in spite of the wave of resistance and persecution stirred against the disciples by the Jewish religious leaders who feared that the Christian faith might displace their established religion, Judaism. Herod (Agrippa), the reigning king was also irked by these developments and tried to hinder its further spread. He was an unrighteous king who hated the gospel and its holy principles being propagated by the early disciples. Thus, he decided to persecute the disciples to curtail the spread of the gospel. **"Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the Church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword."** His murder of the disciple, James is a proof he did not know God. James became the second person to lose his life for the sake of the gospel. It is obvious that wherever the true gospel is preached, the kingdom of darkness is always opposed to it. But all efforts at reducing its impact, nay, stopping its spread over the ages, have rather resulted in its further propagation. Truly, the gates of hell cannot prevail against the church of Jesus Christ. Ignorance of this truth makes enemies of the gospel to self-destruct and the church to lose its useful members/ministers as we shall see in this study.

Question 1: Why did Herod kill James and also imprisoned Peter?

Persecution is not alien to the Christian faith. The Lord Jesus Christ revealed that believers **"shall be hated of all men for my name's sake: but he that endureth to the end shall be saved"** (Matthew 10:22). He was also hated without cause. He was rejected, crucified and put to death. The believer's persecution may come in various forms like being reviled, physically assaulted or being put to death. Peter's courage to continue to preach the gospel even after the cruel death of James is worth emulating. Believers then must be courageous to continue to preach the gospel no matter the challenges that attend their obedience to the great commission. This is in view of the promise of His continued presence and reward (Matthew 28:20; 16:25). This does not mean that the church should watch while unbelievers continue to kill its members one after another as Herod intended. **"And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. (Then were the days of unleavened bread)"**.

Jews who practise Judaism claim that they know God but they were happy that a disciple of Christ was killed. And this is the claim of many religious people today. It is clear however that they did not know Him since they harboured hatred/murderous thoughts, sought to kill and practised sin (1 John 3:15; John 8:37,44; Romans 1:28-32). It is abominable to kill fellow human beings to please self or others, or to kill for ritual/money-making purposes. Herod wanted to continue to kill to please the Jews and win their favour and support. He therefore went ahead to imprison Peter also. Christian believers must note that living to please men displeases God and it results in loss of favour and privileges with God. Believers are to please God rather than man (Acts 5:29). And this Christian attitude will wily-nily bring them into continual conflict with those who please self, society, and Satan.

PETER'S IMPRISONMENT AND THE CHURCH'S INTERCESSION (Acts 12:1-6; Psalm 2:1; Mark 4:37,38; Exodus 32:32; Genesis 18:23-33; Luke 18:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:17; James 5:13,14,16).

“Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the Church unto God for him. And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains: and the keepers before the door kept the prison” (Verses 5,6).

Question 2: What can you learn from the attitude and disposition of Peter at this time of trials?

Herod incarcerated Peter. He was securely kept and placed under constant watch of sixteen soldiers grouped into four. It is amazing to know that Peter slept soundly in spite of all the inhibitions. Once timid, Peter's life had been transformed by his encounter with Christ and the Spirit's power he received at Pentecost. Believers need the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to weather all storms of life.

This same attitude was found in Paul and Silas who sang psalms in prison. One may wonder how Peter, on the verge of being executed was able to sleep soundly that the angel who came to set him free had to smite him on his side before he could wake up. He was calm during trials as Christ, his Master who slept during a storm (Mark 4:37,38). We need to trust in God in times of trials and commit our lives to His care instead of becoming worried and anxious.

Question 3: From our text, what part should the believer as well as the church play when fellow Christians suffer intense persecution?

The response of the Church to the event of Peter's imprisonment shows what the attitude of believers should be when faced with challenges of life. Instead of bemoaning their fate, members of the early church engaged in intercessory prayers on behalf of Peter for divine intervention. Praying for divine intervention in the lives of fellow believers in critical situations of life should be the concern of all Christians. For instance, the intercession of Moses for the Israelites and Miriam for forgiveness and healing (Exodus 17:11-14; 32:11-14,31-34; Deuteronomy 9:18-29; Numbers 12:13); of Samuel for Israel's deliverance from oppression of the Philistines; of Abraham for preservation of Lot (Genesis 18:23-

33), of Paul for salvation of the religious Israelites and saints' spiritual growth (Romans 10:1-3; Ephesians 1:15-23); of Epaphras for saints' perfection (Colossians 4:12), were all answered by God. Intercessory prayer is borne out of selfless and sacrificial love, care and concern for the physical, moral and spiritual well-being of another. Christ, the greatest Intercessor prayed the Father to forgive those who were crucifying Him that they did not know what they were doing. The preservation of our present spiritual relationship with God to the end has become the subject of His unceasing intercession after His ascension to glory (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25).

Question 4: What are the conditions for answered prayers?

There is an awesome power in corporate prayers such as the early church had in our text. With it, one believer will be able to chase a thousand, **“and two put ten thousand to flight”** (Deuteronomy 32:30). With the certainty and promise of answer to prayer (Jeremiah 33:3; Zechariah 13:9; Luke 18:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:17), believers then must be united and focused in prayers to be able to receive answers from God. Besides, there must be contrition, whole heartedness, righteousness, faith, and obedience to the word, will and Spirit of God (2 Chronicles 7:14; Jeremiah 29:13; James 5:16; Mark 11:24; I John 3:22; 5:14). In the battle of life, prayer always wins.

PETER'S DELIVERANCE THROUGH AN ANGEL (Acts 12:7-19; Isaiah 65:24; Hebrews 11:6; 13:8; Luke 21:12-15; Isaiah 43:2-4; Acts 16:25-35; Daniel 3:8-28; 6:3-23; Genesis 39:7-9,16-20; 41:9-14; Hebrews 1:7,14; 13:2).

In response to the Church's intercessory prayers, the Lord sent an angel to rescue Peter. **“And behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison, and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And the chains fell off from his hands”** (verse 7).

The way Peter was delivered amidst tight security put in place by King Herod proves that no one can stand in the way of God or contend with the Almighty. Also, it proves the futility of carnal weapons. The believer's weapons are not carnal (2 Corinthians 10:4). The angel led Peter out of prison. He (Peter) thought it was a vision. However when Peter came to himself, he affirmed, **“Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent His angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from the expectation of the people of the Jews”** (verse 11). God will always deliver His own people in times of trouble. Having delivered Daniel from the lions' den, Shedrach, Meshak and Abednego from the burning fiery furnace, Paul and Silas from prison, He will not forsake you during persecution and trials of faith.

When Peter got to the house where believers gathered praying for him, Rhoda, the girl who saw him reported to those inside. They disbelieved her. They were stunned because the answer to their prayers came while they were still praying. It is comforting to know that the believer has a God who answers prayers with precision. Note, however, that they were specific in praying for Peter's deliverance. Believers need to be specific and ceaseless in their intercessory prayers for the salvation of loved ones, establishment of new converts suffering persecution, sustenance in grace and service of pastors, missionaries both at home and abroad. Prayer must also be extended to all believers who are suffering intense persecution in countries dominated by other

religions that God should preserve their lives from the murderous schemes of unreasonable and demon-inspired men.

Question 5: In what ways can angels minister to believers today?

Peter's miraculous release from prison was secured by an angel of God. Angels are ministering spirits sent by God to minister to the need of saints (Hebrews 1:7,14; 13:2). There are many records of angelic intervention both in the Old and New testaments. The angel of God went before the camp of Israel (Exodus 14:19); an angel shut the mouth of lions for Daniel's deliverance (Daniel 6:22). Angel Gabriel announced the birth of Jesus Christ (Luke 1:26-31). The promise: "**For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways**" (Psalms 91:11) did not terminate in Bible days. It is an age-long promise. There are myriads of testimonies of deliverances received through angelic beings who appeared in the form of humans. Though they are supernatural beings sent to minister to saints, we should not worship them as they are creatures of God (Revelations 22:8,9).

PRIDE OF HEROD AND DIVINE JUDGEMENT (Acts 12:20-25; Isaiah 42:8; 48:11; Jeremiah 13:16; 9:23,24; Proverbs 16:18; Romans 11:36; Luke 2:14; Jeremiah 4:2; Psalm 2:1,9; Daniel 4:3-33; Daniel 5:25-31; Philippians 2:5-10; James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:6).

The miraculous escape of Peter caused embarrassment, first, among the soldiers, and later, Herod. He ordered the immediate execution of the soldiers for their supposed dereliction of duty. "**Now as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers, what was become of Peter. And when Herod had sought for him, and found him not, he examined the keepers, and commanded that they should be put to death**" (verse 18,19). The scripture affirms that "**when the wicked**" are in rule, the people suffer. God's great revelation that all earthly rulers and kings need to take to heart is recorded in Proverbs 16:12: "**It is an abomination to kings to commit wickedness: for the throne is established by righteousness**".

Being precious in His sight, God has committed Himself to preserving His children at all cost. "**For I am the LORD thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour: I gave Egypt for thy ransom, Ethiopia and Seba for thee. Since thou wast precious in my sight, thou hast been honourable, and I have loved thee: therefore will I give men for thee, and people for thy life.**" The men who threw the three Hebrew children into the fiery furnace, conspirators against Daniel thrown into the lion's den, enemies of Mordecai and the Jews in Shushan, etc. all lost their lives. Beware!

Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, etc. all bore the brunt of divine judgment for their wickedness and abominable practices.

Question 6: What are the dangers inherent in wickedness and pride?

Herod had sown to the wind and he was soon to reap the whirlwind. Whatsoever a man sows that shall he reap. "**And Herod was highly displeased with them of Tyre and Sidon... And upon a set day Herod, ... made an oration unto them. And the people gave a shout saying, it is the voice of a god, and not of a man. And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him,**

because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost" (verses 20-23). He got the full recompense of all his wicked acts. He died a shameful death. God's miracle of judgement was meted upon him.

God is love but He is also a consuming fire. As much as God is gracious and merciful so can He be terrible in judgement. The glory due unto God must not be ascribed to self or any other creature. God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. The believer must humble himself like apostle Paul who said, "**I am what I am by the grace of God**". As God is expanding our ministry, talents, wealth and opportunities, this could bring praises from men that need support from us. Notwithstanding, we should glorify God in our hearts and let this be revealed in our response to the ovation. God in His power and authority knows the better way to avenge his saints of their enemies. Little did Herod realized that he was going to be punished for the previous misdeed. No sinner would go unpunished. Do not continue in sin because the longsuffering of God is delaying the divine judgment for past sins of abortions, theft, lies, fornication, adultery, idolatry, drunkenness, backbiting, cultism, etc. committed. His patience will only last for a while. Judgment on the unrepentant is certain, sudden and grievous – do not wait for it. Repent of sin and receive Jesus as your Saviour and Lord to escape divine punishment for sin.

After Herod's death, the word of God grew and multiplied. God in His omnipotence knows how to deal with those who oppose the truth. One truth that is highlighted by Herod's judgment is the fact that nothing can be done against the truth about Christ and His doctrines.

LESSON 476

PAUL AND BARNABAS COMMISSIONED

MEMORY VERSE: “As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work where unto I have called them” (Acts 13:2).

TEXT: Acts 13:1-14.

In the last study, we considered the miraculous deliverance of Peter from prison and the death of Herod.

It revealed the awesome power of corporate prayer the church has at its disposal. And through it, the church received and continued to have renewal of the power of the Holy Ghost, won many souls, secured divine intervention and deliverance for Peter, brought divine judgement upon Herod and advanced the cause of Christ. In this study we shall consider the commissioning of Barnabas and Saul by the Holy Ghost.

The Church at Antioch was founded by the Holy Ghost through the instrumentality of the disciples that fled at the persecution and death of Stephen (Acts 11:19-21). The impact of their preaching and the accompanying revival was so great that the early church sent Barnabas on fact-finding mission about the spiritual awakening, “**who when he came and had seen the grace of God was glad, and exhorted them all that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord**” (Acts 11:23). Moreover, he went to Tarsus to seek Saul, and assembled with the church at Antioch and taught for a whole year. The amazing life and teaching of the early believers had great impact on the people: “**And the disciples were called Christian first in Antioch**” (Acts 11:26). This further reveals the importance of teaching in actualizing the gospel mission, maturing believers and equipping workers for the kingdom.

Question 1: Mention some lessons that can be learnt from the prayer life of the ministers in the church at Antioch.

It is significant to note the unity of ministers in the church at Antioch in ministering to the Lord and depending on Him for direction. From this, we learn the need for corporate prayers in a local church, the need for ministers to seek the Lord for direction in ministry (Psalm 32:8), the need for ministers to seek the Lord to receive strength for greater exploit in ministry (Isaiah 10:28-31).

THE SPIRIT’S GUIDANCE ON MISSION (Acts 13:1,2; John 16:13-14; 15:26-27; 14:26; Acts 8:29; 10:19-20; 16:6-10).

“As they minister to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them” (Acts 13:2). The Holy Ghost is a divine personality who we must honour, love, worship, fellowship with and listen to. A person is anyone who can think, feel, act, speak

and be spoken to, anyone capable of self-consciousness, capable of personal decision and will. From the personal names, attributes, acts and offices of Holy Spirit, we know, He is a Person (John 16:7-15; Ephesians 4:30). He is the third Person in the God-head. He is eternally self-existent, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, immutable and holy. He is the Inspirer of the Holy Scriptures, the General Overseer of the militant church, the great Teacher, Comforter, Helper and Guide of all saints (Hebrews 9:14; Acts 9:24-29; 2 Timothy 3:15-17; 2 Peter 1:21; Acts 15:28,29; John 14:17,26). As we follow the birth and growth of the early church, we can see conspicuously the awesome role of the Holy Spirit in the preaching and direction of the gospel outreaches. At this time the Holy Ghost led the church in Antioch to commission Barnabas and Saul for missionary work.

Question 2: Who is the Holy Ghost, and what are His duties in a living church?

“The Holy Ghost said, separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them”. The word ‘separate’ here means to dedicate or set-apart for a special purpose. Therefore, the Holy Ghost in effect directed the Antioch church to dedicate Paul and Barnabas for special missionary assignment which He had chosen for them. The association between the duo can be noted in their earlier relationships, after Saul’s conversion, he came to Jerusalem when he was not accepted. Barnabas introduced him to the saints at Jerusalem. He also was instrumental to Saul’s fellowship with the saints at Antioch. Besides, he partnered with Saul as ministers sent to bring relief to the saints at Jerusalem. The choice of Paul and Barnabas here is a sign of divine approval of the ministerial association.

Question 3: What are the qualifications for higher assignment in God’s kingdom?

Several lessons can be learnt from the earlier devotedness, commitment, consecration and progressive companionship of Paul and Barnabas. Those who God chooses for greater and higher assignments have track records of faithfulness in previously assigned duties (Luke 16:1; Matthew 25:14-27). Also, they must have been actively involved at the local church level just as Paul and Barnabas were involved at the local church in Antioch before they were sent to the mission field.

In a general sense, every believer is saved to propagate the Great Commission. However, to be commissioned in a specific sense as revealed in our text requires God’s specific call which can be direct or indirect. Moreover, before their commission, we see their conversion (Acts 5:36-37; 9:4-6), their consecration and commitment to gospel preaching (Acts 9:20-22), their communion with the saints (Acts 11:22-26), and their commitment to personal development and discipleship (Acts 11:23-26). It is clear from the foregoing that God only uses vessels of high spiritual and moral qualities (2 Timothy 2:20,21).

THE SUBMISSIVENESS OF SANCTIFIED MINISTERS AND BRETHREN (Acts 13:3; Isaiah 6:8; Galatians 2:20; Philippians 1:21; Acts 4:18,20).

“And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away” (Acts 13:3).

Question 4: What lessons can we learn from the submission and obedience of the Antioch church to the Spirit’s instructions on Barnabas and Paul?

The simple and implicit obedience, understanding the purpose of ministry, submission to the Spirit’s leading of the Antioch church to the call of Barnabas and Saul, make this account a model for the church today in many ways. One, the church released the best of her ministers for mission work. Two, the church understood that the challenge in the mission field required the service of well-grounded and proven ministers to handle. Three, she understood that the training that Paul and Barnabas had received through the agency of the Holy Spirit was for taking the gospel beyond their borders. Four, having received the gospel by the hand of some who were converted at Jerusalem, they were grateful to contribute the two ministers to the greater work of saving souls. Five, they saw their commission as necessary and divine, for which they had to fast and pray again for their success in this Spirit-given assignment (John 4:35-36). Six, the church should have vision for missions. Seven, Paul and Barnabas themselves were willing to leave the warm fellowship of the Antioch church to go to unfamiliar mission field. Even today, members and ministers must be ready to accept the Spirit’s leading whenever they are required to leave their comfort zone and move to the rugged mission field.

SUNDRY CHALLENGES OF COMMISSIONED MINISTERS (Acts 13:4-14; 2 Corinthians 11:22-28; Acts 13:49-52; 14:19-22; Romans 8:35-39).

“So they, being sent forth by the Holy Ghost, departed unto Selucia; and from there they sailed to Cyprus” (Acts 13:4).

As Barnabas and Saul departed from Antioch they came to Selucia and then sailed to the island of Cyprus. Barnabas was a native of that country (Acts 4:36). Their being sent forth by the Holy Ghost was the encouraging factor in their understanding. They left Cyprus and arrived at Salamis, and when they had preached, they went onward through the isles till they came to Paphos. As the apostles arrived in Paphos, they were encouraged by the deputy of the country who had a holy inquisition for the gospel. It is noteworthy that many Sergius Paulus exists in our society who are seeking opportunity to hear the gospel. However, as they came in to see the deputy they encountered Elymas the sorcerer who opposed them, wanting to turn the deputy’s heart from the truth (Acts 13:6,7).

Question 5: Mention some challenges ministers encounter in the mission field.

Paul and Barnabas faced many challenges on their missionary journey. First, John, their assistant left them and went back to Jerusalem. Second, the physical challenge of traveling over unfamiliar terrain on land and sea. Three, Elymas the sorcerer, a false prophet, made it his purpose to withstand Barnabas and Paul with a goal to hinder the deputy from getting saved. We learn from this episode that Satan, in a special manner, is busy with great men

and women of power to keep them from being saved because he knows that their conversion will have influence upon many. Also, Satan has multiplied false prophets in the mission field to oppose gospel ministers and their messages (1 Peter 2:1-3; 2 Corinthians 11:13-15). The battle for souls should be taken seriously as a spiritual warfare. **“Then Saul, (who also is called Paul) filled with the Holy Ghost, set his eyes on him. And said, Oh full of all subtlety and all mischief, thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness, will thou not cease to pervert the right way of the Lord”** (Acts 13:9,10).

The name Bar-Jesus, meaning, the son of Jesus or son of salvation was a contradiction in terms. By character, this man resembled the devil in craftiness, mischief and was opposed to righteousness. His present crime was made plain: **“... will thou not cease to pervert the right way of the Lord”**. We learn then that, while it is good to give meaningful names to our children, we should endeavour to win them to Christ to have their nature transformed to reflect their names; every sinner, to an extent, has a resemblance of Bar-Jesus. This evil personality may never have expected a sudden judgement as passed on him through Paul. It shows that although God is longsuffering, His judgement is certain for unrepentant sinners (Romans 2:4; Psalm 50:15-22).

“And now, behold the hand of the Lord is upon thee, and thou shall be blind not seeing the sun for a season.

And immediately, there fell on him a mist and darkness, and he went about seeking some to lead him by the hand” (Acts 13:11). It is noteworthy that what Paul said did not come from personal resentment, but from a strong impression which the Holy Ghost made upon his spirit. **“The deputy when he saw what was done believed, being astonished at the doctrine of the Lord”** (Acts 13:12). Here we see the purpose of miracles. The ultimate purpose of all divine actions is to bring men to salvation.

Question 6: What challenge can the believers receive from the commitment of Paul and Barnabas to their commission?

Leaving Paphos, Paul and his company came to Perga in Pamphilia and from there to Antioch in Pisidia. We are not to return from the mission field until the work is done. We are not to be discouraged by the challenges we face on the mission field. The vision of divine reward by the Lord should keep us faithful. This study should spur all and sundry to prayers for our missionaries and move us to be more committed to soul-winning.

LESSON 477

PAUL'S FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY

MEMORY VERSE: “**And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then the end come**” (Matthew 24:14).

TEXT: Acts 13:15-52.

At the beginning of this chapter, we read of the commissioning of Paul and Barnabas for the work which the Holy Ghost had them called to. It was a definite call and commission as the duo were separated for missionary assignment to Gentile lands. When he encountered the Lord on his impious mission to Damascus to persecute Christians, Christ had instructed him to “**Arise and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do**” (Acts 9:6). Soon after, he began to preach Christ in the synagogue that He is the Son of God (Acts 9:20). In fulfillment of this prophecy however, he was not to remain in Jerusalem but be sent on foreign mission.

Paul and his team, having been sent by the Church through the Holy Spirit departed, preaching the word in towns and synagogues. This itinerary led to the miracle of judgment on Elymas the sorcerer and the conversion of Sergius Paulus, governor of Cyprus. Paul's company did not settle down with the little success at Paphos because they were on a mission to the Gentile world. Jesus died for all men. This study takes us into the details of Paul's first missionary journey, providing the pattern for scriptural missionary outreach in New Testament churches. The approach, exploits, challenges and methods of these pioneer missionaries constitute the focus of this study.

Question 1: What challenge does Paul's life pose to believers today?

Paul's life remains a pattern and a challenge to every believer and missionary. This eminent apostle knew from the outset of his conversion that his life was cut out for a specific purpose. He knew that he was not to engage his life on issues of less importance than the salvation of men and their eternal destiny. Those converted to the Christian faith should dedicate their lives to serve the One who redeemed them from eternal damnation. First, they should make a clean break from their past, never to be found with their old sinful habits anymore. Second, they should seek to know why the Lord has called them into the ministry and waste no time in doing that which is according to the will of God. Those who perceive God's call to higher ministry, either through direct personal call or church leadership should be ready to patiently seek God's face in prayers for clear directions.

PAUL PREACHED IN THE SYNAGOGUE OF THE JEWS (Acts 13:15,16; 13:5; 14:1; 17:1,2; Matthew 4:23; 13:54, Mark 6:2, John 18:20).

As Paul and Barnabas arrived Antioch in Pisida, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. It would seem customary for Paul to go first to the synagogues of the Jews upon entering a new city. “**And it came to pass in Iconium, that they went both together into the synagogue of the Jews,**

and so spake, that a great multitude both of the Jews and also of the Greeks believed” (Acts 14:1; 17:1,2). The same thing had been done by his team in Salamis (Acts 13:5). This was because the synagogues provided opportunity and avenue for Paul and his team to meet with and preach to the Jewish audience. This practice was not only limited to Paul or the apostles; Jesus preached and taught on many occasions in the synagogues (Matthew 4:23; 13:54, Mark 6:2, John 18:20). Preachers and soul-winners should borrow from this practice. Public meeting places such as markets, school assemblies as well as religious gatherings can be used as platforms to preach the gospel at little or no cost. This can be done by prayerfully seeking for permission where necessary. It is also needful to know that in our choices of locations for crusades and other gospel campaigns, efforts should be made at securing venues that will enable maximum contact with the people. The gospel is not just to be preached but must be preached to the people.

Question 2: What lessons do we learn from Paul preaching in the synagogue of the Jews?

“And after the reading of the law and the prophets the rulers of the synagogues sent unto them....” Notice must be taken here of the practice in the synagogue where the worshippers gave preference to the reading and sharing of the word. The essential ingredient of any worship, aside of prayer and praise must include preaching. Indeed, the climax of every true worship should be the preaching of the Word. The practice where dancing and singing take the greater part and little or no time is given to preaching in worship is out of order. Worshippers must leave God’s presence edified and transformed through the word.

Ministers of God must be prepared always so as to effectively utilize every open door in ministry. Success in ministry and other areas of life is often achieved when opportunity meets preparation (2 Timothy 2:21; 1 Peter 3:15). To always be ready therefore, ministers should live righteously and maintain a prayerful life coupled with regular, diligent study of the Word.

Question 3: What should characterize the programmes and practices in the worship places of today?

The presentation of Paul taught us lessons in courtesy during preaching. He said, **“Men of Israel and ye that fear God give audience...”** (Acts 13:16). Effective preaching is hammering and communicating the truth without giving unnecessary offence. He displayed the same attitude while answering Festus (Acts 26:25). Believers should not be unnecessarily offensive and confrontational in presenting the gospel. Wisdom teaches that we can be courteous, gentle and seasoned in language without compromising the truth of the gospel (Colossians 4:6; Titus 2:8; 1 Peter 3:8).

THE CONTENT OF PAUL’S SERMON IN THE SYNAGOGUE (Acts 13:17-41; Philippians 2:3, Acts 26:25; 2:14-39).

Upon invitation from the rulers, the apostle beckoned with his hand and urged the audience to give attention. The sermon Paul preached revealed the

classic presentation of the gospel to the Jews. Jews by religion believe the Old Testament writings but ignorant of the import of the New Testament and the works of Christ. Paul began from what they knew and flowed into what they ought to know showing and proving that the Old Testament foreshadows the New. Preachers must be careful to understand their audience so as to be selective in the choice of their sermon and presentation. Beginning from the patriarchs, Paul chronicled the nation's pilgrimage to Canaan till he zeroed in on the Redeemer, Jesus Christ. The sermon can be divided into the following major points: (i) a review of God's dealings with and goodness to Israel (Acts 13:17-22); (ii) a proclamation that Jesus is the promised Saviour (Acts 13:23-26); (iii) Jesus' death and evidence of His resurrection (Acts 13:27-37); (iv) a declaration that salvation is now offered through Jesus (Acts 13:39-39); and, (v) warning not to fulfil prophecy by rejecting God's work in Christ (Acts 13:40,41). Though tailored specifically for his Jewish audience, the message contains major ingredients and pattern for an effective salvation message. Messages for gospel campaigns should emphasize the love of God towards the sinner, the death of Christ as substitute and ransom for our sins, Christ's resurrection for our justification, pardon and forgiveness through His blood, the need for total repentance from sin and faith in Christ, and warning against neglecting this great salvation.

Question 4: Mention the ingredients of an effective salvation message.

As we compare this sermon with Peter's on the day of Pentecost, we find a lot of similarities (Acts 2:14-39). This teaches us that if we have the Spirit of God, we can mind the same thing, "**speak the same thing**" and be perfectly joined together in the same mind irrespective of our location. Those at home as well as on foreign missions or evangelistic fields can uphold the doctrines and cardinal teachings of the word of God. Distance from the headquarters should not affect ministers' faithfulness to the word and to the doctrines.

REJECTION BY THE JEWS AND RECEPTION BY THE GENTILES (Acts 13:42-49; Matthew 12:24, 1 Corinthians 16:9; Acts 26:17,18).

The audience in the synagogues were divided in their response. The religious Jews rejected the message of salvation but many of the Jews and religious proselytes (Gentiles) received the word and "**followed Paul and Barnabas: who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God**" (verse 43). This is often the experience of preachers of the gospel: some will believe and others will not. Even at the time of Christ, it was the same (John 5:38; 10:38). Therefore, missionaries and ministers of the word should not be discouraged when response to their message falls short of their expectation. Negative response of people should not stop us from preaching the gospel because among our audiences are sincere seekers who are hungry for the truth. In spite of the rejection of the religious Jews, the Gentiles pleaded "**that these words might be preached to them the next sabbath**".

It would seem that Paul and his team or the religious proselytes made some personal contacts and publicity before the next sabbath. The effect was awesome such that the synagogue was filled beyond capacity as "**almost the whole city** (came) **together to hear the word of God**". Such is the power of

publicity. Those who have heard the word should always be encouraged to bring others to hear. However, the religious, unconverted Jewish audience reacted to this by blaspheming and openly contradicting what had been preached. This reaction was nevertheless precipitated by envy. This was not new. The oppositions of the Pharisees to the message of Christ in His day were also often as a result of envy and fear that people would believe in the Lord and be free from their religious dogma and bondage. We should also be careful of negative comments and ill-feeling when other righteous preachers of the gospel appear successful in their outreaches lest we be found to be working against God and His counsel. On the other hand, it must be noted that open door for the gospel would always attract stiff opposition from the devil. **“For a great door and effectual is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries”** (1 Corinthians 16:9).

The reaction of these missionaries to the hostile development was the inspired utterance and action of Paul: **“Then Paul and Barnabas waxed bold, and said, It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles. For so hath the Lord commanded us....”** Some people should not be denied the word while we concentrate on those who do not value it. If those invited to the wedding would not come, let us look for others (Matthew 22:8,9). Caution must be taken however lest we overreact to every little opposition by people against our gospel. An evangelistic field that is not ripened for harvest this year may be ripened in a few years to come. We should not utterly abandon a mission outpost because there was little or no success at first. Some nations and cities of the world were not successfully evangelized at the first attempt. The fact that Paul and his team had this success in the midst of opposition teaches us that persecution should not be used as an excuse for non-performance.

Question 5: Adduce reasons for the Jews’ reaction to Paul’s message.

THE EXPULSION BY THE JEWS (Acts 13:50-52; Matthew 10:14; Luke 9:5).

The religious Jews were grieved that in spite of their conscious effort to disrupt the gathering, multitudes of people believed the Lord. Unable to bear the success of this evangelistic outreach, they expelled Paul and his team out of the city. When people meet face to face with disturbing truth, the tendency is to be repulsive and to fight back. **“But they shook off the dust of their feet against them...”** This symbolic reaction was in obedience to Christ’s instruction to His disciples (Matthew 10:14). The implications of this are that one, it will stand as a testimony against them on the day of judgment that the gospel was preached to them but they rejected it. Two, an expression of not taking with them any of their properties including even their common dust. Three, it is customary **that when Israelites leave a Gentile nation, they shake the dust from their feet: a way of cleansing themselves from the dirt of the heathen. In the same way, the preachers dissociated themselves from their sins, counting them as heathens. Paul and his team eventually left Antioch because of the persecution and opposition but they left behind a strong church.**

LESSON 478

PERSECUTION OF PAUL AND BARNABAS

MEMORY VERSE: “We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed but not in despair; persecuted but not forsaken; cast down but not destroyed” (2 Corinthians 4:8,9).

TEXT: Acts 14:1-28.

In the previous chapter, Paul and Barnabas commenced their first missionary journey from Antioch in Syria. They had gone through the Island of Paphos and came as far as Pisidian Antioch where Paul preached his first recorded missionary message (Acts 13:16-41). In response to Paul’s message, some people believed while others did not. Those who did not believe raised persecution against them and expelled them out of their region (Acts 13:50). In continuation of their missionary task, they came to Iconium, Lystra and Derbe where they preached and made disciples.

However, virtually in all the places where they preached the gospel, they faced persecution in one form or the other. As they were opposed, maligned or stoned, they experienced in a practical measure the sufferings which the Lord Jesus Christ predicted would attend the preaching of His word (Matthew 10:17; 24:9; Luke 21:12; John 16:2; Revelation 2:10). However, they did not stop preaching just because of their physical sufferings. This response of the apostles to persecution poses a great challenge to present day believers. Inasmuch as persecutions are inevitable whenever the gospel is preached, believers should prepare themselves psychologically to suffer for Christ’s sake and also be determined to preach the gospel no matter the cost or challenge.

Question 1: What should be our attitude to persecutions as we preach the gospel?

PREACHING AND PERSECUTION AT ICONIUM (Acts 14:1-7; 2 Timothy 3:10,11; Matthew 10:23; 5:10-12).

After their expulsion from Antioch in Pisidia, the missionaries came to the Roman province of Galatia. The first city they reached was Iconium, which became part of the province of Galatia in 25 BC when Caesar Augustus re-organized the Roman provinces. Though Iconium became a Roman colony, it retained its Greek taste and culture. In modern times, the cities of Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, which were mentioned in our text, fall within the land known as Turkey.

When they came to Iconium, they went to the Jewish synagogue and preached with such power that many Jews and Gentiles believed. “**But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and made their minds evil affected against the brethren**” (Acts 14:2). The Jews who did not accept the gospel message moved the Gentiles against Paul and Barnabas. But despite this, the apostles stayed in Iconium a long time, speaking boldly and testifying of the grace of God.

Question 2: What form did the persecution of Paul and Barnabas take in Iconium, and what can believers learn from it?

The persecution of Paul and Barnabas in Iconium was slightly different from that in Pisidian Antioch in that they could still remain in the city and preach. Initially their persecution took the form of evil speaking and verbal opposition to the gospel. But they were able to overcome because God confirmed their message with signs and wonders. This made many of those who believed to remain with the apostles and to continue in the faith.

From their experiences in Iconium it could be seen that whenever and wherever the gospel is preached in the power of the Holy Ghost, God always draws people to Himself. However, some people will still not believe despite great manifestations of God's power. But, soul-winners must not allow the antics of those who reject the gospel to hinder them from preaching. As believers, we must not give in to discouragement, rather we must preach with passion. Persecutions take different forms. It may be mild and such that we can continue in ministry, but at other times, it may become life-threatening and then we need to flee to a less dangerous environment. Therefore, soul-winners must be prayerful, watchful, discreet and make judicious use of intelligence report as they carry out evangelistic outreach. Preachers and soul-winners need power evangelism to further confirm the truth of the gospel.

The persecution at Iconium eventually rose to a dangerous dimension because a mob of Jews and Gentiles planned to attack and stone Paul and Barnabas. But knowing their plans, the apostles fled to the region of Lycaonia. This step was taken not out of cowardice but in obedience to Christ's injunction: **"if they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another"** (Matthew 10:23). This teaches us that scriptural boldness is not the same thing as reckless impulsiveness which may lead to unnecessary and untimely death. There is a time to flee from danger so as to remain alive and continue the work that God would have us do.

PAUL'S MINISTRY AND STONING AT LYSTRA (Acts 14:8-20; 2 Timothy 3:10,11).

After their escape from Iconium to Lystra in the Lycaonian region of Galatia, they continued preaching despite the persecution they experienced earlier. Soul-winners are to preach the gospel anywhere using all available resources. Whether in the synagogue or in the open where people are gathered, believers must preach the word in season and out of season.

While preaching at Lystra, a cripple who had been lame from birth listened to Paul's message. When Paul discerned that he had faith to be healed, he commanded him to stand up, and the man jumped up and began to walk. This miracle of healing was similar to that of the lame man at the beautiful gate (Acts 3) and it had a profound effect on the crowd at Lystra.

Question 3: What impact did the healing of the lame man have on the crowd at Lystra and how does it teach us pitfalls to avoid in power evangelism?

As a result of the miracle, the people were amazed and they shouted in Lycaonian dialect, **"the gods are come down to us in the likeness of men"** (Acts 14:12). Therefore, they wanted to sacrifice unto Paul and Barnabas. They

were mistaken, thinking that Paul and Barnabas were gods who had come to them, disguised as men.

The immediate response of the people at Lystra to the miracle of healing the lame man highlights one of the grave pitfalls to avoid in power evangelism. When miracles are done by true servants of God, the main purpose is to accelerate the gospel message and make the people believe in Christ. But often the real focus is lost and the whole thing degenerates into a personality cult whereby the people begin to deify a miracle worker. A similar error occurred on the island of Malita where the people took Paul to be a god (Acts 28:6). This error should be strictly avoided. In the case of Paul and Barnabas at Lystra, they tore their clothes as a mark of self-humiliation and they restrained the people from worshipping them. They pointed out to them that they were human beings like them. Then Paul preached boldly urging his hearers to turn from idols and be converted to the living God. In his message, Paul denounced paganism and used simple illustrations, drawn from nature, which the people could understand, to explain God's goodness and interest in them. But even with this plain message it was hard to convince the people of Lystra.

Question 4: What are the lessons to be learnt from the stoning of Paul at Lystra?

Meanwhile, as Paul was preaching at Lystra, some Jews came down from Antioch in Pisidia and Iconium to poison the minds of the people. Then the crowd suddenly changed, became hostile, stoned Paul and drew him out of the city, thinking he had died. But the believers in Lystra gathered around him in prayer and he was resuscitated. Then he went back into the city and left Lystra the following day.

The stoning of Paul at Lystra teaches us how fickle and unreliable human beings are. In one moment they reckoned Paul was a god but the next they saw him as a villain. This teaches us not to depend much on either the patronage and praise, or the censure and criticism of men. The manner Jesus responded to the crowds during His earthly ministry should serve as a lesson for us. **“But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men, And needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man”** (John 2:24,25).

Furthermore, Paul's experience in the hand of persecutors in Lystra teaches us to beware of the terrible effect of evil speaking. The Jews who came from Antioch and Iconium used negative words to sway the minds of myriads of the people at Lystra. Therefore, we must beware what and how we speak lest we poison the minds of people and embolden them to do evil.

Sometimes miracles are not sufficient to make people believe the gospel. Sinners must experience the conviction of the Holy Spirit in their hearts before they can forsake evil and surrender to Christ. The men of Lystra saw a great miracle, yet they stoned Paul. Again, the fact that a believer is full of the Spirit's power, and is on the path of duty does not guarantee freedom from persecution. However, God had promised to be with His persecuted saints and give them sufficient grace to overcome. Furthermore, each believer's path has been marked out by God's unerring wisdom and it is possible for two believers to be in the same situation but have different experiences. Paul was stoned but Barnabas was not, even though they were together. There is no wisdom in

comparing ourselves with one another. Finally, believers should pray for those who are persecuted. When Paul was stoned, the believers prayed upon him and he rose again.

PREACHING AT DERBE AND RETURN FROM THE FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY (Acts 14:20-28; Matthew 28:19,20; Mark 16:15-20; 2 Timothy 4:2).

When Paul and Barnabas left Lystra, they traveled about 50 miles (80 kilometres) to Derbe. There they preached the gospel and taught many people the word of God. The expression “**taught many**” here actually means they made many disciples. It is the same word Jesus used while giving the Great Commission: “**Go ye therefore and teach all nations**” (Matthew 28:19). It is the duty of all true believers to go and multiply disciples by preaching the gospel and teaching others to know Christ.

After preaching at Derbe, Paul and Barnabas returned again to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch. On their return journey they did follow-up on the disciples, organized leadership in the churches and encouraged them to continue in the Lord despite the persecutions they would encounter. Here, we learn the necessity of following up on new converts and helping them to become stable and mature in the faith.

Question 5: What challenge can believers receive from the commitment of Paul and Barnabas to evangelism in spite of persecutions?

As believers, we can see the commitment of Paul and Barnabas as they returned to cities where they had just been recently persecuted. They did not consider their personal convenience or the great cost of preaching the gospel as anything in comparison with obedience to God. They were ready to hazard their lives for the sake of winning lost souls. We also have a responsibility to preach the gospel and help new converts to develop spiritually. And no matter how difficult or inconvenient the task, we must do what the Lord has commanded and fulfill the Great Commission. We must, however, be sensitive to the promptings of the Spirit and ensure that we visit the converts, teach, encourage, fast and pray for them always so that they will stand complete in Christ. When we do our part, we can count on God to reward our labour with lasting fruits. The labour of Paul in Iconium, Lystra and Derbe yielded fruits despite their persecutions. Churches were planted and leaders were multiplied in those places. Later, notable leaders such as Timothy came out of the church in Lystra, and Gaius also arose from Derbe (Acts 16:1-3; 20:4).

As Paul and Barnabas concluded their first missionary journey at Derbe, they returned to Antioch in Syria where they were initially sent to the mission field. When Paul and Barnabas came back to Antioch, they gave a positive report of their outreach to the brethren. They did not amplify or focus on the persecutions they encountered but on “**all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles**” (Acts 14:27). The lives of these missionaries emphasize the importance and the method of giving reports or feedback whenever we are given any assignment. Furthermore, from their examples, believers should always hold themselves accountable to other members of the body of Christ. As Paul and Barnabas did not isolate or constitute themselves into a superior authority simply because they **had a**

successful missionary outreach but rather stayed with other believers in Antioch for a long time (about one year) until it became necessary to go on another missionary journey, believers should be well integrated into the body of Christ, especially their local churches.

LESSON 479

THE RAPTURE AND THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST

MEMORY VERSE: “Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord” (1 **Thessalonians 4:17**).

TEXT: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 5:1-11.

In the whole gamut of Scripture, nothing enjoys a greater mention than the Rapture and the Second Coming of Christ. The rapture of the saints which is heralded by Christ's appearance in the air at the trump of God is the first phase of Christ's Second coming. Though the rapture is also generally referred to as the second coming of Christ, it is actually an initial phase since He merely appears in the air and raptures the ready saints.

Question 1: What is rapture and when will it take place?

The rapture like the ultimate second coming of Christ is imminent and certain. The rapture will happen before the second coming of Christ. At the rapture, Christ will appear in the air. At the second coming, the feet of Christ will rest on the Mount called Olivet. However, the rapture is the present expectation of the saints. It is the next event in the programme of God for the church age. Virtually all events prophesied concerning Christ's second coming have come to pass. Therefore, rapture can happen any time from now and saints must prepare.

PREPARATION FOR THE RAPTURE (1 Thessalonians 5:4-8; Matthew 24:44; Mark 13:35; Luke 19:13. 1 Timothy 6:14).

We believe that nothing should be of greater importance to the true believer than the knowledge of the kind of character, life and conduct that will make and keep him ready for the rapture. In almost all the areas of the Bible where the rapture is mentioned, are accompanying warnings and instructions that border on readiness and necessary preparation. Actually, there is the ever-present need of watchfulness. Failure to be vigilant and consecrated to Christ is dangerous.

Question 2: How are sinners and believers to prepare for the rapture?

Great stress and emphasis has always been laid on watchfulness as part of the 'saints' preparation for the Rapture. As saints prepare for the coming of the Lord, they must be sober and watchful. Watchfulness and sobriety are most suitable to Christian character and privilege, as "**being children of the day**" because "**they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night**" (1 Thessalonians 5:5,7).

The apostles repeated the commandment of our Lord on the subject of watchfulness. Peter admonished Christians: "**be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer**" (1 Peter 4:7). John wrote: "**Blessed is he that watcheth**" (Revelation 16:15) and Paul exhorted: "**watch ye, stand fast in the faith, be strong**" (1 Corinthians 16:13). The duty of watching is of paramount obligation; for the night is far spent, the day is at hand, the Christian must not slumber or please himself with the shadowy dreams of early glories; for he must keep vigil, watching always. The warning to watch is for all men and for all times: "**What I say unto you I say unto all, watch**" (Mark 13:37).

Toiling or labouring is also part of the saints' preparation for the coming of Christ. His command is: "**Occupy till I come**". Working and watching go together; for we are to comport ourselves like the Jews of Nehemiah's day who built the walls of Jerusalem whilst they were armed and on their guard against the foes. Our Master has left us in the midst of dangers, not to depress our courage but to quicken our vigilance. All must work and watch that at the Lord's return, it will be found that His charge has been kept.

We must also be sober. Christian sobriety is taking a serious and grave view of life. It is neither sadness nor gloom. The Christian should be both serious and happy, sober and cheerful. Peter wrote: "**But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer**" (1 Peter 4:7). The purpose of our preparation is that we will be found fit when He comes for His saints (1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17).

There is a lifestyle peculiar to the saints who will be caught up at the coming of Christ. Those who are waiting for Him are the surrendered, serving and sincere saints. The Lord will not catch away fake Christians. Only true saints will be caught away. The Lord will not catch away loud, half-hearted, cold, filthy and fearful church-goers. Only true saints will be caught away. Remember that the Lord is coming soon. "**And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure**" (1 John 3:3).

The future coming of our Lord naturally leads us back in thought to His first coming. The world waited long for Christ's first coming. Patriarchs looked forward to it, but it was in faith; prophets saw it but it was in vision; saints sighed for His solemn approach but it was still a great way off and they died before the promise was fulfilled. And today, as the people of God look forward with eagerness and equal longing to the day of Christ's Second coming, we look and long for it as the day of final and definite redemption. We expect it as the time of ultimate home-gathering of all the brethren in the Lord. For "**other sheep I have which are not of this fold: them also I must bring...**" (John 10:16). In anticipation of the blessed reunion with our Lord and Saviour, we all cry "**Even so, come, Lord Jesus**" (Revelation 22:20).

The second coming of Christ is the blessed hope of all blood-washed Christians – the church, the body of Christ. And every new day renews the expectancy of our Lord's blessed appearing. There are some denominations that are reluctant to believe in the literal return of Christ. The great scholars and

theologians of Jesus' day refused to accept Jesus as the promised Saviour yet, sacred history revealed that Jesus was the promised Redeemer sent forth to save the world of sinners. Obviously, several modern theologians will also be deceived.

To us, however, it should not be strange that Christ will come again literally and visibly. As the prophecies concerning His first coming were fulfilled so also will the Old and New Testament prophecies of His Second coming be fulfilled. A writer puts the subject of Christ's Second coming thus: "Jesus will come again in just real and literal manner as He came the first time". No other interpretation of the Second coming is consistent with the teaching of Scripture. Christ's Second coming is imminent. In that sense, it may happen at any time. Christ could come at any time. This imminent return of Christ is the glorious hope of the church. One in every twenty-five verses in the New Testament pertains to the Lord's Second coming. And there are more mention of the Second Coming than the subjects of personal salvation.

THE CERTAINTY OF CHRIST'S SECOND COMING

(1 Thessalonians 4:15-17; John 14:1-3; Acts 1:10, 11; Daniel 7:13,14; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10; Revelation 1:7).

Question 3: Cite scriptural proofs of the certainty of the Second Coming of Christ?

Jesus Himself, first assured His disciples of His coming. He comforted His troubled and sorrowful disciples with the message of His personal return and presence with them in the Father's abode. "**Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also**" (John 14:1-3).

Again, Jesus reassured His audience during His trial that He is coming again. This was a prophetic utterance from the lips of the Lord. He spoke with deftness and certainty. "**And Jesus said, I am: and ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven**" (Mark 14:62).

Added to the personal promise and prophecy of Jesus about his Second Coming is the announcement of angelic heralds at His ascension to heaven. Jesus, they said, "**shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven**" (Acts 1:11). The message of the angel that Jesus shall come back in like manner makes the interpretation of Jesus' personal, bodily and visible return undoubtable. Our Lord will certainly return!

The apostles, especially Paul, rounded off their teachings on Christ's coming. Paul solemnly declared that "**the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord**" (1 Thessalonians 4:16,17). John the beloved apostle also talked about the coming of Christ. He was unequivocal about it: "**Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not**

yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

THE SUDDENNESS OF CHRIST’S SECOND COMING (Matthew 24:27,36; Luke 12:40; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3).

Question 4: What does the Bible say concerning the time of the Lord’s return and what lesson can believers learn from it?

The Spirit’s choice of words on the subject of the second coming of Christ shows us the uncertainty of the time of His coming. **“For yourselves know perfectly that the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night”** says the Holy Ghost through Paul. His coming is likened to the attack of a thief in the night. Thus, as thieves usually come in the dead of the night when they are least expected, such will be the coming of the Lord.

To assure the Church of the imminence, suddenness and unpredictability of the time of the Lord’s coming, Paul gives an analogy of a woman in travail. **“For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape”** (1 Thessalonians 5:3). A pregnant woman knows she must travail to give birth but knows not the day or the hour it will happen so it is with the time of the coming of the Lord. We know the times and seasons of His coming but the very moment, the day, or the hour is known only to God.

THE SIGNS OF CHRIST’S COMING (Matthew 24:3-14; Luke 21:24-36; 2 Timothy 3:1-5, 7)

Question 5: How do we know the coming of the Lord is at hand?

While we do not and cannot know the exact time of the coming of Christ, we certainly do know the season for the Lord’s coming will be heralded with signs. Since Christ knows more about His coming than anyone else, we draw considerable knowledge from His words relating to the signs of His coming in the period that precedes the Rapture and the Great Tribulation in what is generally referred to as the last days or latter times.

Our Lord did not mean for us to be doubtful about His coming. “Long prophetic discourses of Christ are recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke and the new details added by each indicate that the original discourses was longer than any of the accounts we have in the gospel”, writes one Christian author.

While answering three great questions asked by His disciples, the Lord said **“because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold”** (Matthew 24:12). This description of the social conditions of the last days is both frightening and gloomy. Lawlessness (the literal English interpretation of iniquity), selfishness, greed, social injustice are the signs of Christ’s coming.

Further social signs at the coming of the Lord are found in the epistles of Paul the apostle to Timothy. He talked about the drift in the world’s social order when the coming of the Lord draws near. The **“perilous times”** Paul writes about are not products of his imagination. He penned the revealed knowledge of God. Love of self will characterize the last days. Those who love self do hate good people who insist on living a life of righteousness and godliness. On the social setting, there will also be advanced learning and knowledge. There will be

cultural, scientific and technological advancement while spiritual ignorance permeates the society. In spite of these admonitions and warnings from the Lord and His apostles about deceivers and signs of the last days, thousands have been entrapped in the web of false doctrines and sinful practices. In fact, the very widespread deception of nominal Christianity constitutes a greater danger that makes the ground slippery for those who sincerely seek to escape the damnation of hell as Paul the apostle noted in his epistle to Timothy (1 Timothy 4:1).

Sinners and backsliders must return to the Lord and believers must abide in and constantly watch as the Lord's Second Coming can happen even now!

LESSON 480

THE GREAT TRIBULATION AND THE ANTICHRIST

MEMORY VERSE: "For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be" (Matthew 24:21).

TEXT: Matthew 24:14-30; Daniel 9:24-27; Revelation 6:1-17; 13:1-18

The signs of the coming of Christ and the end of the world have been clearly revealed in Scripture. In the whole body of truth on "the last things", the teaching on the tribulation and the reign of the Antichrist stands out as an important event which all earnest Bible students should be thoroughly familiar with.

The Great Tribulation which will precede the final coming of Christ will not begin until after the Church has been raptured. In view of this, some believers may see no reason to be interested in the details of the Tribulation period. But the fact that not all professing believers will be raptured and that those who miss the rapture of ready and earnest saints will go through the throes of the Great Tribulation should make us eager to know the suffering that await such careless believers. Again, acquaintance with the troubles that await unsaved men and women (among whom are our country men, neighbours, friends and loved ones) should move us to rise up and rescue the perishing while we may.

Question 1: What do you understand by the Great Tribulation?

DESCRIPTION OF THE GREAT TRIBULATION (Matthew 24:14-30; Revelation 6:1-17; Jeremiah 30:6,7; Joel 2:11,31; Zephaniah 1:14; Revelation 13:2)

The Great Tribulation will be the most awesome event in human history. It is crystal clear from Biblical evidence that the event will witness the most intense suffering in the history of the world. World wars I and II, inter-tribal wars, civil wars, and all other wars in the history of human existence as well as all kinds of cataclysmic occurrence since the creation of man will fade into insignificance when compared with the Great Tribulation. It will be a period of unparalleled suffering, dreadful woe and frightening destruction. Although it is a time of

universal trouble, yet the epicentre will be in Jerusalem and Palestine, which is why prophet Jeremiah referred to it as “the time of Jacob’s trouble” (Jeremiah 30:7). It will be the climax of God’s cumulative and catastrophic judgment upon the world. The period is peculiarly the time when God’s wrath and judgment will fall upon the earth. It is also a time when Satan and the Antichrist will unleash woe and wickedness upon the inhabitants of the earth (Revelation 6:2-9).

The Great Tribulation has been called by Jeremiah, “**the time of Jacob’s trouble**” and it will indeed be a time of great trouble for the Jews and all the inhabitants of the world. No one will be able to buy, sell or earn a living without relinquishing all independence to the Antichrist. All will submit themselves before him in awe and wonder. The Great Tribulation will be a time of intense persecution for Israel and those who will stand for God and against the heresy of the Beast. However, the Great Tribulation will usher in a time of triumph for the Lord and His people.

PERSONALITY OF THE ANTICHRIST (Daniel 8:23-25; 2 Thessalonians 2:8, 9; Revelation 13:2-4)

The Antichrist will be the great personality behind the Great Tribulation. He is a personality that has been mentioned in several portions of the Scripture. Way back in the Old Testament, Daniel says: “**And in the latter time of their kingdom, when the transgressors are come to the full, a king of fierce countenance, and understanding dark sentences, shall stand up. And his power shall be mighty, but not by his own power: and he shall destroy wonderfully, and shall prosper, and practise, and shall destroy the mighty and the holy people. And through his policy also he shall cause craft to prosper in his hand; and he shall magnify himself in his heart, and by peace shall destroy many: he shall also stand up against the Prince of princes; but he shall be broken without hand**” (Daniel 8:23-25).

In the New Testament, we are told: “**And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming: Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders**” (2 Thessalonians 2:8, 9). John, the apocalyptic seer, was given a glimpse of the man of sin, the ultimate and the final Antichrist who will be controlled by Satan. “**And the beast which I saw was like unto a leopard, and his feet were as the feet of a bear, and his mouth as the mouth of a lion: and the dragon gave him his power, and his seat, and great authority**” (Revelation 13:2). Again, it says: “**And they worshipped the dragon which gave power unto the beast: and they worshipped the beast, saying, Who is like unto the beast? who is able to make war with him?**” (Revelation 13:4). The power of the Antichrist will make him the idol of the world; “**and all the world wondered after the beast**” (Revelation 13:3).

DANIEL’S PROPHECY OF SEVENTY WEEKS (Daniel 9:24-27; Nehemiah 2:5; Ephesians 3:5,6; Colossians 1:25-27; 2 Thessalonians 2:6-11).

The period of the Great Tribulation falls within Daniel’s seventieth week. Daniel’s prophecy spans a period of seventy weeks. A week in Daniel’s prophecy

means seven years. Daniel's seventy weeks therefore means four hundred and ninety years. The seventy weeks of Daniel's prophecy are clearly demarcated into three; 7 weeks or 49 years for the rebuilding of Jerusalem (Daniel 9:25), 62 weeks or 434 years from the completion of the building of Jerusalem (at the end of the 49 years or 7 sevens) to the time the Messiah is revealed, and the last or seventieth week of the last seven years which has also been divided into two periods.

Daniel's prophecy concerning the seventy weeks shows the accuracy of Biblical revelation on the teaching of eschatology. In the seven weeks or forty nine years, Jerusalem was to be reconstructed or built again. In the sixty two weeks or four hundred and thirty four years the Messiah would be cut off (that is, die or be crucified). Again, it was prophesied that the (wicked) prince that shall come shall destroy the city of Jerusalem. This happened in 70 A.D. when Roman soldiers under the leadership of General Titus invaded Jerusalem. Sixty-nine weeks (483 years) were to transpire between the edict to rebuild Jerusalem (after the Babylonian captivity) and the first advent of the Messiah. This prophecy was exactly fulfilled. From 445 B.C. (Nehemiah 2:5) when Artaxerxes issued a decree concerning the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem, at the appeal of Nehemiah, to the time of the public advent of Christ the Messiah was exactly 483 years.

Question 2: Explain the three periods of Daniel's prophecy of seventy weeks.

Sixty nine weeks out of Daniel's seventy weeks have been fulfilled while the last one (or the seventieth week) is yet to be fulfilled. The age in which we live, that is, the church age, intervenes the time of the Messiah being cut off (or the sixty-ninth week) and the seventieth week. It is important to know at this juncture that the Church age was not directly predicted in the Old Testament. God's own programme for the New Testament Church was unknown to the Old Testament prophets. The Bible calls the Church age programme a mystery (Ephesians 3:5, 6; Colossians 1:25-27). There are many prophets in the Old Testament that predicted the two advents of Christ without throwing any light on the intervening of the two events between them. However, this does not make this present age less significant. This age is significant in the heart of God and it was known to Him from the foundation of the world (Acts 15:18). God's programme with the Church will terminate at the time of the rapture and His programme with Israel will continue until the Second Advent of Christ.

Question 3: Describe the events preceding Daniel's seventieth week.

It is clear therefore that the Church age will usher in Daniel's seventieth week. Again, this shows the Rapture will usher in the period of the Great Tribulation and the revelation of the Antichrist (2 Thessalonians 2:6-11).

Though the period of the Great Tribulation will be the darkest hour in human history, we should remember that "it is always darkest before the dawn." The man of sin will be allowed to do his work before God's day of righteousness and glory dawns. Sin and evil will be highly promoted and enhanced during the Great Tribulation. But they will not last forever. We must not forget that the Lord will come to catch away His people before the Great Tribulation begins

(Isaiah 26:20; Revelation 4:1-6, 7). This is why the Lord is seeking to save sinners and restore backsliders into fellowship with Him so they can escape this period of the Great Tribulation.

At the beginning of the seven-year tribulation period, the Antichrist will enter into covenant with Israel. In the midst (middle) of this period, he will break the covenant to fulfil Daniel 12:11 and 2 Thessalonians 2:3-11. Thus, the Great Tribulation will start in earnest. The beast will then persecute the Jews in the Great Tribulation for three and a half years: **“it shall be for a time, times and a half”** or **“a thousand, two hundred and ninety days”** (Daniel 12:7, 11).

Question 4: Why should everyone strive to make the Rapture and escape the Great Tribulation at all costs?

The suffering of the Tribulation will be so gruesome that no believer should go through it. However, the Bible teaches that backslidden and careless believers who miss the Rapture will go through the Great Tribulation (Revelation 7:14). Although the tribulation saints will eventually be saved, it will depend on their ability to endure untold sufferings of the tribulation period without compromise or denial of Christ. Those who are watchful today will be part of the bride of Christ and they will be enjoying the marriage supper of the Lamb while those who fail to make the Rapture but still profess faith in the Lord will languish in the tribulation here on earth.

THE ANTICHRIST AND THE APOSTATE CHURCH (Daniel 11:36; 2 Thessalonians 2:4-12; Revelation 13:11-14).

Question 5: Who is the Antichrist and what will be his activities during the Great Tribulation?

The Antichrist will set himself as the only God and will demand worship of the people of the earth. Daniel prophesied: **“And the king shall do according to his will; and he shall exalt himself, and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak marvellous things against the God of gods...”** (Daniel 11:36). Paul the apostle also predicted that the Antichrist **“opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God”** (2 Thessalonians 2:4).

At the time of the tribulation, the apostate (backslidden) church will succumb to the beast’s regime. The false prophets will force the earth and all that dwell therein to worship the Antichrist (Revelation 13:12) in order to identify his followers and let the world know that he is being worshipped as God. The Antichrist will compel them to have his inscription stamped on their right hands or foreheads. Some may say that they will never receive the mark of the beast. But the scripture tells us that those who reject the gospel now will be deceived by the Antichrist and will accept the mark of the beast. **“And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness”** (2 Thessalonians 2:11, 12).

THE PRIORITY OF THE CHURCH (1 Thessalonians 1:10; 5:9; 2 Peter 2:10-14; Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-20; Revelation 14:15).

Question 6: What responsibility has the knowledge of the Great Tribulation imposed upon the believer in Christ?

True believers will not be present on the earth when the beast arises in full terror of his diabolic dictatorship. We are not looking for the coming of the Antichrist, but for the coming of Christ. The second coming of Christ is at hand. When sin has run its course, when mankind's cup of iniquity is full and when Satan has done his worst, then God will unleash fiery judgment on all workers of iniquity and the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our God (Revelation 11:15).

In view of all these, the church should accelerate its evangelistic programmes as never before to prepare saints for the coming of the Lord, to bring backsliders back into the fold, and to usher multitudes of hopeless, perishing souls, who are at the valley of decision into the church. Now is the time to prepare for the Rapture – live the Christian life, pray and join the Lord in the harvest of souls.

LESSON 481

CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL VICICES: THE CHRISTIAN VIEW

MEMORY VERSE: “And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (**Genesis 6:5**).

TEXT: Romans 1:18-32; Philippians 4:8,9.

Since the Fall, Adam and all generations after him have become susceptible to evil imaginations and actions.

Through the ages, mankind has elicited the evil traits in many different ways. Modern man lives in a world that invents “**evil things**”. Man himself has a sin-generating mind. He has the capacity to generate or create sin, sinful pastimes or entertainment. Sin, in itself, is inexhaustible. It is brewed in the depth of human heart. Man's craving for evil and vices is insatiable. He ever craves for novelty in sin. Today, traditional sins are either weak in attraction or predictable in their nature. Thus, the contemporary man – youth, adults, boys,

girls, rich, poor, educated, illiterates, invalids and deformed, restricted and free – has some newly devised set of evil and vicious values he engages in.

Question 1: How did God describe the spiritual condition of men before the flood?

Since the flood, the heart of man has always been evil. God saw the whole imagination of the thoughts of man's heart, and concluded that it was evil continually – every year, every day, every hour, every moment. He never deviated into good. Such is the authentic account of the whole race of mankind. Such were all men before God brought the flood upon the earth. And strange enough, the Scriptures do not give us a reason to think otherwise of man today. The mind of the modern man is a sin-generative machine.

Increase in technology meant increase in evil. The advent of the television, video, computer and the internet and their potential of conveying thoughts in picture, colour, language or motion is accompanied by increased engagement in entertainments and pleasure. But, and that regrettably, we go full cycle from being pleasure-hungry to pleasure-mania to pleasure-boredom. The television, for instance, impresses some vices on the mind of youth and adult and make light of violence, hooliganism, murder and assault.

Question 2: What are the common contemporary vices that a Christian should guard against?

MENACE OF GROWING SOCIAL EVILS (Romans 1:28-32; 2 Timothy 3:1-6,13; 1 Corinthians 6:19,20; Ephesians 2:1-3)

Drug addiction, a practice found among teenagers and students in institutions of higher learning is a vice that ranks very high in contemporary times. Some freely say that scriptures did not say anything about use of drugs. Yes. But it did warn us against defiling or, in modern usage, destroying the temple of the Holy Ghost which we have in us. **“What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's”** (1 Corinthians 6: 19,20).

The use of hard drugs is a contemporary vice and its toll on the life of its users is pretty heavy. Hard drugs inflame the mind, sedate the heart and makes the soul to feel 'high'. Its end is more dangerous and deadly than the beginning. It leaves its victim a wretch on one hand and a danger to others, on the other hand. Closely allied with drug addiction is involvement in cults among students in secondary schools and institutions of higher learning. Cults, these days, pretend to be a social club but when its activities are closely examined, it is revealed as the breeding ground of all contemporary vices – wild life, thuggery, drug addiction and, at times, immorality. In recent times, dangerous weapons like live ammunition, machetes, spears and arrows are found amongst the members of cults in schools. This is a modern trend and it comes with every conceivable danger to life and property.

Another contemporary vicious practice, common amongst non-Christians, and at times, strange though, amongst Christians, is betting and pools-staking. The bottom line and motive in engaging in this practice is covetousness. An obsession to get-rich-quick, a greed to reap where you have not sown, avarice at its worst and, of course, laziness are the driving spirits behind this practice. It is sad to see this creep into the midst of some believers years after they have claimed to be converted.

Common amongst students who are desperate to excel without corresponding input of labour and diligence is examination malpractice. In contemporary times, this has reached some level that frightens constituted examination bodies, school authorities, students who have fear of the Lord and, of course, Christian parents. This practice looks like a contemporary vice that has come to stay in most societies. But its permanence or rationalization does not make it right. It remains essentially evil and vicious.

Contemporary youths and even the generality of middle-aged folks are unduly exposed to the practice of pornography. The evil sight that stirs up the base nature of man through pornography has a demonic hold on youths. Some Christian youths cannot stand or continue in the faith because of pornography. The sad thing is that youths and adults (men and women) generally accept to sit loosely yielding to the gratifications of those appetites wherein they stand on a level with the beasts that perish. Sensual pleasure is basically sinful. It is strange to see that rich, elite and seemingly refined ones, the creams of the country are held by the fiendish power of pornography. Teachers as well as their students, employers as well as their employees, leaders as well as the led, the advanced, civilized, industrial countries as well as the developing, primordial societies are all given to pornography and all kinds of immorality. Closely allied to pornography are the unclean practices of lesbian and homosexually immoral propensity to one's own sex. These are rampant practices amongst students in boarding schools and higher institutions. Strange enough, some highly placed folks are insured in this practice. Some of them are found in religious circles.

From the days of old, music has always been a spiritual and edifying medium. The Scripture exhorts us to admonish **“one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord”** (Colossians 3: 16b). David's songs and playing on the harp had great spiritual and soothing impact on Saul. Elisha called for a minstrel under whose ministration he received inspiration (2 Kings 3: 15). Indeed, hymn-singing is a great inspiration to those who preach, just as good singing and music precede most of all preaching today. In heaven, music continues. **“And I heard a voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of a great thunder: and I heard the voice of harpers harping with their harps”** (Revelation 14:2). Such is the traditional and even future use of music.

But in contemporary times, music has been perverted from its original spiritual, inspirational and edifying context. Wild music which in the past was once exclusive has been brought to the churches. Most churches have lost the solemnity, inspiration, freshness, and refreshing that comes with Christian music in Bible days. Contemporary youths are besieged by rock 'n' roll, wild noisy music, drumming and tune, which are very much akin to those that obtain in heathen shrines. Wild secular music has a strong appeal which

makes the mind stray away from the kingdom. Contemporary pseudo-Christian music is a vice, which the believer must free himself from.

The local practice of chieftaincy titles, traditional honour and kingship as done in some societies comes with all its vices and the believer in contemporary times must avoid it like a plague. It is disheartening to see a Christian relish in the conferment of a chieftaincy title on him. One wonders how near or far such a Christian is from his Lord. Did not Jesus show his detachment from such earthly conferment of titles?

Question 3: (a) What was Jesus' reaction to the offer to make Him king? (b) What do we learn from this?

“Then those men, when they had seen the miracle that Jesus did, said, This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world. When Jesus therefore perceived that they would come and take him by force, to make him a king, he departed again into a mountain himself alone” (John 6: 14,15).

If indeed we believe and know that we will truly later be made **“kings and priests: and we shall reign on earth”** in the millennium and in the New Earth forever (Revelation 5:10; 2:26,27; 11:15; 20:4-16; 22:5; Daniel 7:18), why should we then get obsessed with the transient, perishable, earthly, ritualistic and generally devil-inspired titles on earth? No real Christian who is a shining example as well as a burning light can be so loved by the world to the point of conferring honour on Him.

Question 4: What should be the Christian's view in relation to chieftaincy title?

Chieftaincy title, traditional honours and all recognition from people whose primary interest and focus is the Devil and his continued hold on the people are vicious. The believer must steer clear.

Finally, the use of slang and gutter language is another contemporary vice. The Bible says: **“Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt”** (Colossians 4: 6). Christian language as salt, should do five things. First, it should sweeten, edify the heart and mind of the hearers. Second, it should purify, not defile or offend since whiteness of salt symbolizes purity. Third, it should preserve the hearers from decay and spiritual decomposition. Fourth, it should be pervasive in its influence, no matter how few the words are, just as a pinch of salt would pervade a whole meal. Fifth, it should be known for its characteristic. The Bible says **“... a fool's voice is known by multitude of words”** (Ecclesiastes 5:3).

Question 5: What danger does the use of worldly slangs pose to the Christian testimony?

The Christian's use of slangs sourced from brothels, drug addicts, thug-proselytising musicians, “heroes” in boxing, sports and theatre makes a believer to be one of them and this dwindles his potential to minister to them. We all then become blind together. And the Bible asks: **“... Can the blind lead the blind? Shall they not both fall into the ditch?”** (Luke 6: 39). And records

again: **“Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch”** (Matthew 15: 14).

THE CHRISTIAN’S STAND (Philippians 4:8,9; 1 Peter 1:5-11; 1 Corinthians 10:31-33)

There is no sitting on the fence for the Christian. He cannot afford to pitch his tent with Sodomites and Gomorrhites and still claim to know Christ. The vices known in contemporary times are deceitful, but no Christian should be deceived. The Bible has given enough guide to the Christian as to the position he must take on these issues. As a Christian daily faces temptation and allurements from any of these vices, he needs ask some questions.

Question 6: How should a Christian assess any practice or conduct that looks like a source of temptation?

First, does it glorify God? Would God behold it with Joy? Can I do it in the presence of the Lord? Can I do it or talk about it without any shame or contradiction before the saints of God in the Church of the living God? Second, does it edify the saints of God? Does it provoke the brethren to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24). Is it worth emulating? Third, does it point the sinner to Calvary? Is that practice – pornography, homosexuality, lesbianism, smoking, involvement in cult, wild music, conferment of traditional titles, drug addiction, use of gutter language, gambling, betting and pools staking – capable of gaining a soul for the kingdom or challenging the sinner on the need for the salvation of his soul? Fourth, does the practice harm the temple of the Holy Ghost whose body you are? Does it weaken your frame, enlarge your heart, enfeeble your mind, waste your resources and enslave you the rest of your life?

Fifth, does it make you an example to believers? **“Be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity”** (1 Timothy 4:12). Sixth, it is exigent for the Christian to always ask himself some questions before embarking on any action: Does it draw me nearer to heaven? Does it enhance my preparedness for heaven? Does it make me rapture-ready? Seventh, will the practice, language or lifestyle earn me a smile of approval from my Lord and Saviour? Finally, is the issue under consideration true, honest, just, pure, lovely, of good report? If it is not, the Christian’s position is a firm No!

THE WAY OUT (Romans 10:9; 1 John 1:9,10; Jeremiah 18:8; Luke 13:3; Hosea 6:1; 2 Chronicles 7:14).

Victims of contemporary vices need a release. The vices are yokes and like every yoke, they must be broken.

Question 7: What is the way out of these contemporary social vices?

If we are to be free from the vices, essentially, we must avoid them like one would do a plague. Whoever has slipped into them should go back to the Lord in repentance and call on the Lord for restoration. Because involvement in these vices is tantamount to loss of eternal life, there is the need to fight

manfully. The Bible says, **“The kingdom of God suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force”** (Matthew 11:12). Repentance is to be followed by a return to the Lord (Isaiah 55:7). To return implies one has felt some brokenness and contrition, and unto such the Lord is very much keen to save and deliver. **“The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit”** (Psalm 34: 18).

It is very helpful to see the minister watching over your soul for help. After repentance, returning and restoration, it becomes very necessary to practice the abiding presence of the Lord. Imagine the Lord is ever by you and do only those things that He would approve of. Like David, remember that wherever you are, God is there with you.

