

THREE MEN ON THREE TREES

Levi Sides, Jasper, AL

In the spring of 33 A.D., the crucifixion of three men outside the city walls of Jerusalem changed the course of world history.

Crucifixion was cruel and inhuman. Roman executioners hammered nails through the hands and feet of three men and left them to die. Like a helpless animal tangled in a barbed-wire fence, the victim could survive for days with excruciating pain. Death usually came by suffocation when, hanging by his hands, the victim lost the strength to draw another breath. The event itself was common in the ancient Mid-East. Yet, 2,000 years later, the world still talks about those three men on three trees who died in about six hours.

1. ONE MAN DIED WITH SIN ON HIM. The one word which describes him is *rebellion*. He was one of the two thieves executed that day. By the law of the land,, he was given punishment he deserved. By a judge wearing the authority of the Roman Caesar, he was sentenced and condemned.

He seems to have died an angry man. He was probably angry at himself for getting caught; he was probably angry at the judge who sentenced him; he was probably angry with all those who had let him down along the way; and he was probably angry with Jesus for being unable to help him (Luke 23:39).

2. ONE MAN DIED WITH SIN NOT ON HIM. The one word which describes him is *repentance*. At first he joined the others who ridiculed and insulted Jesus. For a while he, too, mocked Jesus with the challenge to save

Himself and them if He really was the promised Messiah (Matthew 27:37-44).

As the darkness closed in, he had a change of heart. Turning to the other thief, he said, "Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we receive justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:40-43).

3. ONE MAN DIED WITH SIN ON HIM BUT NEVER IN HIM. The one word which describes Him is *redemption*. Jesus shouldered the guilt of the world that day. He died with the weight of the world's sins on Him but not the slightest wrong in Him. Three days later, He arose from the dead to show that His death, tragic as it was, was not a mistake. With a nail-scarred, resurrected body, Jesus gave His disciples then and now all the evidence they needed to believe that "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved" (John 3:16-17).

PRAYER

Our Father in heaven, we thank you for your desire to save us from our sins. Help us to completely obey your will so we may live in heaven after this life. In Jesus' name. Amen.

WOT

EDITORIAL

PSALM 1—GOD’S PATH TO TRUE HAPPINESS

A study of the Psalms is a wonderful, fulfilling endeavor. So many verities are revealed in this collection of writings. Numerous are the emotions detailed by these children of God as they pour out their hearts upon the pages of Holy Writ. It seems a daunting task to explore these one hundred and fifty writings which comprise the book we call Psalms. It seems even more difficult because of the number of different ideas that are explored within this book. Perhaps we find it to be an arduous undertaking because we attempt to study the Psalms in the same manner as we do other books of the Bible. With other books, we attempt to find the pervasive theme of the entire contents, and then study each passage in light of that theme. Each of the psalms, however, must be studied individually, in light of the circumstance of their writings, their authors, etc., while at the same time they should be studied as a collective whole. The first psalm provides us with a number of themes that are prevalent throughout the entirety of the Psalms, thereby giving us a good foundation upon which to build our study of the other psalms. Let us explore these themes as they help us lay the groundwork for further study in the Psalms (many thanks to brother Bobby Liddell for the alliteration).

SIN IS PROGRESSIVE

The first verse of Psalm 1 makes clear that sin follows a dangerous progression. Few have ever decided to jump into sin headlong. Most are gradually drawn into its evil clutches, slowly giving in to the progression of sin. Sin entices the potential suitor initially to get within earshot (walking in the counsel of the ungodly). If Satan can get one to stop and listen to the call of sin long enough, his chances for success increase dramatically. Many are foolish enough to think they can get as close to sin as possible without falling prey. Those who would be truly happy will stay as far away from sin as possible. Should one give ear to the beckoning of sin (listening to ungodly advice, listening to filthy jokes, ungodly music, etc.), he will soon find himself “standing in the way of sinners.” He is now in the company of sinners, standing in their midst. Sin has enticed yet another to join its

band of ungodly brothers. Should one then refuse to part ways with this company, he will soon find himself “sitting in the seat of the scornful.” He has heeded the call of sin for so long that he is now the ringleader of this ungodly host. He is sitting in the captain’s chair and is now enticing others to join in the sin parade. How many would fully expect or desire to find themselves in this position as they started down the path of sin? Sin is deceitful! All who desire true happiness will seek to avoid sin’s progression by refusing its initial advancements.

THE SCRIPTURES ARE PRICELESS

The blessed (or happy) man is one who delights in the law of the Lord (vs.2). The only way to avoid the onslaughts of Satan and the allurements of sin is to fill our hearts and minds with the precious word of God. Our world increasingly devalues the Sacred Page, and the shattered lives and sin-scarred world is proof of how little society values it. The child of God must treasure God’s revealed will above all else. The wise Solomon wrote, “Buy the truth and sell it not; also wisdom, instruction, and understanding” (Proverbs 23:23). Many of the psalms beautifully portray the preciousness of God’s Holy Word. None does so more completely than does the 119th Psalm. The longest of all of the psalms is devoted entirely (176 verses) to this thought. The Bible is the Christian’s sure defense, the whole armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-18). A heart full of Scripture is man’s only fortification against temptation (Psalm 119:11; see also Matthew 4:1-11). Those who would be truly happy in this life will be those who meditate on God’s word day and night. This can only be accomplished when one consistently, carefully, and prayerfully studies the Scriptures. Let each who truly values the word of God cry out as did the psalmist, “O how love I thy law! It is my meditation all the day” (Psalm 119:97)!

THE WAY OF THE LORD IS PROSPEROUS

In the pathway of the saved is found true success. Those who give their all in service to the Lord will find that their undertakings for the kingdom of God will prosper (vs.3). What a beautiful illustration the psalmist

pains of the child of God prospering in the salvation of the Lord! He is as a tree planted by the living water, whose roots run deep and are firmly planted by the life-giving stream. As a result, the storms and droughts of life will not shake this one. His goal is to bear fruit to the glory of God (John 15:8). Note that prosperity in the eyes of the Lord is not measured in the amount of money we may accumulate, nor the upscale friendships we may develop, nor the size of the house we may live in, etc. True prosperity in God's eyes are those who "seek first the kingdom of God" (Matthew 6:33); those who have truly learned to "fear God, and keep his commandments" (Ecclesiastes 12:13). The one who desires true happiness will learn to be content in whatever circumstances life may bring (Philippians 4:11). His satisfaction comes in living each day close to the Lord and in having fellowship with the congregation of the righteous. This is the pathway which the Lord knows (vs.6)—that is, this is the way that God approves.

THE WAY OF THE SINNER SHALL PERISH

In striking contrast to those who walk the highway of holiness (Isaiah 35:8) are those who travel the pathway of destruction (Matthew 7:14). Unlike a tree firmly rooted in fertile soil, those who live opposed to God are as the unusable husk (chaff) of wheat that blows away with the slightest of breezes (vs.4). This way may bring pleasure for a season (Hebrews 11:25), but the reward that lies at the end of this path is death (Romans 6:23; Proverbs 14:12). It is for this reason that the ungodly shall not be able to "[with]stand in the judgment" (vs.5). It is certain that both righteous and unrighteous will appear before God come Judgment Day (2 Corinthians 5:10), but those who have walked the broad way of destruction will rue the day they refused to walk in God's way. Would God that men and women everywhere would learn that sin is such a cruel taskmaster! Unfortunately, far too many will learn far too late that the payment for a life of sin is eternal separation from Almighty God and from all of those who have lived godly in Christ Jesus (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9).

These ideas expressed in Psalm 1 are reiterated numerous times throughout the Psalms. We would do well to heed the godly advice given to us in this psalm. If you desire to be truly happy, then there is no other way than God's way! Live a life of obedience to the word of God, taking every precaution to avoid the pitfalls of sin, and striving to walk everyday in the path of truth and righteousness. You will never regret it!

WOT

PAUL AND SILAS

Eva Nell Brown Naramore

Paul and Silas bound in prison,
Did not fail to preach the word.
Praying, singing with the message,
Prisoners and the jailor heard.

Suddenly there was an earthquake;
Foundation of the prison shook.
Up from sleep, the doors were open,
And the jailor took a look.

He would have killed himself supposing
That the prisoners had all fled,
But Paul cried out with a loud voice,
"Do thyself no harm," he said.

The jailor then sprang in and asked,
"What must I do to be saved?"
They said believe on Jesus Christ,
His life with sin had been enslaved.

At midnight then he washed their stripes,
And was baptized that same hour.
Rejoicing and believing God,
The gospel has great power.

What songs did they sing together?
Did they all kneel down and pray?
From what chapter in the Bible
Did they find the words to say?

To be baptized did they gather
Down along the riverside,
Where the water rushes onward,
Or by a creek not very wide?

Being midnight, was there moonlight?
Or was there a lantern found?
Did they find some extra clothing?
Did cold frost lie on the ground?

There are questions we may ponder,
But the good news is to know,
Paul and Silas taught the jailor,
And the judges let them go.

There is more rejoicing over
One that's brought into the fold,
Than for ninety-nine just persons,
Trusting Jesus with their soul.

Paul and Silas bound in prison,
Led the jailor to believe,
To repent, and then be baptized,
Hope of heaven to receive.

DO CHURCHES OF CHRIST USE A "PASTOR" SYSTEM?

Mark Lance, Chalmette, LA

We would typically answer the above question by saying, "Of course not. The Bible says the elders have the oversight of the congregation." We would likely reflect on Paul's words to the elders at Ephesus when he said, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). We might even quote, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you" (Heb. 13:17).

The pastoral system is not scriptural since the pastors of the Bible are the elders (bishops, shepherds, overseers), not the preacher. Sometimes a man may be a preacher and an elder (pastor) in a congregation, but he is not a pastor because he is a preacher, and he always serves as a pastor with a plurality of qualified men in that same capacity. So to give a Biblical answer to the question, "Do we have a pastoral system in the churches of Christ," we would have to answer "absolutely not!" However, let us look at a couple of ways many congregations are practicing the pastoral system.

First, there are some preachers who have a tremendous desire for power and prestige. They may even be sound on all other issues, but their overwhelming desire to have the final say in all matters has led them to ignore the Divine authority given to the eldership. Their pride is severely wounded if everyone is not coming to them for the right way to do everything. This has caused many preachers to stumble, and many congregations to be divided. The Bible warns us about pride: "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18). While we may condemn the denominations for the pastoral system (and rightly so), one who is lifted up with pride to the point that they demand or encourage everything to be run through them is guilty of practicing this, even if he will not admit

it.

Second, there are many sound gospel preachers with no desire to take the authority away from the elders (or from the men of the congregation if there are no elders), but they seem to be thrust into the pastoral system with no choice. This takes place when everyone does not carry their own load, and things simply go undone if the preacher does not do them. This violates the words of the inspired James: "But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves" (James 1:22). The body of Christ is not functioning properly when this takes place: "For the body is not one member, but many" (I Cor. 12:14).

The preacher should not be left to do the work of the elders. How many times do preachers hear, "Where is the preacher," when someone is sick? No doubt the preacher should be out visiting the sick, first and foremost because he is a Christian, and also because as a preacher, he should be a leader. All Christians, whether preachers, elders, Bible class teachers, or members, have the same responsibility to visit. James again writes by inspiration: "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world" (James 1:27). This applies to all Christians, not just preachers.

Many preachers are faced with burn out when the responsibilities of other members are dumped in their laps. This, too, is equal to the pastoral system. So before we are quick to point out the errors of others, we must make sure we are not guilty of the same thing. May our heavenly Father bless us as we strive to serve Him. "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen" (1 Thess.5:28).

WOT

FOLLOWING THE CROWD—A FOOLISH PHILOSOPHY

Preston Silcox, Milton, FL

“When 40 million people believe in a dumb idea, it is still a dumb idea.” I’m not sure who said it, but you have to admit it’s catchy...and right. While not as brash, the Bible speaks of this truth quite a bit. Think about it.

Genesis 6-8 details the destruction of the world via a global flood, and while stressing a particular point about that tragic (but Divinely just) event, Peter observes that only eight souls were spared (cf. 1 Pet. 3:20). How often do we really think about that? Out of the world’s entire population—which some estimate to have been at least seven billion people—less than ten individuals survived! What happened? The overwhelming majority decided to ignore the preaching of Noah. A rather bad idea, wouldn’t you say? Also, there are other examples.

Numbers 13-14 tells of the evil and faithless report of the ten spies. While Joshua and Caleb sought to ignite confidence and hope in the people (based on the power and promises of a trustworthy God), the inspired record portrays “all the congregation” and “all the children of Israel” crying, weeping, murmuring, and attempting to murder the two faithful spies who refused to go along with the majority. What was the result of the majority’s behavior? At first, God was going to smite the nation with a pestilence and disinherit them (Num. 14:12). After the intercession of Moses, however, God ruled that everyone from twenty years old and upward was prohibited from entering the Promised Land (14:29). Over the next forty years, their carcasses would fall in the wilderness in which they were destined to aimlessly wander. But again, this is not the last account of individuals foolishly following a crowd to do evil.

In the New Testament, we read of a man named Pilate who yielded to the majority. As the Roman procurator of Judea, this official had the means and authority to free Jesus from his enraged enemies. The Bible is clear regarding his personal judgment of the legal standing of Jesus. Upon his initial examination of the Christ, he told the chief priests and the people, “I find no fault in this man” (Lk. 23:4). After seeing Jesus for the second time, the governor proclaimed,

Ye have brought this man

unto me, as one that perverteth the people: and behold, I, having examined him before you, have found no fault in this man touching those things whereof ye accuse him: no, nor yet Herod: for I sent you to him; and, lo, nothing worthy of death is done unto him (Lk.23:14-15).

The crowds went on to reject Pilate’s offer to chastise Jesus and to refuse the release of Christ over Barabbas. Still, the procurator announced a third time, “Why, what evil hath he done? I have found no cause of death in him: I will therefore chastise him and let him go” (Lk. 23:22). Because the voices of the mob were insistent, demanding, and loud, Pilate surrendered to the majority—even though he knew the decision to be wrong.

Of course, other examples and precepts exist in God’s Word that demonstrate the folly of conforming to the crowd. Counting heads is not the standard by which we measure the validity of a belief system, principle, or practice. The sole and supreme standard is the New Testament Law of Jesus Christ (cf. Matt. 28:18; Jn. 12:48). Let us diligently study it and appropriately apply it!

WOT

SHOULD I TELL THE CHURCH?

Todd Clippard, Hamilton, AL

In the last fifteen or so years that I have worked in full-time ministry, I have struggled with a difficulty that has become more and more commonplace among church members: keeping their health-related problems to themselves. I became much more disturbed by this practice after my first trip to Ghana when I heard a man pray in the public assembly for the Lord to open the wombs of the women that they might bear children. Seeing the masses of people and the incredible number of children running about, I had not ever thought that infertility might be a problem. However, I now know better! But this was perhaps my first glimpse into the lives of Christians who actually practiced casting all their cares upon the Lord (1 Peter 5:7).

I can't recall how many times I've received calls from brethren who were about to go to the doctor for tests regarding some potentially serious health issue only to be told, "But I don't want this announced at church." While I always oblige such requests, I can't help but wonder, "Why not?" Why do Christians not want their brethren to know what is going on? My personal belief is that such an attitude constitutes **robbery**. Consider . . .

ROBBING MY BRETHREN

When I withhold such information, I **rob my brethren** of an opportunity to pray on my behalf. How many cards have been read during announcements thanking people "for all the visits, calls, cards, **and most of all your prayers.**"

In speaking of the unity that should characterize the local church, Paul says that "the members should have the same care one for another" (1 Cor.12:15). The word "care" here is sometimes used negatively when de-

scribing worry or anxiety (cf Phil 4:6), but in this case it describes the genuine concern that members are to have for one another. 1 Thessalonians 5:11 speaks of brethren "comforting yourselves together and edifying one another." Keeping health-related concerns to oneself does not contribute to the development of love and concern that brethren should have. Furthermore, it robs my brethren of the exercise of their faith in the power of prayer. If we really believe prayer changes things, then we will want our brethren praying on our behalf.

ROBBING MY GOD

Additionally, keeping such information to myself **robs God** on a number of levels. First, it prevents righteous men from the offering of fervent prayers. Concerning these prayers, James 5:16 says they accomplish much good. Literally, the text says they have **great power or force**. Why would anyone deny themselves access to such great power in time of such great need? Second, it robs God of praise and thanksgivings when test results are favorable. And in addition to robbing God of thanks, it again robs my brethren of having their faith in God built up and strengthened.

At the end of our bulletin "prayer list" is found this verse: "Continue in prayer, and be watchful therein with thanksgiving" (Col 4:2). Paul closed his first Thessalonian letter with the following: "In every thing give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you" (1 Thes 5:18). Let's do all we can to make these admonitions a greater reality in the life of our church family.

WOT

FREE BIBLE CORRESPONDENCE COURSE

If you would like to study the Bible in the privacy of your own home and at your own pace, enroll in a free Bible correspondence course. All materials are free of charge, and you are under no obligation to continue the study. Brother Hap Johnson will be glad to get you started in study of God's word today. Request your free study by writing to the church office at the Sixth Avenue Church of Christ, 1501 Sixth Avenue, Jasper, Alabama, 35501. You may also call us at (205) 384-6446.

SOLA SCRIPTURA

Chris Hodges, Valrico, FL

The Latin phrase “sola scriptura” means “by scripture alone.” If you were to search for the phrase on the internet, you would find several articles pertaining to church history, especially Martin Luther. In 1521, he appeared before the imperial Diet of Worms to defend his words and writings. During his defense, he said, “Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason – I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other – my conscience is captive to the word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I can do nothing else.” Obviously, this is a very powerful statement and affirms the concept of “sola scriptura.” However, the concept is not true simply because Martin Luther or any other person affirmed it. It is true only because God affirmed it as such.

For example, Paul wrote, “*And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him*” (Col. 3:17; ESV). In other words, everything that a Christian teaches or does must be in accordance to the authority of Jesus Christ. In order for something to be in accordance to Jesus’ authority, one must have Scripture affirming the teaching and/or action. Otherwise, one cannot claim that it is in accordance to Jesus’ authority. Therefore, as old fashioned as it may be, one must have “book, chapter & verse.”

Without Scripture man would be lost. Solomon wrote, “*There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death*” (Prov. 14:12). Jeremiah wrote, “*I know, O LORD, that a man’s way is not in himself, nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps*” (Jer. 10:23). Imagine being in the middle of New York City with no map or any type of directions whatsoever. Without ever having been there before or stopping to ask someone for directions, the chances of your finding the way to your destination would be almost impossible. Now, imagine trying to find your way from Earth to Heaven with no directions at all. That would be absolutely impossible.

Thankfully, we have directions. The Bible is our guide. It is our map to Heaven. It contains the words of eternal life (John 6:68). It has the words by which we will be judged (John 12:48). It reveals to us everything

that we need for life and godliness (2 Peter. 1:3). It is the very breath of God (2 Tim. 3:16).

Therefore, we must study the Scriptures in order to know what God wants (2 Tim. 2:15). I’ve had people ask me “What does the church of Christ teach about this?” My response has been and will continue to be that it doesn’t matter what the church teaches or what I have to say. The only thing that matters is what God says. Churches have taught things (and, unfortunately, some will continue to do so) that are contrary to God’s Word. Preachers have taught things (and, unfortunately, will likewise continue to teach such) that are contrary to the will of God. However, God’s Word is right 100% of the time! It is always right; it has always been right; it has never been wrong; it will never be wrong!

We must stand in the Scriptures alone. We must be willing to make whatever changes are necessary in order to be consistent with God’s Word. We must never elevate man-made traditions to being equal or above God’s Word (Matt. 15:9). We must abandon any traditions that contradict God’s Word. We must never bind any non-contradictory traditions on others as if they were God’s Word.

I am convinced that most of the problems that we see in the church today have arisen because of a departure of being “people of the book.” Just like Israel was being destroyed in the days of Hosea for a lack of knowledge (Hosea 4:6), the church will be destroyed if she abandons God’s Word. If the problems have come because of a departure, then the solution is a return to the Bible. We must “go back to the Bible.” Let us hold true to the words that we have all sung from the days of Vacation Bible School: “The B-I-B-L-E. Yes, that’s the book for me. I stand alone on the Word of God, the B-I-B-L-E.”

WOT

ASK A BIBLE QUESTION

QUESTION: Why are members of the Church of Christ sometimes called Campbellites?

ANSWER: Early in the 19th century, Alexander Campbell (1788-1866) broke away from the Presbyterian Church and was baptized (1812) for the remission of his sins (Acts 2:38), determining to follow “nothing that was not as old as the New Testament” (Phillips, p.57). After associating with the Baptist Church for a short time, he broke fellowship with them over the issue of baptism and started preaching, “Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent.” General Robert E. Lee said, “If I were asked to select a representative of the human race to the inhabitants of other spheres in our universe, of all men I have known, I should select Alexander Campbell” (Phillips, p.37). It is wrong, however, to state that Alexander Campbell founded the "Campbellite Church" or any other church. He simply called upon people to take the New Testament as their guide and the church of the New Testament as the only church that is authorized by the Word of God. Robert Owens was the first to use the nickname, “Campbellite” (*The Shattered Chain*, p.32). In 1828 Campbell responded to the question: “What is Campbellism?” in the following fashion: “It is a nickname of reproach invented and adopted by those whose views, feelings and desires are all sectarian – who cannot conceive of Christianity in any other light than an ISM” (*CB*, vol.5, p.270). Many today falsely identify Campbell as the founder of the Lord’s Church and label her members with the misnomer “Campbellites.” Churches of Christ do not owe their origin to Campbell or any other human leader. Jesus is the founder of His Church (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 1:20-21; 5:23; Col. 1:18), not Alexander Campbell. Members of Christ’s Church are called “Christians” (Acts 11:26; 1 Pet. 4:16). Thank God, however, for those like Campbell that threw off denominationalism and returned to the Church of the New Testament as the ONLY one authorized by God.

—Mark N. Posey
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