

EVANGEL

The Good News of Jesus Christ



Despair

Despair a common emotion

One of the most common emotions that afflicts our society today is depression. There are thousands of people who struggle with depression every day. Many suffer depression because of chemical imbalances in the body which affects one's mind and one's mood. Therefore many can be helped with the use of medication. But the vast number suffer depression because of despair. Despair is the result of not seeing or feeling any hope in our life. When we are depressed we feel so lonely in this world. The troubles and problems of life overwhelm us so that we feel we are struggling against our difficulties all alone. When we feel this way, there does not seem to be any reason to continue the struggles of life.

In the book of Psalms several Psalmists speak about the despair and depression that they have to battle in their lives. One of those psalmists was a man by the name of Asaph who wrote Psalm 77. You hear his despair in the opening words of the Psalm. He writes: "I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, that He may hear me. In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without

weariness; my soul refuses to be comforted." In these words you hear the anguish that he is going through as he expresses his pain and torment in a loud voice to the Lord.

Despair controls one's life

Asaph speaks about how his despair controls his life. Every waking moment and thought is consumed with the despair that he feels. The whole day he cries to the Lord in his anguish and through the long night he stretches out his hand toward heaven, pleading to the Lord for His help. His despair will not allow him to get any rest, for he says, "The Lord holds my eyelids from closing." Perhaps you can relate to what the Asaph experiences. Perhaps you have or are experiencing dark days when life does not seem to have any purpose or meaning, when there does not seem to be any reason to continue with life. Sometimes the sense of despair will only last for a few moments or hours, sometimes it lasts for a few days or longer. During these times of despair it can be very difficult to carry on with the normal activities of life. It can control our every waking moment.

Cause of despair

The most telling words of Asaph are found at the end of verse 2 when he writes, "my soul refuses to be comforted." It is impossible to live without comfort in our lives. We are without comfort when there is no longer any hope in our lives. Asaph despaired because he felt as if he was all alone in this world; that even the Lord God had abandoned him. He asks in verse 7,8 "Will the Lord reject forever? Will He never

show His favour again? Has His unfailing love vanished forever? Has His promise failed for all time? Has God forgotten to be merciful? Has He in anger withheld His compassion?"

Asaph feels he has been abandoned by the Lord and that he is all alone in this world. There is no greater darkness in this life than to be lonely and abandoned, without any hope in this life. Asaph does not tell us why he feels that the Lord has abandoned him. No doubt he has been going through some personal traumatic struggles that has caused him great pain and suffering. It is also possible that the enemies of Israel have conquered the nation and are making life very difficult for Israel. Then it may indeed appear as if the Lord has abandoned His people. And if the Lord has abandoned His people to the tyranny of their enemies, then what hope and what comfort does Israel have? None.

And without any hope there is only despair and depression. What happens when we fall into despair and become depressed is that we become absorbed in our troubles and problems. Our troubles become so overwhelming that they take over our whole life. All our problems and difficulties become magnified, so that we can no longer see the forest for the trees.

We begin to look inward and focus on all our problems. Even the small problems of life become so large that we cannot see our way out of them. There is no longer any hope and without hope what is the sense of continuing on with the struggles of life. This sense of hopelessness can come about when we lose a loved one that is so precious and dear to our hearts. It

can come about when we have difficulties with our husband or wife and our relationship deteriorates, or our children are causing us great concern, or our health is failing. There are so many things that can cause us to lose hope and question the purpose of this life. Without a purpose there is no comfort for our soul.

Common response to despair

The most common way to deal with our despair is to ignore our pain and anguish. We try to find comfort by forgetting about our difficulties. We can compare this method with the way we treat the minor scrapes and bruises of our children. When our little child comes crying because they have received a minor scrape, the way we deal with it is to distract the child, for when he is distracted, then he will also forget that it hurts. We often try to do the same with the pain and struggles of this life. We try to ignore and forget about them, we do not want to face our problems and deal with them for that will only cause us greater agony.

There are many ways in which people try to escape the hopelessness of this life. Many try to drown out their pain with alcohol, others will try to find comfort by going on a food binge, others seek it in sex, or in sports to take their minds from the problems of life. We all find different ways to ignore our pain and struggles and to seek our comfort in this life. But a life that seeks ways to ignore or avoid dealing with our problems is a life of non-existence. We walk through life like a robot, programming ourselves to do the things that need to be done, but we do not feel anything,

and so we have no real and lasting comfort in this life.

Comfort in the midst of despair

Although Asaph struggles with despair, yet he does not give in to it. He does not try to ignore the despair that he feels, but he faces the pain and hurt in his life. He does that by crying out to the Lord. Even though he feels so lonely and abandoned in the middle of his struggles, yet he faces them by placing his pain and anguish before the Lord God. He cries aloud to God. He says, "In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord." He stretches out his hands to God without wearying. He knows that all the other methods by which man tries to find comfort end in total failure. His only hope is to cry to the Lord, "Lord help me."

Even though he feels so lonely, as if the Lord has abandoned him, yet he cries to the Lord, "Lord, do not forget me, show me your mercy, and compassion." When he brings his pain and anguish before the Lord, the Lord does not forget about him. The Lord lifted him from the despair and depression that he felt. For the Lord opened the eyes of Asaph, so that he says in verse 11, "I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago. I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds."

Asaph thinks back to what the Lord has done for His people in the past. He remembers how the Lord took care of His people, how He saved them from Egypt with great miracles, and let them escape the Egyptian army by opening a path through the Red Sea. If the Lord has done great things for His people in

the past, surely he will look after His people today. Faith remembers the mighty deeds of God for his people in the past, and faith knows that the same God will take care of his people today. Today we may remember the great things God has done for us through Jesus Christ. If Jesus Christ died for our sins and if he has been raised up from the dead and now sits in heaven with the Father, then we may also be sure that the Lord will not forget about His people today.

What happens in our life is that we so quickly lose the proper perspective. What do we remember? We remember all the trouble and suffering that we are going through. All our thoughts dwell on our pain and our difficulties, so that it overwhelms us. But we forget about our Lord. We so quickly forget the great things our Lord has done for us in Jesus Christ.

God's people can face the pain and struggles of life, because the Lord has given us real comfort in Jesus Christ. That does not mean that God's people never have pain. In fact they feel the suffering and pain of this life very keenly. God's people do not escape the difficulties and problems of life. But we can face them, for the Lord has given us a hope. We know that no matter how great our pain is today, with the Lord Jesus we have a purpose and meaning for life. We know that in everything the Lord works for our salvation and ultimately for the coming of His glorious kingdom. Our great comfort is that the struggle of this life will give way to the eternal bliss and joy of the life everlasting with our Lord. In Jesus Christ my Saviour, my soul is comforted.

Matthew VanLuik

The Red Sea and

I'm sure most of you have not forgotten the Red Sea and Operation Noah. It was an awful sight. A large part of southern Manitoba was covered with water as the water of the Red River had turned into the water of the Red Sea. Homes were ruined, possessions were lost, animals were drowned. Anyone with a little bit of Bible knowledge will have thought of the time of Noah when there was also a time of mass flooding.

What really caught my attention during the time of the southern Manitoba flood, was the valiant efforts to save lives, property, and possessions. Dikes were stabilized, sandbags were packed, old wrecks were used as breakers. The army and the citizens did what they could to contain the damage and save what they could. The alarm had been sounded and the people reacted in an excellent way.

And rightfully so. For much time and money had been invested into building towns and homes. Much work had been done to acquire possessions. Many memories had been made in the places people lived. Why allow all of this to just be washed away with the waters of the flood? Why not try to save what can be saved?

And yet, I wonder whether the real message of the Red River flood has been understood. Was this flood just a so-called natural catastrophe or was the hand of God in this flood? As a Bible-believing Christian, I believe the latter. The hand of God was in this flood beckoning our hearts upwards to Him. In order to explain this, I would like to discuss a few passages from the Bible with you.

The Lamb and the scroll

When you turn to the fifth chapter of the book of *Revelation*, the last book of the Bible, you get a little picture of what is going on in heaven. Among other things, you see a Lamb standing by the throne of God. This Lamb is a symbolic representation of the Lord Jesus Christ who, after his ascension, is seated at the right hand of God. In the Lamb's hand, you see a scroll sealed with seven seals. This scroll is symbolic of the judgments of God which strike this world after the ascension of Jesus Christ. That the Lamb has this scroll in his hands and that He is the One who has the right and authority to open the seals points to the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ is the One who unleashes the judgments of God.

The four horsemen

When you turn to the beginning of the sixth chapter of this book, you see what happens when four of the seven seals are opened. When the first seal is opened, you see a white horse with its rider having a bow in his hand and a crown on his head. Then you are told that this rider went forth conquering and to conquer. This seal symbolizes the spirit of conquest and militarism that increasingly characterizes the time between the ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ and His return. When the second seal is opened, you see a red horse with its rider having a great sword with which to take peace from the earth. This seal is symbolic of civil wars that follow in the wake of many military conquests (first seal). When the third seal is opened, you see a black horse with its rider having a balance in his hand. This seal symbolizes scarcity, hunger and economic hardship that strike at the necessities of life. When the fourth seal is opened, you see a pale horse with a rider whose name is Death and Hades following him. Together with Hades this rider is given power to kill with the sword, with famine,

with pestilence and by the beasts of the earth. This seal symbolizes the various forms of death which strike the people of this earth.

Four trumpets

When you now take a little jump and turn to the beginning of the eighth chapter of the book of *Revelation*, you see what happens when the seventh seal is opened. Among other things, you see seven angels standing before God with trumpets in their hands. As you listen to the four trumpets, you will notice a pattern similar to that of the first four seals. As with the first four seals, you read about judgments striking this earth. When the first trumpet is blown, you read about judgments of God striking the earth: hail and fire, mixed with blood falling on the earth and burning up a third of it. When the second trumpet is blown, you read about judgments of God striking the sea: something like a great mountain burning with fire, is thrown into the sea, destroying a third of the living creatures in the sea and a third of the ships. When the third trumpet is blown, you read about judgments of God striking the rivers: a great star falling from heaven, blazing like a torch, and falling on a third of the rivers and fountains of water, killing many people because of the bitterness of the water. When the fourth trumpet is blown, you read about the judgments of God striking the sky: a third of the light of the sun, moon and stars is kept from shining. Together, these first four trumpets symbolize the judgments of God as you see them in hail and thunderstorms, hurricanes and tornadoes, tidal waves and floodings, earthquakes and water pollution, the disorder and disruption of heavenly bodies.

A summons to repentance

If you want to discover one of the purposes for the unleashing of all these and other judgments, the

Operation Noah



end of chapter nine of *Revelation* gives you the answer. There you read that “the rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshipping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood – idols that cannot see or hear or walk. Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts” (verses 20, 21). Notice that the word *repent* is used twice in this passage. This is a clear indication that one of the reasons the Lord Jesus Christ unleashes His judgments is to call the people of the world to repentance! In wars and civil strife, in hunger, famine and death, in earthquakes, floodings and pollution, the Lord Jesus wants us to hear the voice of God calling all men everywhere to faith and repentance.

Noah and the flood

This was also the case during the time of Noah. You read about him in the book of *Genesis*, the first book of the Bible. During that time, we are told that man's wickedness had become very great and that every inclination of the thoughts of

man's heart was only evil all the time. We are also told that the earth was full of violence and that all the people of the earth had corrupted their ways. This grieved God and it filled Him with much pain. So much so, that He decides to flush them all off the face of the earth with the exception of Noah and his family who had found favour in His eyes. During the time preceding the flood, Noah was to build an ark for the saving of his family and the representatives of the animal world. Furthermore, he was to sound the alarm by preaching to the people of his time calling them to faith and repentance.

Sad to say, no one listened when Noah sounded the alarm. No one made a valiant effort to save his life, property and possessions. No dikes were stabilized, no sandbags packed, no old wrecks used as breakers. No army was called in. But what was much worse. No one came to faith and repentance! They all laughed at Noah and thought he was a madman.

Yet, Noah was not a madman. He was a prophet of God. And so, when the time of grace for repentance had run out, the waters of the flood came. And no one

survived this flood, except Noah and his family and the representatives of the animal world.

The Red Sea and Operation Noah

Was this message heard in the waters of the flood in southern Manitoba? To avoid any misunderstanding, I am not saying that all the people that were affected by this flood are wicked sinners just like the people of Noah's time. Nor am I saying that they all had to repent from their wickedness as we read in the book of *Revelation*. But I am saying that there was a message in this flood. It clearly is one of the trumpets calling *all men everywhere* to faith and repentance in the Lord Jesus Christ.

I was impressed with the valiant efforts employed to save lives, property and possessions. Yet, I was not impressed by the lack of spiritual effort that was clearly visible. During this flood, biblical names were used to describe it. People spoke about the Red Sea and Operation Noah. But that was as far as the biblical message was heard. At least, as far as it could be heard in the national news media. No call for repentance was issued. No summons for people to turn their hearts toward God. No urging to embrace the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.

And yet, *that* is what should have been heard. For *that* is the abiding message of the Red Sea and Operation Noah. The Lord Jesus Christ has sounded the alarm and is summoning all men everywhere to faith and repentance before He returns on the clouds of heaven.

When that occurs, the time for repentance will be over. Then we will all have to appear before the judgment seat of God to give an account of what we have done. And we will all be asked how we have responded to the alarms that were sent to call us to faith and repentance.

Dick Moes

By Faith Sarah Gave Birth to a Son

Bible Story

Based on Genesis 18:1-15,
and Genesis 21:1-17

Sarah's busy hands come to rest for a moment. She puts down the pots she was cleaning, and straightens her back. She can feel that she is not so young anymore. But she is still fairly strong for a woman her age: almost ninety years old! She wipes her hands and steps outside the large tent. Her eyes scan the lush fields on the rolling hills. She watches the servants come in with the flocks. Though the land is very good, it took many years before she felt a bit at home in this foreign country, Canaan. Their home used to be far away, in the land by the Big Rivers. Vividly Sarah remembers the day that her husband, Abraham, had told her they must leave. "God will show us the way and make us into a large nation," he had said. Full of trust she had followed Abraham. The Lord would provide.

But over time the doubts came. How could Sarah and her husband become a large nation, if they did not have any children? Sure, the Lord appeared to Abraham several times to repeat his promise of receiving many descendants. But Sarah had stopped believing it. She was too old to have a child, and so was her husband. As the hope for a child drained away from her, she started to lose her joy. Her chores became a drag. Often she lost sight of the purpose in her life. As she is staring over the fields today, her eyes are sad and lifeless.

Suddenly she realizes that her husband is calling out to some strangers. From behind the tent coverings she can see what is happening. Three men are approaching their settlement. Abraham runs towards them and greets them politely, bowing to the ground. He seems to recognize one of them. The other two must be that person's friends. Sarah's husband seems very excited about his visitors. "Please, stay for a while," he insists. "You must not leave right away. It is the hottest time of the day. I'll have the servants get some water, so you can cool off your aching feet. But, please, honour us by staying for dinner. After that you may go continue your travels."

As soon as the strangers agree to stay, Abraham rushes into Sarah's tent. "Sarah," he explains, "We have received three very honoured guests. One of them



is the Lord. I recognized Him from the times He appeared to me. He is the one who told us about the great nation we will become. Sarah, each time the Lord speaks to me, He repeats His promise to us. I am so glad He is here. We have to prepare a special meal for our guests. Please bake the best cakes you can, as soon as possible. I am off to the servants to make them prepare fresh meat. Sarah, I am so happy!"

As Abraham hurries to the keepers of the flocks, Sarah gets her pots out again. Unfortunately, she does not share Abraham's hopeful enthusiasm. She has lost the ability to get excited about the promise. But she always cooperates with her husband. Dutifully she starts measuring off the right amount of flour. When Abraham comes back a while later, her delicious cakes are ready.

Right in front of the tents Abraham has prepared a pleasant spot in the cool shade where the guests can eat. With proper courtesy he invites them to sit down. After Abraham serves them the well-prepared food, he steps aside to watch his guests eat. He does not consider himself worthy of sharing a meal with them. But for him the special treat consists of serving dinner to his Lord!

From her tent Sarah looks on. It would not be correct for her to join Abraham and the guests outside. But she can hear every word they say.

Unexpectedly Sarah jolts when she hears her name mentioned! Are they talking about her? Yes!! They ask where she is. Abraham explains that she is inside. Then she clearly hears the Lord say, "When I come back, next spring,

your wife Sarah will have a son." For one short moment Sarah is not sure what she hears. Then she laughs almost out loud. What? Will she have a son? Come on. Abraham and she are much too old.

Suddenly Sarah's laugh freezes. Her heart starts pounding from fear. Although the Lord did not see her, apparently He knows that she laughed from unbelief. "Abraham," she can hear the Lord speak sternly, "I saw Sarah laugh. She does not believe me. But I repeat it. Next spring I will come back, and Sarah will have a son." Sarah feels so awkward now. "I did not laugh," she mutters, trying to excuse herself. But even those words the Lord hears. "You did laugh," He says simply. And with that He closes the topic.

Sarah is greatly embarrassed that the Lord exposed her unbelief and her lie. But slowly that confusion makes way for a new certainty. The Lord did not come to shame her, but to give her faith. Twice He said it. "You will have a son." It must be true. It is true!

That renewed faith gives Sarah new strength. Full of vigor she goes about her daily activities again. Everything has a purpose now. The Lord has chosen her to give a son to Abraham. All the other promises of the Lord will come true as well. Abraham's descendants will be as many as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand by the sea. They will be blessed by the Lord, and be a blessing to all nations of the world.

The next spring Abraham and Sarah became the thankful parents of a beautiful son, because of their faith.

Jane

The Jesus Seminar

Twice per year over the last decade, a group of 75 self-appointed Bible scholars have gotten together in "The Jesus Seminar" to discuss what can be known about the man called Jesus of Nazareth. This group of rebel scholars has deleted almost everything the New Testament reports the Lord Jesus as having said and done.

The quest for the historical Jesus is not new. Scholars have long been disturbed by what they perceived as different pictures of Jesus' life as presented by the four evangelists. Since the early 1800s, they have asked questions such as: Did the writers of the four gospels embellish actual facts? How did the faith and politics of the early church effect the editing process of Jesus' story? Which parts of the New Testament are fact and which pious myths?

For a hundred years, New Testament scholars who categorically denied the possibility of divine inspiration and the miraculous worked on the New Testament until there was little left. Consensus was that the Gospel accounts are so unreliable that we can know little of Jesus, the Jewish sage who walked the roads of Palestine almost two millennia ago.

And yet, the quest continued. In the last decade, however, it has taken a turn in style. Whereas in the past the discussions were contained in the university lecture theatres and scholarly works, the Jesus Seminar is eager to popularize the quest. They see it as an ethical necessity to let the public in on what the Bible scholars are doing. And so the Jesus Seminar has produced *The Five Gospels* (the fifth is the *Gospel according to Thomas*).

The Five Gospels presents the Gospels according to the Jesus Seminar. The text marks what Jesus *probably* said, *may* have said, *probably* did *not* say, and *certainly* did not say. This is determined by majority vote at the semi-annual meetings of the Seminar. The group votes with great theatricality on the authenticity of each saying of the Lord by casting colour-coded beads into a box or jar to indicate their vote on whether or not Jesus actually said what the New Testament writers purported him to have said. A red bead indicates that the scholar believes Jesus actually said it; a pink bead, he may have; gray, doubtful; black, not a chance. The 75 votes are tallied. The Seminar's

labours up to 1993 appear in *The Five Gospels*. In an obvious parody of the red-letter Bibles, the supposedly authentic words of Jesus are printed in red. The rest are printed in the other colours, in descending order of credibility. 82% of the words of the Lord Jesus are judged inauthentic. The "Jesus" of the Jesus Seminar has been pared down to a poor, semi-literate man who uttered a few aphorisms like: "Turn the other cheek," "Love your enemies," and "Rejoice when reproached."

Not content, though, with only judging *sayings* of Jesus, the Seminar in an ongoing effort to offend God, has recently begun to judge the *events* spoken of in the Gospels. They have taken skepticism to new heights. The skeptics have always been around; however, the earlier ones did not so much deny the events reported in the New Testament as try to explain them rationally. The rationalists said that the crucifixion may have induced a deep coma from which Jesus revived. A volcanic eruption may have caused the parting of the Red Sea. The Magi of the East may have followed a comet to Bethlehem. The healings Jesus did were probably psychosomatic, brought about by the people's faith in and devotion to Jesus.

Bible-believing Christians reject these explanations, but at least they work with the notion that the events recorded happened. The radical scholars of today hold that the Bible is a collection of myths, legends and hero-worship produced by the early believers to promote a political agenda. What is presented as facts and history in the Gospels are, by their opinion, only parables about power and authority in which the early church was

complaining about oppression, poverty, malnutrition, sickness, and being overworked. One leader of the Seminar says that the stories in the Bible are as "true" as Aesop's Fables.

And so the scholars of the Jesus Seminar have been reading each other's papers about the events recorded in the Gospels, meeting, and voting on what happened and what did not. In the Fall of 1994, they considered the Virgin Birth and 96% agreed that it is fiction. The only thing left of the Nativity description is the name of Jesus' mother (Mary). No miracles survived the decisive vote of the scholars. A year ago they voted on the Resurrection. Negative! Jesus' body was either left on the cross to rot or tossed in a shallow grave to be dug up and eaten by scavenger dogs. It is highly unlikely that Judas Iscariot for 30 pieces of silver kissed the Master and thus betrayed him.

And so it goes, on and on. The skeptics tearing apart the Scriptures, piece by piece. Don't be taken in by them. You will be left with nothing – no Gospel, no hope, no salvation. God's revelation, His holy Word, is true – every word of it. God does not lie. God will not be mocked. Accept His Word. Embrace it. Believe it.

Aesop's Fables! Wow!

George van Popta

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