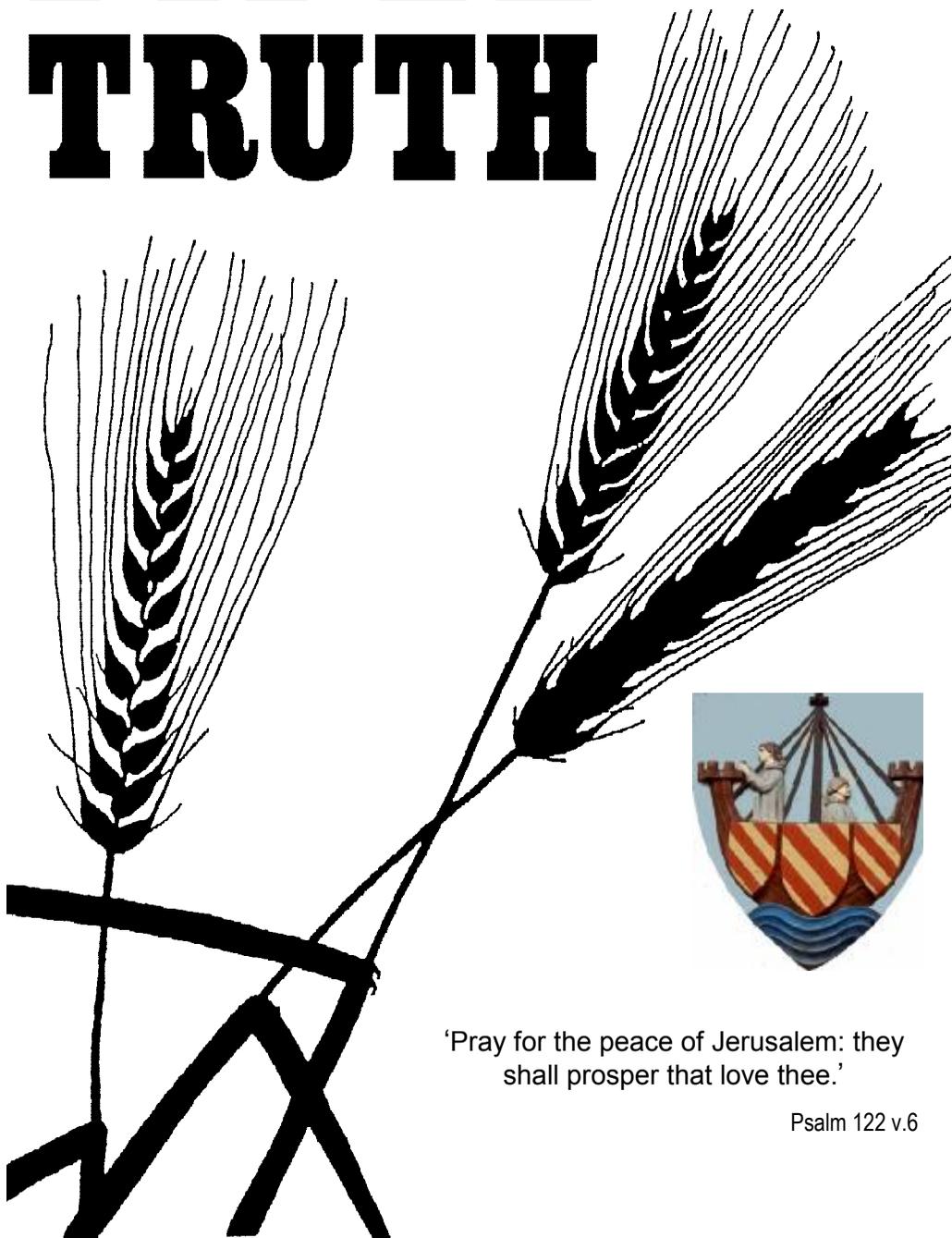


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'Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee.'

Psalms 122 v.6



THE SHIELD OF FAITH

by Derek Gash

'Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God:'

Ephesians ch.6 vv 16-17

'By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh. By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God. ... By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.'

Hebrews ch.11 vv 4-5 & 8

These readings are taken from epistles written by the Apostle Paul, a great writer, preacher and follower of Jesus, whom he served with all his being, with all his strength, with all his intellect, with all that he was, until death. We are left with his legacy of faith as recorded in the New Testament where 14 out of 27 books are attributed to him as well as something like half the Book of Acts.

St Paul, a towering figure in the Bible and in the history of the world, was once a very different man. Once called Saul, he studied under Gamaliel, one of the most noted scholars in Jerusalem, so he was trained in law and Jewish traditions as a Pharisee. He was a fervent Pharisee and it is believed he became a junior member of the Sanhedrin. He witnessed the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. In spite of his youth, he must have been highly regarded by the Jewish authorities because he was given a commission to go to Damascus to persecute any follower of Jesus that he could find and, if possible, have them put to death.

Saul, a devout Jew, some would say a fanatic, travelled from Jerusalem to Damascus with the sole intention of seeking out any Jew who believed in Jesus, so that they could be put to death. He

had seen Stephen martyred and he was convinced that death was the only penalty possible for those who defied the High Priest and the Sanhedrin, by believing that Jesus is the Son of God, the long promised Messiah. It was the same High Priest and his supporters in the Sanhedrin who had illegally tried Jesus, He who had done no wrong; nowadays we would describe His trial as a kangaroo court. Human nature tends to hate those whom we have wronged. Hate diminishes the person who has hatred in his heart which is why Jesus told us to love and not hate those who have wronged us. With hate in his heart, and convinced of the rightfulness of his cause, Saul journeyed on the road to Damascus.

Saul, the fanatical Jew and avenger for the Sanhedrin, breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, never reached Damascus. Jesus met him on that fateful road. The man who reached Damascus was a very different man to the one who had left Jerusalem. He was a blind man soon to be named Paul. He did not go to the Jewish authorities at the synagogue but took refuge in an house, in the street called Straight, and that street is still in the Old City of Damascus to this day. The Divine revelations given to St Paul by Jesus are also with us to this day, to be found in his epistles, as recorded in the Holy Bible. We have read some of these verses which show his belief in the importance of faith. Without faith we cannot be Christians, with faith we live a very different life to the time when we had no faith. Faith is the beginning of our journey to our future home with Jesus, in the Father's Kingdom (for He has said He would prepare a place for us). Faith is the evidence of things unseen and the hope of things to come. Faith was the cornerstone of God's relationship with His servants in the Old Testament and the cornerstone for our belief in the Lord Jesus.

I used the term 'cornerstone' deliberately as this word was used by Jesus to describe Himself.

'... Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes?'

Matthew ch.21 v.42

In the Old Testament one can read over and over again of how the servants of God were rejected. His marvellous provision throughout the ages, for His people Israel, was rejected, ignored, and treated as of little consequence. But the prophets of God are His building blocks for His future Kingdom on earth and the greatest Prophet of

all, His only begotten Son, Jesus Himself, was rejected and treated worse than the vilest of murderers. Indeed, the Sanhedrin gathered a mob and incited them to cry for the release of Barabbas, a known murderer and thief, instead of Jesus.

Now the greatest faith of all is the faith displayed by Jesus in His father, Almighty God. This may seem to be an easy thing to do, as after all, He is the Son of God, He had been with God in the creation of the world, so how could He not have faith? Well, I should remind you that Jesus had left heaven, divested Himself of all His Glory, He became a human man with all the weaknesses and frailties of a man. He came to do God's will and fulfil God's promises that had been given to Israel and then through Israel to the entire world. A great and heavy burden was laid on His Shoulders, a burden so great that only He could bear. All the sin of the world, past, present and future was carried on His Shoulders. Now the effect of sin is the separation of the sinner from God, for the pure cannot mix with the impure, truth is not compatible with lies, light and darkness do not and cannot go together. All His Divinity, as He took on the greatest task the world has ever known, namely the salvation of the world, was stripped away. Jesus was left with only two weapons with which to fight and win the battle, faith and love in and for The Father.

St Peter tells us that David prophesied concerning Jesus.

'For David speaketh concerning him, I foresaw the Lord always before my face, for he is on my right hand, that I should not be moved: Therefore did my heart rejoice, and my tongue was glad; moreover also my flesh shall rest in hope: Because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.'

Acts ch.2 vv 25-27

All flesh rots and corrupts after death, but the only redemption for sin is the sacrificing of blood which causes the death of the sacrifice, so that once the sacrifice is complete the remaining flesh will rot unless it is burnt or eaten. This is what happened to the sacrifices in the temple. Not everything was burnt on the altar but some was eaten by the priests and some by other people, especially those who had given the sacrifice. This was more of a practical arrangement as the total of animals and birds in a day would have overwhelmed any attempt to completely burn them in the temple. So some were eaten by the priests, some by the donors and the rest was supposed to be given to the poor.

Jesus knew all this and still He offered Himself as the once and perfect oblation for sin so that all could come to the Father through Him. His Love carried Him to the cross and His Faith gave Him the strength to shoulder the burden.

The question is 'How can we in our lesser state hope to get faith?' We cannot buy it at the supermarket, it is not dished out as a State Benefit, nor can someone leave it to us in their Will. It cannot be seen or tasted or touched. Faith is the evidence of things unseen and the hope of things to come. So how can we achieve faith?

Now for the good news! God has not left us alone. We have three weapons in our armoury with which to get faith. First is the Holy Bible which tells of God's plans for all people of the world, through His servants, prophets, and finally, the ministry of Jesus. Next is the fact that His Word through His prophets has been fulfilled in history. God's enemies may rubbish prophecy by saying that it was written after the event, but prophecies of Daniel give the lie to this. Jesus quoted Daniel to an audience who knew who he was, and did not question him. One of his great prophecies concerned events long after Jesus spoke which was the end of Rome, the world power in the time of Jesus. If the Bible and history are searched we soon realise that prophecy is truly history before it happens. This is not, or should not be, surprising. For we are told that God's Word will be done.

'So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.'

Isaiah ch.55 v.11

Thirdly, and the greatest of the three, is the Holy Spirit, sent by Jesus in His Love and Mercy.

'And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; ... he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.'

John ch.14 vv 16 & 26

'Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.'

John ch.16 v.7

We cannot all meet Jesus on the road to Damascus, but in quiet moments the Holy Spirit can and does come to us. God has not left us alone to fight the battle. He sent the prophets, He sent Jesus and He sends, even to us, The Holy Spirit.
