

Eye-Opener Studies



Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. (Ps. 119:18)

20: Godly Living

There never was a golden age for the church! Okay, so the first few weeks after Pentecost when over 3,000 souls were baptized after they realized that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah and that ‘they’ had crucified Him, was an amazing time. They buzzed around from house to house breaking bread, remembering the Lord and learning from the apostles, shared all that they had with their new-found brethren in Christ, and exulted in the excitement of apostolic miracles and the fellowship they experienced. Luke describes it thus in Acts: *‘They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.’* (Acts 2:42-47).

These are well-known words but these times cannot be either re-created or repeated. They were unique, and they didn’t last long either because problems soon struck this fragile fabric as the reality of having to settle down into a more normal pat-



Dandelion clock: ‘seed’ dispersal!

tern of life, work and living kicked in. They could not live permanently at this level, and besides which many of the new Christians had to return home to distant lands after their Jerusalem encounter with the Lord and His brand new church. Remember there were *‘Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians’* (Ac 2:9-11) and they all had to go back home, but taking their new-found faith with them, scattering the ‘seed’ like a dandelion clock as they went. This golden moment, as it were, soon vanished but its effects were tremendous.

New Testament Christianity: what do we mean?

Nevertheless, despite this ephemeral ‘moment’, we in our day hark back to New Testament Christianity in an attempt to try to restore it. The Noticeboard outside the building in the congregation I grew up in, in Liverpool, had this statement at its base: ‘Pleading for a complete return to New Testament teaching and practice’. I grew up with this as a Christian mantra and it is still one of the things which drives me on. Let’s get back to the Bible and especially to the New Testament. However, what exactly, do we mean by this? Of all the churches mentioned in the New Testament which one are we striving to emulate, or would we like to imitate? We

know there may only have been one church - and that is correct - but there were many different congregations and expressions of the 'New Testament Church', and each had its own set of problems.

Whilst at university there was a student, from a Methodist background, who parodied the church to the tune of 'Onward Christian Soldiers', thus:

*Like a giant tortoise
Moves the church of God;
Brothers we are treading
Where we've always trod!*

He had a point. Sometimes it does seem that our mascot should be a sloth and our motto 'Striving towards the Laodicean ideal' (refer to Revelation 3:14-22 if this allusion mystifies!). The electric dynamism of those early days simply cannot be sustained at the immediate post-Pentecost level because of the dangers of burn-out, but all too often our glowing embers are virtually allowed to fizzle out, and will do so if we are not diligent.

Therefore the notion of restoring New Testament Christianity is not a specific set of principles to which we all would adhere. There would be quite a variety in the detail no matter to whom you spoke. What is generally meant is that we wish to get rid of

unnecessary additions implanted on to the faith down two millennia. The two 'big' or essential items are the baptism of believers who choose to follow Jesus as He commanded in the waters of baptism, not the sprinkling of babies who have no say or choice in the proceedings, and the central gathering of the faithful to remember the Lord in a simple ceremony of partaking of bread and wine every Sunday. Also that these emblems of bread and wine (non-alcoholic or not) remain as bread and wine and do not mystically become the actual flesh and blood of Jesus, even though to all intents and purposes, forensic tests confirming, they are still only bread and wine. We do not want men officiating wearing fancy clothes, or robes, and calling themselves priests, but ordinary spiritual men honouring the Lord with dignity and humility and not via pomp



Unnecessary fancy robes



Elaborate high altar

or their 'audience' need them in order to feel the presence of God. Robes, altars, incense, holy water, unleavened bread (yes, unleavened bread!) are Old Covenant trappings reintroduced into Christian worship but which actually have no place in New Testament Christianity. (If you are confused about the 'unleavened bread' ask yourself why did Jesus use it to represent His body. It was unleavened because it was Passover and this was commanded in the Jewish religion. There was no other sort of bread available to Him. Its 'unleavened' nature carries no meaning for the Christian, though it was highly significant for the Jew. There is no harm in using it, but there's no point either, as far as Christian worship and practice is concerned.)



Simple communion table

Modern day Christendom has become a mish-mash of Judaism and Christianity where groups gave equal weighting to Old Testament practices and failed to spot the New Covenant differences. They had little sense of dispensational religion and declared they were following the Bible, which is why we say we wish to be 'New Testament Christians' not 'Bible Christians' for the Cross abolished the ceremonial side of the Old Law (Col 2:14) - the moral side is still extant, though Jesus redefined some of it. We want to get back to the New Testament in its simplicity, so the simpler the worship and practice and the least ornate the set-up, the closer we feel we are getting to godly living as far as worship and church conduct is concerned. Thus the picture of the simple communion lay-out above, which is of my formative congregation at Thirlmere

Road, Liverpool, is authentic New Testament and the ornate altar isn't. The latter statement is true but the former is not. New Testament worship may well have been simple but it was not like that. They had no church buildings for over 300 years, so they had no pews. They met in houses, caves, catacombs (right), river banks, indeed anywhere where they could meet in peace or not be caught doing so. They met for love feasts, and the Lord's Supper was an integral part of that much longer gathering than the brief hour or so we spend in our day. Paul once preached until midnight one Sunday (Acts 20:7); aren't we glad our preachers don't try to emulate him in that? - though some occasionally do seem to threaten to do so! An American brother, who encouraged and supported me for a while, once told me that no service should last more than an hour and no hymn should be longer than three verses. He was keen on simple worship as befits one of our members but he missed the point about other aspects involved. I ignored him on both of those counts! The Christianity of the New Testament did not work like this because they lived in different political and social settings and at different tempos and pace, which also had different concerns, hopes and fears. We cannot replicate their times though we can eliminate the obvious dross which clings limpet-like to certain beliefs and practices. This is all part of what we mean by restoring New Testament Christianity, though it is not the whole picture, of course.

Personal responsibility

Essentially what we are looking to restore is New Testament theology and congregational practices; we are not looking at restoring personal lives. We can control our group beliefs, trappings and practices but godly living does not come under that remit. We naturally expect it of our members, and watch to see that it doesn't get too far out of line, but this is much more a personal matter between us and God. We can make people drink out of one cup, use unleavened bread, sing *a cappella* and not sing car-

ols at Christmas, if that's what we feel is correct and where we, as a congregation, stand on matters of opinion, but we cannot force them not to be selfish or to attend every Lord's Day without fail. We can preach about it and encourage very high standards of personal commitment to the faith - and we do, quite legitimately and correctly - but we cannot command it, unless a member has slipped into a positively sinful life-style which brings the church into disrepute, like living together before marriage, which is so popular today. Then the elders can take action as appropriate.



Catacomb of Rome

As we read the Letters written to the churches in the New Testament, we get the flavour of the issues which were the going concerns of their times. We have some of the same, because human nature does not alter, but we also have had 2,000 years of Christian teaching and heritage which underpins much of our general morality and standards in society whether its individuals are religious or not. Thus atheists and the religiously indifferent can correctly inform us that their lives are equally lived as good as ours, and in many cases they are because we have some Christians who let the side down and there are some atheists who live good, moral lives. However, that is not how we gain heaven on Judgment Day. One of my aunts, who was a lapsed, baptized believer, once almost tore a strip off me as a relative youngster when I implied that going to church and practising the faith was kind of important. She said, "It's not what you believe, it's how you live your life which matters," as she steadfastly refused to attend worship for the bulk of her adult life. She thought that being good was how you influenced God and that He would let heaven's door swing open for the 'good' (and naturally she placed herself in that category) - as defined in human terms - and not on how we have served Christ in faith and love.

So what 'bothered' the writers of the epistles?

The list seems almost endless. If these early Christians are exemplars of the faith which we should be striving to emulate in our lives, we must be in a mess, because they were or the writers would not have mentioned it. We need to remember that all Letters were written to keep Christians faithful; they were not written to tell people how to become Christians. Just look at the church in Corinth. If we today found a congregation with their problems, both theological and personal, we might well want to disfellowship them instantly. This is hardly surprising since the background to their social setting was pretty vile. Even the Gentiles thought Corinth was a cesspool of iniquity and the phrase ‘To Corinthianise’ meant sinking to the lowest depths. Paul had been afraid to go there. *‘And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling...’* (1 Co 2:1-3). Look at the baggage these Christian converts carried with them. Let one small passage suffice: *‘Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practise homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. **And such were some of you...**’* (1 Cor 6:9-11, emphasis ours.). And we think we have problems with some of our members at times!

The Corinthians came from a grossly immoral background by any standards. Jewish converts had mainly different issues since their background was based on the Ten Commandments and the Old Law. But they still had problems. *‘Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember those who are in prison, as*

though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. Let marriage be held in honour among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous. Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have...’ (Heb 13:1-5). Sexual immorality and adultery seem to have plagued Christians ubiquitously down the millennia, and sadly still do in our day, but the former Jewish failures seem a little less

coarse and more refined than the rough Corinthian failings. They were obviously a better class of sinners!

So which New Testament church should we restore?

Show me most congregations in the New Testament and, providing we have sufficient details about them, I’ll show you their problems. It was ever thus and ever will be. In

Revelation there are two churches which defy this rule and are given the thumbs up from the Lord: Smyrna (2:8-11) and Philadelphia (3:7-13). How long they survived, and whether they kept faithfully to their spiritual promise, is not recorded, but it is good to know that there were faithful churches then and so, obviously, there can be now.

We are not aiming actually to emulate any particular congregation when we look to restoration. What we are doing is looking to return to the apostolic ideal of what we should be like if we were to be as they have told us to be. It can never exist because it is composed of fallible, fallen human beings. This does not mean that it is not worth the effort of trying. Jesus told us once: *“You... must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect,”* (Mt 5:48) and though there is a context to this statement, it is still an unobtainable ideal for us. Paul was so confident of his faith and its application that he could write to the Corinthians: *‘Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.’* (1 Co 11:1), yet that same Paul knew that perfect godly living was beyond him. To the Philipians he wrote: *‘Not that I ...am already*

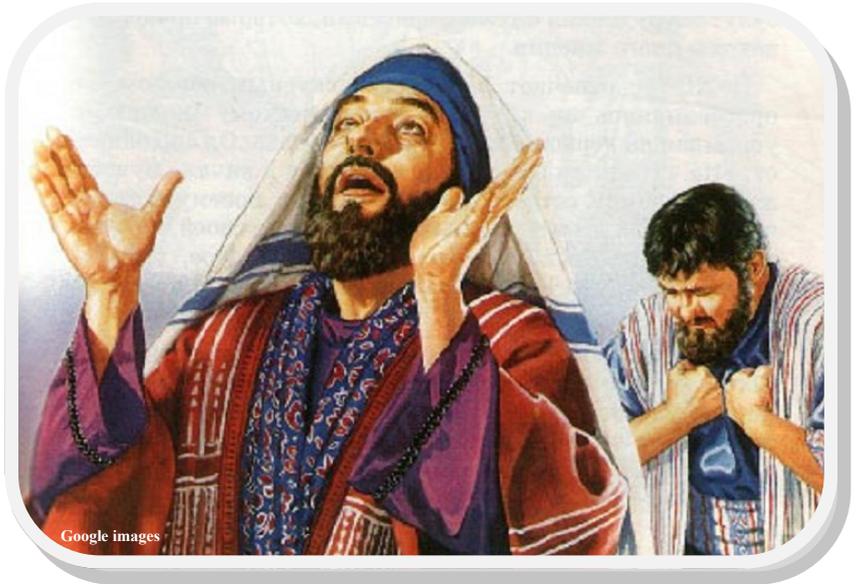


Ancient site of Corinth

perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.' (Php 3:12-14). As we now sing so would he have done: 'I'm pressing on the upward way'. He was painfully aware that he was both human, fallible and a sinner, and that godly living was indeed never going to be perfected in him. That agonizing confession in Romans teaches us all that even the best of us fall far short of what we should be.

How he could even admit to it in public, as it were, and not just between Himself and God, I cannot imagine - but he did it. *'We know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.'*

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.' (Rom 7:14-25). He couches this in the present tense of 'do' not 'did', 'find' and 'see', not 'found' and 'saw', or 'used to find' and 'used to see'. He's living every day struggling with sin yet striving for godly living. If spiritual giants like him struggle with a sin problem, we 'pygmies' will do the same, and the people like my late aunt who struggle with nothing spiritual at all because they are convinced they are 'good' are not engaging in godly living at all. They may harm no-



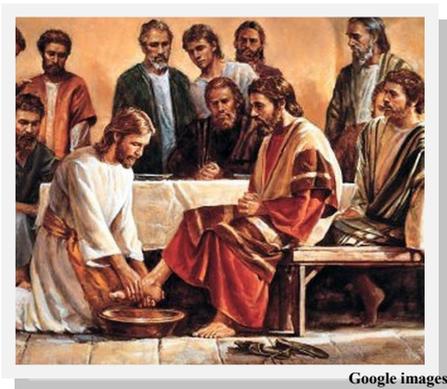
The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

body, and that is commendable, but they are not godly people, as the Bible defines them.

The dangers of godly living!

'Dangers? What dangers?' you might ask. 'Isn't godly living what we should striving for?' Well, yes it is but it is far too easy to get everything out of proportion and what becomes a wonderful goal ends up being a huge spiritual millstone around the neck, and can lead to condemnation, even eternal condemnation - and that's frightening. Unfortunately human nature does not alter and we are as prone to the overbearing self-righteousness of pharisaism in our day as the religious leaders were in Jesus's day - and we know what that led them to do to Him. And that's very dangerous!

Paul issued a warning to his beloved Philippian congregational members: *'Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.'* (Php 2:12-13). He had just been telling them not about actions but attitudes. Actions are one thing but attitudes are an entirely different 'species', and on them hangs the eternal significance of those actions. *'So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind*



Google images

Jesus washes the disciples' feet

things from rivalry or conceit even if we are technically right, or if we laud it over others and do not count them more significant than ourselves, we are looking to our own interests and not the interests of others. It's a big ask and not always easy to accomplish. Jesus took a towel and taught His future church leaders that their job was to serve not dictate (John 13:1-17).

Jesus had more run-ins with the Pharisees than with any other group. They were very 'big' on godly living and had added their own extra holinesses on top of the Law to make it just that little bit more spiritual to achieve perfection. They were frequently too full of godly living and one even told God how marvellous he was, not like this miserable tax collector beside him (see picture on previous page). His daily actions and life-style could well have been much much better than the tax collector's but his attitude was so so wrong. His form of godly living was for his own glory and had thereby failed him completely. He simply did not realise it.

Jesus never condemned meticulous Law-keeping, in fact just the opposite. In His famous diatribe against the Scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23 He opens up thus: *'Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so practise and observe whatever they tell you—but not what they do. For they preach, but do not practise. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by others."*' (Mt 23:1-5). The deeds were not wrong but the attitudes behind them most definitely were, and attitudes count equally as much as the deeds. To underscore this point, later in this discourse, which naturally alienated Him fur-

ther in their sight, He said, *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others."*' (Mt 23:23, emphasis ours). So godly living, doing as God commands, is not an optional extra, but must be diligently attended to. Cherry-picking the easier, more obvious commands so others can take note of your faithfulness, godliness and holiness is not what is required. He had already made this point in the Sermon on the Mount. *"When you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."*' (Mt 6:2-6) Later He mentioned fasting, a command at certain times under the Old Law but not in Christianity (16-18). Giving, prayer and sometimes fasting were an integral part of godly living, and two of them still are, but it is attitude which defines the godliness of the action not the action itself. We need to grasp this point. The wrong motives behind technical excellence, no matter how accurate and technically excellent it is, will avail nothing.

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Shivers down the spine

The problem with striving obsessively for technical excellence and accuracy in matters of faith and practice is that the closer we get to it the more superior we are in danger of thinking we have become compared to others who do not match up. Before too long the 'old man' can kick in and we start feeling that only we are right in God's eyes, therefore others must be wrong, and if they are wrong, they could well be condemned. In the end we think we are the only ones who are going to be saved because we are the only ones who are right. Thus our view of the church, in its wider context, becomes very

narrow and exclusive, and judgementalism - roundly condemned by the Lord in Matthew 7:1-5 - kicks in. We then start to try to do God's work for Him and pronounce condemnation, or praise, in areas which are none of our business. Our duty is to preach the truth as we understand it, and to try to persuade others who do not fully agree with us to think again, but we must leave the ultimate verdict on their souls' destination to Him. He is the judge and jury not us. He will not get anything wrong, and it is by His grace anyway that we are saved, not by our erudition. Too often we are accused, and rightly so, for being pharisaically judgemental. We sometimes hear the accusation, "Oh, you're a member of the Church of Christ. You think you're the only ones going to heaven," or words to this effect. The charge may be undeserved in any one particular case but it is a reputation which, sadly, has been well earned. The correct and commendable struggle for theological accuracy through meticulous Bible study has taken over. We must never forget that 'Caiaphas was in his own mind a benefactor of mankind, and read his Bible every day'. He cheerfully and 'righteously' helped to get Jesus nailed-up on a cross. This did, in fact, benefit mankind but not quite as he intended it to!

Turning to Matthew 7:21-23 always sends a shiver down my spine. "*Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of iniquity.'*" Some who have dedicated their whole lives to serving the Lord, and think they are certainly heavenward-bound, will discover that they are condemned. If this does not make we who are deeply involved in doing the Lord's work think very carefully about our attitudes and teaching, nothing will. Even Paul was very aware that if his attitudes were wrong he could be disqualified despite the great things he had done. *I discipline my body and*

keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.' (1 Co 9:27).

If our minds are closed in a sea of certainty against which no reappraisal is brooked, the danger signals should well be posted. Our spiritual quest is a quest for truth (Study 2). If we give up on that, beware the dangers of pharisaism; it is crouching at the door; its desire is for you (cf. Gen 4:7).

So finally we turn again briefly to the great passage in 1 Corinthians which warns that it is the attitude behind the action which determines its acceptability to the Lord - 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 (see also Study 11, Salvation). Rightly when we think of this section from Paul's great Letter we focus on love. The command to love was one of the few direct commands that the Lord issued here on Earth, and the apostle John echoed it again in his Letters. Jesus was speaking to His disciples specifically, but the call echoes down the millennia to us too: "*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.*" (Jn 15:12).



Ossuary (bone box) of Caiaphas

Paul knew that even great works count for nothing if love is not their driving force - love for others and love for the Lord, not love of self and for self-glory. *'If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.'* (1 Cor 13:1-3). We do not need to labour the point after Paul has so clearly said all that needs saying on this subject.

Conclusion

Godly living is essential if we are to gain heaven after death, but this is a paradox. We cannot earn heaven by it yet we cannot obtain heaven without it. It's a lot like baptism in this regard, for just being baptized carries no free-entry pass through the Pearly Gates. It is the love, faith, willing obedience

to the Lord's commands and belief which validates the action. Good works never saved anybody for we are saved by grace through faith; Paul said so: *'For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.'* (Eph 2:8-9). But he concludes immediately after this: *'For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.'* (Eph 2:10). So we are created in Christ for good works, or, if you please, 'godly living'. The two go hand-in-hand. It is never an 'either-or' situation. As James puts it quite simply, to Martin Luther's constant dismay: *'What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.'* (Jas 2:14-17). It is works, godly living, which give substance to our faith, for without them faith on its own is dead. A dead faith

never saved anybody.

The very best witness for Christ is not fine sermons, good singing or condemnatory finger-wagging at those who fall short - important though these may be at times - but godly lives which witness by example to the hope that lies within us. A godly life, humbly and quietly displayed, will teach young and old far more effectively than anything else, for true humble godliness will be remembered long after other things are forgotten.

Godly living is not always easy, and sometimes we fail because we are fallible human beings, but the admonition and call to godly living rings out from the pages of Scripture down two millennia because we are all children of Adam. We need to become more and more like *'Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.'* (Heb 12:2, AV/KJV).

To Him be all honour and glory.

This is the last study of this course. There is no task being suggested but if you would like to comment on this study, or on any other aspect of the course, please feel free to contact your leader, or teacher, or even the author, Graham Fisher, at: gafisher888@aol.com

We hope and pray that you have been helped in your faith through the studies and will grow in grace as a result. May God bless you.