

# A Gift From Heaven

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# The Bible Is A Miracle

The word Bible comes from the Greek word for book. In itself that is nothing remarkable. Bible = book. Yet the Bible is no ordinary book. It came into existence in a special way. It was not written by one person in one language in a certain year, but it was written by many writers in various languages over a period of 1600 years.

In fact, the Bible is made up of 66 books. Each book has its own origin, style, content, and word choice. One book for instance is poetical, another is historical, and yet another is prophetic.

The Bible contains 66 completely different books, yet these 66 books have the same theme: "God speaks to us." They all present the message of God for all ages and for all people.

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## The Writers

There are many Bible books of which we do not know the authors. Still, it is interesting to trace the lives of the writers we do know. In doing so you discover many differences.

### Moses

The first five books of the Bible were for the greater part written by Moses. Originally a Hebrew boy, he received a scientific education and a solid political schooling at the court of Pharaoh, the Egyptian king. Although he was brought up as an aristocrat, Moses was never ashamed of his origin. Read *Heb. 11: 24-26*.

### David

David was king of Israel and ruler over the several adjoining countries in the Middle East. He was also a poet-musician and wrote many psalms. Today you can find David's songs in the book of Psalms. Some of these songs are prayers, others are poems in which He praises and thanks God.

### Amos

Amos was the owner of several large enterprises: he was a cattle breeder and a grower of sycamore trees. God called him away from his sheep, and told him to prophesy.

## Luke

Luke was a totally different figure. Luke was a physician who knew all about aches and pains. Through his studies and training he came into contact with the "higher circles". God purposely chose him to write one of the four gospels. One of the most widely known passages from the Bible, the description of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, is found in chapter 2 of Luke's book.

## John

John was a fisherman, who was called away from his father's business, in order to follow Jesus. He became the author of five books. He wrote the fourth gospel, three letters, and Revelation. Even in his old age he did not quit writing. He addresses his readers as "little children" (*Matt. 4:21, 1 John 2:12,18*).

## Paul

Paul was the theologian. He received a well-rounded education as a Jewish lawyer. He knew the culture of his age and was no stranger to Greek mythology and literature. Most of the letters in the New Testament were written by him.

In spite of all these different people, their writings form one book with one message. The Bible contains history, laws, psalms, prophecies, letters, proverbs, acts, and visions. In all

these different writings, however, God speaks to us. In its own way each book tells us who God is to us and what we should be to Him. All of them are connected by one "golden thread", the coming of Christ and the consequence of His coming.

## Unity

The books of the Bible form a solid unity. It is fascinating to discover how the Bible books are connected with one another, amplify one another, and mesh together. It is remarkable how in one Bible book texts are quoted from another Bible book. The prophets, for example, mention texts from the Psalms. Compare *Is. 40:6-8* with *Ps. 103:15,16*; *James 1:10, 11* and *I Peter 1:24*. The Psalms cite historical books. Compare *Ps. 106: 9-12* with *Ex. 14*. The gospels quote the law and the prophets, for example in *John 6:45* where *Is. 54:13* is quoted. When the gospels and the letters refer to the books of the Old Testament they usually say: "As Scripture says".

You can also discover the unity of the Bible by paying attention to recurrent themes. Take for instance the phrase "God living with His people". The God of Israel "lived" at first with His people in a tent (tabernacle). That means that He was present in a special way (*Ex. 40:34-38*). Later God "lived" in a temple (*I Kings 8:14-21, 27* and *Is. 66:1*). On Christmas night the Son of God came to earth. John says, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (*John 1:14*) and concerning the new world he writes, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people." (*Rev. 21:3*). Still another example of the unity of the Bible becomes obvious when you compare the first and last pages of the Bible. *Gen. 3:15* speaks about the enmity and struggle between "the woman" and "the serpent". On the last pages (*Rev. 12*) we read again about the enmity between "the woman" and "the dragon", i.e. "the serpent" (*Rev. 12:14*). Finally, there is one more example that deserves to be mentioned. The Bible begins by telling us about Paradise where man lived in peace with God and creation. A rebellion against God, however, resulted in man being driven from Paradise. Will this original state ever be restored? Yes, it will. On the last page of the Bible we are told about the new paradise, God's new world (*Rev. 22:1,2*). Throughout history God is working toward the coming of this new paradise. The Bible - what a unity! What a marvelous unity! The beginning of the Bible is tied to the end. The end is the fulfillment of the beginning. The Bible is a miracle.

# The Fall Into Sin

## *Genesis 3*

God created everything good and without any defects. Man in paradise did not know worry, sickness, hunger, or death. Death was not part of God's creation or of man's existence.

From all of this it is obvious that radical changes have taken place in our world. The Bible does not keep us in the dark about the cause of these changes. At the same time, however, it does not give answers to all our questions.

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## **Rebellion in Heaven**

Revolution began among the angels in heaven. God had created the angels to be His servants, but they rebelled. The angel who led this rebellion is called "Satan" or "the devil" in the Bible. But God did not allow Satan and his rebellious angels to succeed. God was not dethroned. The rebellion did, however, spread to earth and continues today. How did it come to earth? To answer that we need to begin with Adam and Eve. They were the first people God had made and they lived in complete harmony with God and with each other. Their task was to cultivate and keep the Garden of Eden (*Gen. 2:15*). There they lived according to God's will, and there they experienced God's special presence. They heard, as it were, His footsteps (*Gen. 3:8*).

God also made a covenant or agreement with Adam and Eve. This is often called the "covenant of works" or "the covenant of favour". In it He promised to give them eternal life if they would freely serve Him. For their part Adam and Eve were only given one commandment to obey. "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (*Gen. 2:16,17*). By means of this command God wished to put Adam and Eve to the test. It is at this point that Satan enters the picture and launches his attack. He uses the form of a serpent, "the subtlest of all wild creatures". Through the mouth of the serpent, Satan speaks to Eve and tells her that God laid down this command because He feared that man would become His equal. This was supposedly the real reason that one tree was declared off limits.

## **The Unexplainable**

Then the unexplainable happens. Eve believes Satan's lie. It just might be true, she thinks. She trespasses God's commandment by eating from the tree. She also gives some to Adam, and he eats too. In this way man sins. "The Fall" or "the Fall of man", as it is sometimes called, becomes fact. It is the first revolution on earth. It shows that man does not want to live as a child with God. He wants to live for himself. He wants to be God's equal. One can ask many questions about the fall into sin. For instance, could God not have prevented the rebellion of the angels and that of Adam and Eve? How could people without sin, like Adam and Eve fall? Why didn't God stop them when they were tempted by Satan? Why did God let Satan have his way on earth? Why did man have to be tested?

We want the answers, but the Bible does not give them. The Bible does teach us, however, that we cannot blame God. Adam and Eve, and all the sinful people that were born after them, have only themselves to blame. Instead of loving God, they became unfaithful. God does not leave this unfaithfulness unpunished.

## **The Consequences**

The disobedience of Adam and Eve had far reaching consequences. Life on earth fell under the curse of God. The curse of God is the opposite of His blessing. By means of that curse, we are destined by God for destruction. It brought

sickness, hunger, war, and death. Thus sin touched every aspect of life. Men were no longer concerned about God's honour, but only about their own honour. They are no longer interested in the welfare of others, but only in their own welfare. Before the fall into sin, Adam and Eve loved God with all their heart, mind, and strength, but after the Fall they were incapable of doing any good and inclined to all evil (*Rom. 3:10-18*).

As a result, there is much suffering in this world and it is not difficult to illustrate this by examples. The question is often asked, "If God exists, how can He allow this?" or, "How can God be love if He allowed this to happen?" The answer is that God is loving and faithful. We, human beings, became unfaithful. God is punishing us because we have rejected His love and faithfulness. We have to remember time and again that in the beginning God created everything perfect and good.

## Our Collective Guilt

Do we still have to pay for the mistakes and sins of Adam and Eve? Is the disobedience of Adam and Eve our affair? Yes, it is. Adam is the forefather of the human race, the ancestor of all men. In him we all have sinned. Adam acted as a representative, as a monarch who represents his subjects. What Adam did had consequences not only for himself, but also for his offspring. The sin of Adam is passed on to all men who have come and still will come after him. The Bible is very clear on this point. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, "Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned..." (*Rom. 5:12*)

Everyone is born a sinner. In *Psalms 51:5* we read, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." This means that man of himself never does what God wants him to do. By nature each person only does what goes against God's will. This becomes apparent in so many ways, not only in our deeds, but also in our words and thoughts. Man is a sinner and God brings suit not only against Adam and Eve, but against all of their descendants as well. God told Adam and Eve that the punishment for disobedience was death, and that meant a total, eternal forsaking of man by God. Sin can be defined as that act whereby man rejects God. As a result, the punishment for sin is that God breaks off His relationship with man. The Creator takes away life from the sinner. God would be totally justified if He were to execute His final judgment on all people. Yet, He continues to seek them.

## Disrupted Harmony

After the fall into sin when God enters paradise and Adam and Eve hear His footsteps, they hide from Him. This clearly demonstrates that the relationship between them is now

broken. The harmony is gone. This also becomes apparent in the relationship between Adam and Eve. Adam points to Eve: "The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate" (*Gen. 3:12*). Eve points to the serpent: "The serpent beguiled me, and I ate" (*Gen. 3:13*). God is quick to punish the sin. The woman receives the curse of pain during childbearing. The man is doomed to work a cursed earth in order to feed his family. And worst of all, death becomes part of both of their lives. "You are dust and to dust you shall return" (*Gen. 3:19*). Sickness, unhappiness, hatred, suffering and death all came into the world.

Yet God continues to seek and care for man. Death is the punishment for sin, but there remains the possibility of salvation. "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (*Rom. 6:23*). God decided to send His only Son into the world. Many years later, this Son of God came to earth to bear the punishment which man deserved. That does not mean that all misery has disappeared from this earth. That will only come about on the new earth.

Indeed, the promise of a new beginning is a central theme in the Old Testament. In various ways and under many circumstances the coming of God's Son, Jesus Christ, is foreshadowed. Everything God promises in the Old Testament is in reality a fulfillment of the promise given in Paradise, when He said, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (*Gen. 3:15*).

## Struggle in this World

The above text is difficult to understand. We must realize that it is spoken to the serpent, and via the serpent to Satan. Satan and all who belong to him will be sworn enemies of Eve and all who belong to her, but from Eve's descendants there will come a promised Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Thus God did not abandon man into the hands of Satan. He takes pity on man and begins to restore the harmony between Himself and man. But that inevitably means a struggle that will continue as long as the earth exists. However, the outcome of this struggle is predetermined. Satan will lose the war and Jesus Christ will be victorious. That, too, can be derived from this difficult text in Genesis. It says that Satan's head will be crushed. He will definitely get the worst of it. As for the believers, they will not come out of the battle unscathed. The heel of the woman will be bruised for Satan will make use of every opportunity to inflict great damage on the believers. This is just a brief glimpse of the total picture. In the following lessons we will delve more deeply into this matter.

# Praying: But how ... ?

How should you pray? That is not only a question for those who perhaps have never really prayed and do not know what to make of this business of prayer. Even people who habitually pray at times don't know how to pray or what to pray for.

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## Do you have to pray with fine words?

There are prayers that God does not hear. Why not? Is it because you did not pray in an acceptable way, or in a correct manner? Was it not nice enough? Did you ask for something that was not according to God's will? Is your prayer faulty if God does not give you what you ask? Can you ask too much? To obtain answers, let's turn to the Bible. It soon shows you that the form of prayer is not at fault. Luke tells us about one of the criminals crucified with Jesus who prays to Him. Is his prayer stylish or well-worded? It is nothing more than a cry, "Jesus, think of me." The answer he received is more than he bargained for. Instead of a promise that He would think of him Christ said, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Jesus took him along to heaven.

That the form of the prayer does not matter is clear too from the parable of the Pharisee and the publican (*Luke 18:9-14*). Pharisees were men who strictly kept all laws and precepts. They thought that God would be satisfied with that. Some of them were pious on the outside, but did things on the sly. Jesus calls them hypocrites, but most people honoured them for their "holiness". It was exactly the opposite with the publicans. These tax collectors, who served the Roman occupation forces, were looked down upon, even hated. To be sure, most of them were corrupt. They tried to get rich quickly at the taxpayer's expense. The prayer of the tax collector in *Luke 18* is again nothing but a cry: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." The Pharisee, no doubt, prayed beautifully. He thought that he knew what prayer was all about. But God did not listen to him, rather God heard the prayer of the tax collector. In this way Jesus illustrated that the hearing of prayer does not depend on flowery language nor on the many words that we utter.

## Jesus Teaches His Disciples to Pray

From the gospel it appears that even Jesus' disciples are at a loss as to what to do with prayer. They ask him, "Lord, teach us to pray". Jesus then teaches them the prayer known as the

Lord's Prayer. You can find this prayer in *Matthew 6:9-13*. In one of the following lessons this Lord's Prayer will be further discussed. In this lesson we shall consider only that Jesus' prayer consists of six petitions. In the first three we do not ask anything for ourselves, rather we pray that God's glory may be seen on earth. It directs us to God's Name, His Kingdom, and His will. Only after that do we come to the three petitions in which we ask something for ourselves. In this sequence, we already receive an important lesson about prayer.

## Prayer in the Old Testament

In the book Exodus we are told that Moses receives instruction to make a tent (tabernacle) for the worship of God. This tent was divided into two parts. In the innermost part stood a gold chest called the ark of the covenant. In the ark were two stone tablets on which God had written His law. The chest was covered by the "mercy seat". Outside, in front of the tent stood the altar of burnt sacrifices. It means that when an Israelite had sinned against God's commandments he had to sacrifice an animal. This animal, a lamb for example, was killed and then completely or partly burned. With this action the sinner signified: "Lord I have deserved death, but be pleased to take this animal instead". Once

a year the chief priest, or the high priest went into the inner part of the tent with blood. He sprinkled the blood on the mercy seat which rested above the tablets of stone containing the law. The blood of the animal "covered" the sins, the trespasses of God's law. To be sure, the Israelite was aware that all these actions were symbolic; he knew that the blood of the animal could not save him. You can read about that in *Ps. 51:18,19* and in *Hebr. 10:1-7*. Between the altar in front of the tent and the ark stood yet another altar called the altar of incense. Every day a priest entered the tabernacle with incense, offered it and prayed. The rising smoke from the incense symbolized prayer. (See also *Rev. 8:3,4*)

Prayer is, therefore, a sacrifice to God. It has to ascend to God as the smoke of the incense offering. It is to be a presentation of ourselves to God. Can that be done? Can a sinner present

himself to God? Yes, because first a confession of sins was made with the burnt sacrifice and only after that did the priest pray with the burning incense. In this way God was present with His forgiveness.

## Prayer and Confession of Sin Go Together

The criminal on the cross prayed to Jesus. But what did he do first? He confessed his guilt and expressed his belief in Jesus' innocence, and only then did his prayer follow in which he acknowledged Jesus as King. We talked about that in the previous lesson. In *Psalms 25* the poet confesses his sins first, thereafter he praises God's faithfulness, and finally he prays for himself. The order, of course, is not important. The real point is that prayer without the awareness of our guilt is impossible. Jesus also teaches us to pray in His Name. What He means by that becomes clear from the Old Testament. The lamb sacrificed by the Israelite, whereby he acknowledged his own sins, is a symbol of the "Lamb of God that takes the sin away" (*John 1:36*). Jesus, who offered himself on the cross, died for our sins. Actually we deserved to be rejected forever by God, but Christ died in our stead. As the blood sprinkled on the mercy seat covered the sins of the Israelite, so our sins are covered by the blood of Jesus Christ.

Thus prayer in the name of Jesus means to confess and believe that He has paid for our sins. He who prays in Jesus' name acknowledges and confesses his own sins and believes at the same time that he is free of guilt. In such a case the form does not matter but what does matter is that we remember that God will hear our prayer only if we acknowledge our guilt before Him. God will never reject a prayer for forgiveness. When we are in trouble, are filled with worries, or are in the midst of suffering, we can go to Him and "hide" in Him. That is what you will find verbalized at the beginning of many Psalms. (e.g. *Psalms 46; 90; 91*). If you know God is no longer angry with you because your sins have been paid, you begin to feel at ease with Him and turn to Him.

## We May Ask Everything

Everyone who comes to God in this way will be helped. He has promised that. So whether your prayer is heard or not heard does not depend on its form, fortunately, but on the content. As a child asks its father, so we may ask God. But does that mean we receive everything we ask for? To put it another way, does a child receive everything it asks of its father? As a child cannot judge what is good, so we cannot judge what is good. On the other hand, our Father in heaven knows what is best.

We may bring all of our needs to God. We may ask for everything (*Phil. 4:6*). But what we need is sometimes totally

different from what we think we need. Even Paul had to admit that. When he was imprisoned in Rome, he prayed to be set free, but God acted in a different way. He left Paul in prison so that the gospel could be preached in places where otherwise it would never have been preached (*Phil. 1:12-14; Acts 28*). Paul has to admit that God knows best. So it is too with Paul's unheard prayer discussed in the previous lesson. A strong, self-assured Paul would not be a fitting instrument to preach the gospel. It had to be a weak Paul, strange as that may seem.

We may ask God for everything, and we should expect everything from Him. He can and does provide healing when we are ill, help when we are in difficulties, work when we are unemployed, peace when war threatens, ...in short, everything.

## How Can It Be?

What do we know about God's plans. Read the moving account of Stephen's death (*Acts 6,7*). We think that here was now exactly the man God could use to preach the gospel. Yet God permits him to be stoned to death. In addition, a man who later would be called Paul helps in the execution. How can that be? We would say: "Read the next chapter." (*Acts 8:4*) It was precisely because of persecution that the gospel spread. Saul (Paul) is arrested by God, seized by the scruff of his neck and told to preach the gospel (*I Cor. 9:16*). That is how God works; that is how God does things.

# Questions for Lesson 2

## The Bible is a Miracle

1. Besides Paul and John, can you name a few writers of letters?
2. Can you name a few Old Testament authors?
3. Which examples are mentioned to show the unity of the Bible?

## The Fall Into Sin

1. What is meant by the “tree of life” (Gen 2:9, 3:22)?
2. In this lesson there is much talk of “sin”. Can you demonstrate from the Bible what is meant by “sin”?
3. What was the real nature of Adam’s sin?

## Praying: But How?

Read *Psalms 32:1-5* and try to answer the following questions:

1. What does the poet say in verses 1 and 2?
2. Why did the poet have so many difficulties?
3. When was his guilt forgiven?