

The Way of the Eternal

About five years ago, a group of archaeologists started working on a dig in a cave on the southwest suburb of Jerusalem. The dig was eventually completed within the last year. In the past few months a book relating to this archaeological site has been issued. An attempt was made to justify the cave as relating to John the Baptist. The location of the cave and its site in terms of a village has, in terms of Christian history, been associated with John the Baptist from Byzantine times.

In the cave, the archaeologists found a number of depictions of John the Baptist and the character of the man as depicted in the Scripture.

In many ways, people have become abuzz about John the Baptist and about the cave that they have discovered. At best, the relationship of this area of the outskirts of Jerusalem to John the Baptist dates back to about the 4th or 5th century after Christ. There is nothing of an earlier providence that relates to John the Baptist.

It is fascinating the way in which people can take something like this and try to build a case relating to John the Baptist. They use a number of the gospels that appeared in the second century to try to create a case, a nice story, for John and Elizabeth having been hidden in this area, in the hope that people will buy their book and finance the archaeological expedition! So on it goes.

It's fascinating to stop and consider that people want to find the physical environment of John the Baptist. This is not the only occasion in which people have tried to locate the exact spot where John the Baptist served, preached and baptised. But very seldom do people really want to take the time to look at the life of John the Baptist and appreciate what HIS COMMISSION was, and what DEMANDS it places upon people today!

Today I would like to start by looking at the early life of John the Baptist and draw some lessons in terms of our calling and what we are supposed to be doing. If we want to learn about John the Baptist, there's one place to go to.

Luke gives us some details relating to the birth of John. We learn about his parentage. We learn about the time setting. We don't learn about where he was born, or where his parents lived.

A week or so ago I asked one person about whether this particular village that was supposedly related to John the Baptist was a town of the priests, whether it could be established that it was a town of the priests. The man said, "There's no hope whatsoever" of associating this particular town with a town of the priests and being able to come to some supposition relating to John the Baptist. The Bible just doesn't give us those details in any way. But it does tell us ...

Luke 1:5 There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division (the course) of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

So we have a general time setting: the time of Herod. We know when Herod reigned. We also know that Zacharias was a man of the priesthood and that his wife was of the priesthood. We know the order of the priest of which he served.

But what is more important is:

6 And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

These people were individuals that God could give a very positive evaluation about. I guess most of us would appreciate that the Eternal would write an epitaph about us which said something similar. We wouldn't be able to see it, but those who lived after us would have an idea that the Eternal thought highly of us!

The Eternal obviously thought very highly of this couple.

7 But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years (the King James Version says "well stricken in years").

To be "stricken in years" means that they had to be very close to 60 years of age. At 60 years of age, a priest stopped serving in the Temple. So Zacharias had not quite reached 60 years of age at this point in time.

***8 So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division,
9 according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.***

The priests would set up a system whereby they drew lots to see who was going to do what in terms of the various functions of the priesthood each day. A large number of priests were probably serving in the Temple. If a person received the lot to be able to burn incense before the Eternal in the morning, his name was then withdrawn from the lot, and somebody else had the opportunity to do it in the afternoon, the next day, and so on.

The priests did not necessarily do the same function day in and day out in terms of the Temple.

In terms of "the course of Abijah" (Luke 1:5), this relates back to the 24 courses that David set up, which we find in the closing chapters of the first book of Chronicles. The 24 courses served for a week throughout the year on a rotation basis. As there are more than 24 weeks in the year, that meant that they served, in rotation, two weeks in a year. Then ALL of the courses served together at the Holy Day periods of the Days of Unleavened Bread and the Feast of Tabernacles to make up the requisite weeks of the year.

Very clearly, if Abijah was working in the Temple at this particular time, the timing of the "course of Abijah" could be reasonably well established. We don't need to concern ourselves with that today, but it does help understand, and provide a basis for, the time of John the Baptist's birth, and then from that, Jesus Christ's birth.

We find that while Zacharias was serving in the Temple and burning incense, trimming the candles:

***10 And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense.
11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense.***

It was a place in the Holy Place that he could not avoid. He had to go to the golden altar and place his incense with the coals, to create a cloud in the Holy Place while he took care of the candlestick. The angel was standing in a place where Zacharias just had to recognise that there was somebody else in the Holy Place besides himself! It was inescapable to him.

***12 And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.
13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.
14 "And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.***

Nothing has changed in the Church of God! At the birth of a child, there is much rejoicing! In this case, because they were older, the level of rejoicing took on a much higher intensity.

15 "For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.

16 "And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.

17 "He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Zacharias, in a typically human reaction, said:

18 And Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years."

"We've been trying to have a child for all of these years."

19 And the angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings.

20 "But behold, you will be mute (speechless) and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time."

This took a process of time. The people in the courtyard were wondering what was happening because the priest was taking longer to fulfil his duties than was normal:

21 And the people waited for Zacharias, and marveled that he lingered so long in the temple.

22 But when he came out, he could not speak to them; and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple, for he beckoned to them and remained speechless.

23 And so it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed, that he departed to his own house.

24 Now after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived; and she hid herself five months, saying,

25 "Thus the Lord has dealt with me, in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

The birth of John the Baptist was miraculous. God intervened in the lives of these people to provide the means, the strength and the ability for John to be born. As Gabriel said, he was born WITH God's Holy Spirit.

We can now quickly fast-forward nine months and come to the birth. We don't need to go through all the details of the intervening period of time. Luke doesn't give us those details.

57 Now Elizabeth's full time came for her to be delivered, and she brought forth a son.

58 When her neighbors and relatives heard how the Lord had shown great mercy to her, they rejoiced with her.

59 So it was, on the eighth day, that they came to circumcise the child; and they would have called him by the name of his father, Zacharias.

60 His mother answered and said, "No; he shall be called John."

There was much remonstrance and protestation:

61 But they said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name."

"You've got to call him after his father's name."

62 So they made signs to his father - what he would have him called.

63 And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, "His name is John" ...

"It's a closed case!"

63 ... So they all marveled.

Of course they marvelled, because the moment he had finished writing that, and making the point:

64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, praising God.

65 Then fear came on all who dwelt around them; and all these sayings were discussed throughout all the hill country of Judea.

66 And all those who heard them kept them in their hearts, saying, "What kind of child will this be?" And the hand of the Lord was with him.

What did Zacharias say? Luke provides an insight. The concluding verses of this chapter are very instructive for us:

67 Now his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying:

68 "Blessed is the Lord God of Israel,

For He has visited and redeemed His people,

69 And has raised up a horn of salvation for us

In the house of His servant David,

70 As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets,

Who have been since the world began,

71 That we should be saved from our enemies

And from the hand of all who hate us,

72 To perform the mercy promised to our fathers

And to remember His holy covenant,

73 The oath which He swore to our father Abraham:

74 To grant us that we,

Being delivered from the hand of our enemies,

Might serve Him without fear,

75 In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.

Having talked about the general context of John's birth, Zacharias then focuses upon John:

76 "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest;

For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways,

77 To give knowledge of salvation to His people

By the remission of their sins,

78 Through the tender mercy of our God,

With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us;

79 To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death,

To guide our feet into the way of peace."

As we go through this, there are lots of things that we could focus upon. There are two particular aspects that I would like to focus upon today.

76 "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest;

For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways,

John was prophesied by his father to prepare "the Ways" of the Lord. Subsequently, we find that part of John's mission was:

79 ... To guide our feet into the way of peace."

This aspect of "the Way" occurs in two separate verses of this prophecy relating to John. Zacharias is quoting from prophecy. He was not simply creating some new thing for himself. There are two Scriptures that very much inform what Zacharias said.

Malachi has already been referred to in the announcement of Gabriel to Zacharias about John, when he was in the Temple. The reference in Malachi 3:1 simply states:

Malachi 3:1 (New American Standard translation) "Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly

come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says the LORD of hosts.

Malachi was inspired to prophecy about the messenger who was coming to prepare the Way of the Eternal, the Way of the Lord.

Zacharias knew not only the prophecy of Malachi, he was also very much aware of the prophecy of Isaiah which addressed the same issue. The role of the messenger is talked about in:

***Isaiah 40:1 "Comfort, yes, comfort My people!" Says your God.
2 "Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her,
That her warfare is ended,
That her iniquity is pardoned;
For she has received from the LORD'S hand
Double for all her sins."***

In the next verse is a prophecy which is related very clearly to John the Baptist:

***3 The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way of the LORD;
Make straight in the desert
A highway for our God.
4 Every valley shall be exalted
And every mountain and hill brought low;
The crooked places shall be made straight
And the rough places smooth;
5 The glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
And all flesh shall see it together;
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."***

Zacharias, in speaking of his son and prophesying about his son's role, was building upon these two prophecies that are given.

We know absolutely nothing about John the Baptist from that day until the day of his appearing in Israel, except for this verse:

Luke 1:80 So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel.

In other words, the physical life and the background of John the Baptist was not of great interest to the Eternal. That wasn't the part of his life that He wanted us to focus upon. The parts that are given to us, the prophecies which he was to fulfil, were of much greater importance to God, and those were the parts upon which He wants US to focus as well.

The Bible is not written from the point of view of trying to tell us everything. It's written from the point of view of trying to tell us what is important to God.

The space given to the comments of Zacharias at the very time of the circumcision of John are included by the Eternal to show us what is really important about this individual. It was not a matter of how tall he was, or how heavy he was, or anything of that nature, but what his MISSION was, and what he was to accomplish.

If we go to Matthew, Mark or John's gospel, we will find each of the gospel writers giving a comment about John which draws upon these same views, these same prophecies. Each of them give a consistent view of John as to his role. They always speak about John in terms of the prophecies of Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:1.

Let's ask ourselves a question: why did the Way of the Eternal have to be prepared? Why was it important that "a Way" be prepared for the Eternal, for Jesus Christ to come?

We might also ask, why is it important for US to be involved in a role that is a type of John the Baptist today in preparing "the Way" for the second coming of Jesus Christ? Why is it important?

Zacharias, in quoting from the prophets, speaks to an issue which is a very fundamental issue in terms of God's Word. "The Way of the Eternal" is one of those underlying elements that informs the entirety of Scripture. The term, "the Way of the Eternal," is a metaphoric usage of "a way" or "a path."

In one of these sections, we have already read about a path:

***Luke 1:79 To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death,
To guide our feet into the way of peace."***

This aspect of guiding feet into the path in which they should walk, or into the way of peace as it is described here, becomes a very important aspect. Many of us can probably cast our minds to a number of Scriptures which talk about "the path," and about "light to our way."

We could probably quickly turn our minds to a Scripture in Proverbs that talks about "a way." It describes a way that existed at the time of the time of the birth of John, the way that existed at the time of the birth of Jesus Christ, the way that exists today, and the circumstances that will exist at the very return of Jesus Christ! Solomon records:

Proverbs 14:12 There is a way that seems right to a man ...

There is a way that seems right to humanity. There is a path that humanity will follow ...

12 ... But its end is the way of death (destruction).

Just to help us appreciate the importance of it, and so that we don't forget it, Solomon reiterates it in:

***Proverbs 16:25 There is a way that seems right to a man,
But its end is the way of death.***

There is a way that seems right to us - but the end result of the way that seems right to humanity, leads to death. That death is what the Eternal requires for His creation.

Isaiah talks about us SEEKING the Eternal:

***Isaiah 55:6 Seek the LORD while He may be found,
Call upon Him while He is near.***

How do you go about seeking the Eternal, and calling upon Him?

***7 Let the wicked forsake his way,
And the unrighteous man his thoughts;
Let him return to the LORD,
And He will have mercy on him;
And to our God,
For He will abundantly pardon.
8 "For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways," says the LORD.***

Humanity lives a way of life which is opposite to that which God requires. The end results of it are the opposite to that which God desires for His creation. God says, "Your thoughts are not My thoughts, nor are your ways My ways ..."

9 "For as the heavens are higher than the earth,

***So are My ways higher than your ways,
And My thoughts than your thoughts.***

He is constantly contrasting His thoughts and His ways with the thoughts and ways of humans. It is a wonderful section of Scripture which talks about the change that has to take place as we undergo repentance and seek to live before God a life which is pleasing to Him. Isaiah mentioned this distinction between God's way and man's way.

In Isaiah 53 is a section of Scripture that we read in relation to Passover. Why was the Passover necessary? Why was it essential that the Lamb of God be sacrificed from the foundation of the earth? Simply because we DON'T follow God's ways.

***Isaiah 53:4 Surely He has borne our griefs
And carried our sorrows;
Yet we esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten by God, and afflicted.
5 But He was wounded for our transgressions,
He was bruised for our iniquities;
The chastisement for our peace was upon Him,
And by His stripes we are healed.***

Why?

***6 All we like sheep have gone astray;
We have turned, every one, to his own way ...***

We lived life the way it suits us. Humanity lives life as it wishes to live it. The Eternal said, "All we like sheep have gone astray." We have departed from the Way of the Eternal, and as a result of that:

6 ... And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

Because the consequence of us living our own way of life is sin! We never ever measure up to the standard that God wishes. We miss the point. We miss the mark - which is one of the principle Biblical definitions of what sin is. We fail to meet God's mark, God's standard. When we walk our own way, we constantly fail to meet that standard. That has been the lot of humanity since God recorded His Word.

God constantly provides this contrast between two paths of life.

At the time of the calling of Noah ...

***Genesis 6:6 And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.
7 So the LORD said, "I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them."
8 But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD.
9 This is the genealogy of Noah. Noah was a just (righteous) man, perfect in his generations. Noah walked with God.***

By saying that Noah walked with God, He is making the distinction that the rest of humanity did NOT walk with God! In walking with God, Noah sought the Ways of the Eternal, rather than his own ways. God's concern for the rest of humanity was that they sought their own ways. They were the living embodiment of what Solomon said in Proverbs 14:12. It provides us with a very clear example of the destruction that humanity brings upon itself as a result of living its own way.

***11 The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence.
12 So God looked upon the earth, and indeed it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth.***

They lived THEIR way. They lived the way that pleased them, rather than seeking the way of God.

There are a number of occasions where God spoke to ancient Israel in the book of Deuteronomy, in terms of this exact same situation. The descendants of those who had come out of Egypt were encamped on the plains of Moab, waiting to cross the River Jordan and to inherit the Promised Land. Moses is giving them instruction about the way in which they were to live within the land, the way in which they were to live before God.

Deuteronomy 9:1 "Hear, O Israel: You are to cross over the Jordan today, and go in to dispossess nations greater and mightier than yourself, cities great and fortified up to heaven,

He goes on to describe the people they were going to confront.

3 "Therefore understand today that the LORD your God is He who goes over before you as a consuming fire ...

God is going to take care of your inheritance of this land.

3 ... He will destroy them and bring them down before you; so you shall drive them out and destroy them quickly, as the LORD has said to you.

Then He told them not to think that they had done this by their own power, that their own way had done this. It was God's greatness towards them

6 "Therefore understand that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stiff-necked people.

That's an epitaph we wouldn't want to have recorded for us!

8 "Also in Horeb you provoked the LORD to wrath, so that the LORD was angry enough with you to have destroyed you.

10 "Then the LORD delivered to me two tablets of stone written with the finger of God, and on them were all the words which the LORD had spoken to you on the mountain from the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly.

While he was receiving those, the Eternal had to tell him that the people were perverting themselves. They were turning to idols.

12 "Then the LORD said to me, 'Arise, go down quickly from here, for your people whom you brought out of Egypt have acted corruptly; they have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them; they have made themselves a molded image.'

God had instructed them in the way in which they were to live. Moses disappeared for a few days and what was the human reaction? To revert to the way they knew, to revert to the comfort level that they themselves liked!

God talks a number of the times about the way in which they reverted to their own ways.

16 "And I looked, and behold, you had sinned against the LORD your God - had made for yourselves a molded calf! You had turned aside quickly from the way which the LORD had commanded you.

Moses was telling the children of Israel, "God gave you a standard to follow. He gave you a way to walk, and the moment my back is turned, you departed from it." Moses was, in fact, instructing the descendants of those people that they weren't to follow the same way.

The history of Israel is that they DID follow their own way after they inherited the land, as we can see in the book of Judges. What is the summary of the book of Judges?

Judges 21:25 In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

And when they had a king, most of the kings did that which was right in THEIR own eyes. They followed their own ways. They followed the ways of the Gentiles around them, and they suffered as a result of that.

We go back to Abraham time and time again. He forms a very important part of God's Plan. The Eternal said something to Abraham about "the Way of the Eternal" that is well worthwhile us appreciating and focusing upon. In Genesis 18 is the announcement of the birth of Isaac. The Eternal and two angels came down to see what was really happening in Sodom and Gomorrah. The cry of the city had ascended up to the Eternal. He came down to see whether it was as He heard. After having been entertained by Abraham and Sarah:

Genesis 18:16 Then the men rose from there and looked toward Sodom, and Abraham went with them to send them on the way.

17 And the LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing,

18 "since Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him?"

19 "For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice, that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him."

The promises to Abraham ultimately speaking were dependent upon keeping "the Way of the Eternal." And as a consequence of keeping the Way of the Eternal, "to do righteousness and justice." I have spoken a number of times about those two terms that are translated "righteousness and justice," or "judgment and justice." They were the consequence of keeping the "Way of the Eternal."

It is interesting to read through Luke 1:69-79 and see how frequently and in what way Abraham, and the promises made to Abraham, comes up in the prophecies relating to John the Baptist and the coming Messiah. John the Baptist was to prepare a people for the Eternal, to prepare the Way of the Eternal, so that He could come and perform a Work. It gives us the understanding that, in fact, the Way of the Eternal had not been taught, or was not being lived, except by a very few people.

We can move on into the book of Acts in the New Testament, turning the clock forward a little further, some 33 or so years to the death of Jesus Christ and His resurrection, and the establishment of the Church.

Let's contrast the following Scripture with another statement of Paul's a little later in the book of Acts. Stephen had been the first martyr of the Church. The Church had been scattered.

Acts 9:1 Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest

2 and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

People were known as being of a particular Way. John the Baptist had come to prepare the Way of the Eternal. These people were known as being of "the Way." In other words, they sought to live the Way of the Eternal. They sought to be the true descendants of Abraham.

Saul sought to persecute those who were of "the Way."

Paul, having been converted, having had his life turned around and now living a new way, comes to Cyprus.

Acts 13:6 Now when they had gone through the island to Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew whose name was Bar-Jesus, 7 who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man. This man called for

Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God.

8 But Elymas the sorcerer (for so his name is translated) withstood them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.

9 Then Saul, who also is called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him

10 and said, "O full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord?"

"Will you not stop seeking to pervert the Way of the Lord?" So Paul pronounced darkness, blindness upon him.

11 "And now, indeed, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind, not seeing the sun for a time." And immediately a dark mist fell on him, and he went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand.

In its own way, this was a very fitting punishment to the man because he didn't know the Way of Truth. He sought to subvert and destroy it. It was as though the Eternal inspired Paul to say to him, "You can't see the Way of Truth, so you are not going to see ANY way. To teach you the lesson of just how much you don't know the Way of Truth, you are going to have problems finding any physical way."

He became blind. He had to have someone lead him. So a very powerful witness was given to Sergius Paulus.

It is interesting to note the way in which the apostle Paul had to counter individuals with demonic spirits, who understood perfectly what the apostle Paul was about.

In Philippi:

Acts 16:13 And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there.

It goes on to talk about Lydia and the way in which she was baptised, and became faithful to the Eternal.

16 Now it happened, as we went to prayer, that a certain slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination met us, who brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling.

17 This girl followed Paul and us, and cried out, saying, "These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation."

She understood what the whole purpose of Paul's teaching was about; that it WAS "the way of salvation." It was the way of salvation from this world, whereby a person could have a relationship with God.

In Acts 18 we are introduced to Apollos:

Acts 18:24 Now a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures, came to Ephesus.

25 This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism of John.

So he had a limited understanding, but he was very fervent. It says he spoke and taught ACCURATELY.

26 So he began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately (more fully).

They ADDED to his understanding of the Way of the Eternal. What was he preaching? He was preaching the Way of the Eternal.

When Paul was imprisoned, he was invited to speak before Felix, the governor of that area.

Acts 24:10 Then Paul, after the governor had nodded to him to speak, answered: "Inasmuch as I know that you have been for many years a judge of this nation, I do the more cheerfully answer for myself,

11 "because you may ascertain that it is no more than twelve days since I went up to Jerusalem to worship.

12 "And they neither found me in the temple disputing with anyone nor inciting the crowd, either in the synagogues or in the city.

13 "Nor can they prove the things of which they now accuse me.

14 "But this I confess to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect, so I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets.

Paul is providing somewhat of a self definition for himself and for the people who followed the Way of the Eternal. He started off persecuting the Way, but now he says very clearly:

14 "But this I confess to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect, so I worship the God of my fathers ...

"That is the Way I live, and you have to judge and examine me based on that!"

This past week I was at a number of conferences. Some of these issues came up. One person quoted from a historian who made an interesting comment that:

"When the Romans became Christians, the Christians became Romans."

You have to ask, what Way were they following? They weren't following the Way of the Lord. They were following the ways that were convenient to them. That's what they were following.

In many of these academic discussions, people try to define things. They say, "Can you define what you mean by 'a Christian'?" They go round and round.

Or, "What do you mean by 'Jews' in the time of the apostles? What do you mean by 'Christians'?" They try and wrestle with this aspect of DEFINITION.

What was the definition of the apostle Paul? It was not necessarily that of a Christian! It was that of a "follower of the Way," the Way of the Eternal. He was following in a particular aspect. Interestingly, it applies to ALL aspects of life. It's worthwhile for us to take some time to consider some of these things. What does God challenge the people with?

Haggai 1:5 Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts:

"Consider your ways!

7 Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Consider your ways!"

"What way are you living? Is it the Way of the Eternal, or is it 'my own way'?" As Frank Sinatra used to say, "I did it MY way;" - the way in which all of humanity lives.

Psalm 1 speaks to this very subject of "the Way of the Eternal." We sing it with great regularity. It's a beautiful Psalm to sing and appreciate. Where does it start?

Psalm 1:1 Blessed is the man

Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,

Nor stands in the path of sinners ...

It doesn't talk about "the Way," but it is using words which are analogous to "a Way." It talks about the person ...

1 ... Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,

Nor stands in the path of sinners,

***Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;
2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
And in His law he meditates day and night.***

Summing up this beautiful Psalm, it says:

6 For the LORD knows the way of the righteous ...

The Eternal KNOWS "the way of the righteous" - because it is His Way! He is the One who has laid it out. He is the One who has established the parameters of that Way, who knows the destination, the goal, the purpose of that Way. But on the other hand ...

6 ... But the way of the ungodly shall perish.

David understood the aspect of "the Way of the Eternal." He understood that there were clearly two ways: the way in which the godly would walk and the way which the ungodly frequented.

Notice another Psalm which talks at length about the Way of the Eternal. David starts by saying:

***Psalm 25:1 To You, O LORD,
I lift up my soul.
2 O my God, I trust in You;
Let me not be ashamed;
Let not my enemies triumph over me.
3 Indeed, let no one who waits on You be ashamed;
Let those be ashamed who deal treacherously without cause.
4 Show me Your ways, O LORD;
Teach me Your paths.***

"Show me the Way that I should live. Show me the standard of my life. Teach me Your paths."

***5 Lead me in Your truth and teach me,
For You are the God of my salvation;
On You I wait all the day.
8 Good and upright is the LORD;
Therefore He teaches sinners in the way.
9 The humble He guides in justice,
And the humble He teaches His way.***

Once again, we get this combining of justice and the Way of the Eternal.

***10 All the paths of the LORD are mercy and truth,
To such as keep His covenant and His testimonies.
11 For Your name's sake, O LORD,
Pardon my iniquity, for it is great.
12 Who is the man that fears the LORD?
Him shall He teach in the way He chooses.***

God will teach him because he does have a right fear and respect for God.

David's life is summed up for us in 2nd Samuel 22. We could read many Psalms and come to the same conclusion. Let's read some of David's last words. He is praising God for His deliverance, and the way in which God has taken care of him:

***2 Samuel 22:21 "The LORD rewarded me according to my righteousness;
According to the cleanness of my hands He has recompensed me.***

Why?

***22 For I have kept the ways of the LORD,
And have not wickedly departed from my God.***

He missed the mark on occasions, but at the end of the day he could say, "I have not WICKEDLY departed from the Ways of my God."

***23 For all His judgments were before me;
And as for His statutes, I did not depart from them.
24 I was also blameless before Him,
And I kept myself from my iniquity.
25 Therefore the LORD has recompensed me according to my righteousness,
According to my cleanness in His eyes.***

Then David picks up on a metaphor in relation to the Way of the Eternal:

***29 "For You are my lamp, O LORD;
The LORD shall enlighten my darkness.***

"He will illuminate my way!"

***30 For by You I can run against a troop;
By my God I can leap over a wall.
31 As for God, His way is perfect;
The word of the LORD is proven;
He is a shield to all who trust in Him.***

Here is a man who is summing up his life and his relationship with God. He realised that God's Way was perfect, and he had sought to keep to that Way of life.

It's a very different situation to the majority of the people who were alive at the time when Gabriel announced to Zacharias about the birth of John, or when the angel appeared to Mary and mentioned to her about the purpose for the Child that was going to be born of her. A Way had to be prepared for them.

David kept the Ways of the Eternal. These ways can be very practical. We can talk about them in a very intellectual manner, or in an abstract manner. But these can be very, very practical.

Let's pick up the account of one of the people who were part of Abraham's household. The Eternal said that Abraham would teach his children AND his household, to keep the Way of the Eternal, to do righteousness and justice, that the Eternal may bring on Abraham all that He has promised. Let's have a look at an example of someone in Abraham's household in a very practical difficulty that he faced, and the way in which he sought to understand the Way of the Eternal.

Genesis 24 speaks of a very important aspect of the life of a young man - finding a wife. This was a very important aspect of the life of the father, finding a bride for his son. It talks to a very different society to that which we have today, but the lessons are the same for each and every one of us.

***Genesis 24:1 Now Abraham was old, well advanced in age; and the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things.
2 So Abraham said to the oldest servant of his house, who ruled over all that he had,
"Please, put your hand under my thigh,
3 "and I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and the God of the earth,
that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell;
4 "but you shall go to my country and to my family, and take a wife for my son Isaac."
5 And the servant said to him, "Perhaps the woman will not be willing to follow me to this***

land. Must I take your son back to the land from which you came?"

6 But Abraham said to him, "Beware that you do not take my son back there.

7 "The LORD God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my family, and who spoke to me and swore to me, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land,' He will send His angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there.

So the servant goes to Nahor in the area of Mesopotamia with a retinue of servants. He comes to the wells outside the city of Nahor:

11 And he made his camels kneel down outside the city by a well of water at evening time, the time when women go out to draw water.

It's interesting to see the attitude of this man to the task that he had been charged with, what became the basis of it, and how he saw the task before him.

12 Then he said, "O LORD God of my master Abraham, please give me success this day, and show kindness to my master Abraham.

13 "Behold, here I stand by the well of water, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water.

14 "Now let it be that the young woman to whom I say, 'Please let down your pitcher that I may drink,' and she says, 'Drink, and I will also give your camels a drink' - let her be the one You have appointed for Your servant Isaac. And by this I will know that You have shown kindness to my master."

And what he had asked the Eternal for, came to pass ...

15 And it happened, before he had finished speaking, that behold, Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel, son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother, came out with her pitcher on her shoulder.

16 Now the young woman was very beautiful to behold, a virgin; no man had known her. And she went down to the well, filled her pitcher, and came up.

17 And the servant ran to meet her and said, "Please let me drink a little water from your pitcher."

18 So she said, "Drink, my lord." Then she quickly let her pitcher down to her hand, and gave him a drink.

19 And when she had finished giving him a drink, she said, "I will draw water for your camels also, until they have finished drinking."

Notice what he then said:

21 And the man, wondering at her, remained silent so as to know whether the LORD had made his journey prosperous or not.

He was wondering, "Is this the one that God has brought me here to find for Isaac?"

22 So it was, when the camels had finished drinking, that the man took a golden nose ring weighing half a shekel, and two bracelets for her wrists weighing ten shekels of gold,

23 and said, "Whose daughter are you? ...

24 So she said to him, "I am the daughter of Bethuel, Milcah's son, whom she bore to Nahor."

25 Moreover she said to him, "We have both straw and feed enough, and room to lodge."

"We've got room. You can come and stay with us. There's even room for your camels."

26 Then the man bowed down his head and worshiped the LORD.

27 And he said, "Blessed be the LORD God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken His mercy and His truth toward my master. As for me, being on the way, the LORD led me to the house of my master's brethren."

"The Eternal led me in this way." Here was a servant who was part of Abraham's household who understood that God had involvement in even the most personal decisions in a person's life, that God could guide and direct him to the right family, and to the very right maiden for a wife for Isaac.

He comes to the family and gives them lots of present. He had ten camels' worth of goodies to give away. The family were greatly impressed by what had happened to Abraham, this long lost member of the family who had been away down south for many years.

The servant was able to explain to Bethuel and his family the mission that he was on from Abraham.

**35 "The LORD has blessed my master greatly, and he has become great; and He has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female servants, and camels and donkeys.
36 "And Sarah my master's wife bore a son to my master when she was old; and to him he has given all that he has.**

He recounts the discussions that he had had with Abraham.

**39 "And I said to my master, 'Perhaps the woman will not follow me.'
40 "But he (Abraham) said to me, 'The LORD, before whom I walk, will send His angel with you and prosper your way; and you shall take a wife for my son from my family and from my father's house.**

Abraham appreciated the relationship that he had with the Eternal. He appreciated that he walked in His Way, and that what had happened to him in life was as a result of following God's way. He said, "You are to go and find a wife for my son."

**42 "And this day I came to the well and said, 'O LORD God of my master Abraham, if You will now prosper the way in which I go,
43 'behold, I stand by the well of water ...**

The servant then recounts to them what he had prayed to the Eternal at that point in time, and the way in which God had answered. He impressed upon them the urgency of the task, and the fact that he couldn't stay around waiting for a ten day party to occur; that he really needed to be up and heading back to his master.

54 And he and the men who were with him ate and drank and stayed all night. Then they arose in the morning, and he said, "Send me away to my master. "

He was able to go back to his master. God had fulfilled His ways.

But it is interesting to see here the way in which God was directing things. Abraham's servant was seeking to fulfil the Way of the Eternal. He was seeking to walk in the Way of the Eternal; to have God's will performed in what we would today consider the most personal of decisions that a person could seek. He wanted the Eternal's Way to be fulfilled.

Can we live our lives in such a way today? Can we seek to do that and follow that Way?

It's a good point for us to consider, because one of the important roles for which we are training at the present time is to teach people in the world tomorrow that they are to walk in this Way.

Nothing has really changed from the beginning of the Book. God, even in the Millennium, will not be introducing some new fangled idea for people. He will be wanting to bring people into harmony with His Way.

We can see the way in which the Eternal talks about bringing people into "the way of the Eternal." Isaiah talks about the rebellious people. Why are they rebellious? Because they won't walk in the Way of the Eternal! They seek to walk in their OWN way. Isaiah is told:

***Isaiah 30:8 Now go, write it before them on a tablet,
And note it on a scroll,
That it may be for time to come,
Forever and ever:***

This is a lesson for ALL humanity.

***9 That this is a rebellious people,
Lying children,
Children who will not hear the law of the LORD;
10 Who say to the seers, "Do not see,"
And to the prophets, "Do not prophesy to us right things;
Speak to us smooth things, prophesy deceits.***

And the end result of prophesying deceits and speaking smooth things ...

***11 Get out of the way,
Turn aside from the path,
Cause the Holy One of Israel
To cease from before us."***

It's as true today as it was then. Humanity has not changed. The other day I heard a man talking about the book of Revelation and saying that the God of the book of Revelation is immoral and irrational! Do you think he wants to see the Way of the Eternal before him? I don't think so, not in any shape or form whatsoever! Nothing has changed from days of Isaiah. But what is going to change?

***19 For the people shall dwell in Zion at Jerusalem;
You shall weep no more.
He will be very gracious to you at the sound of your cry;
When He hears it, He will answer you.
20 And though the Lord gives you
The bread of adversity and the water of affliction,
Yet your teachers will not be moved into a corner anymore,
But your eyes shall see your teachers.
21 Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying,
"This is the way, walk in it,"
Whenever you turn to the right hand
Or whenever you turn to the left.
22 You will also defile the covering of your graven images of silver,
And the ornament of your molded images of gold.
You will throw them away as an unclean thing;
You will say to them, "Get away!"***

You will separate yourself from them. So here we have a situation where humanity, on the one hand, lives by wanting to live their own way of life without any regard for God. "Get God out of my way. I want to be the type of person I want to be myself."

Yet God says there is a time coming when that is going to change. The people who are going to be instructing people in the Way of the Eternal are whom? Hopefully it will be you and me, those of us who are being taught the Way of the Eternal today.

Isaiah 42:16 I will bring the blind by a way they did not know ...

All of humanity is blind at this point in time. They don't know the Way of the Eternal.

***16 I will bring the blind by a way they did not know;
I will lead them in paths they have not known.***

*I will make darkness light before them,
And crooked places straight.
These things I will do for them,
And not forsake them.
17 They shall be turned back,
They shall be greatly ashamed,
Who trust in carved images,
Who say to the molded images,
'You are our gods.'*

They are going to come to the point where they reject that because God is going to lead them by a new path.

*18 "Hear, you deaf;
And look, you blind, that you may see.
19 Who is blind but My servant,
Or deaf as My messenger whom I send?
Who is blind as he who is perfect,
And blind as the LORD'S servant?
20 Seeing many things, but you do not observe;
Opening the ears, but he does not hear."*

He gives a little bit of a riddle, but He is talking about the way in which humanity is going to have their eyes opened, so that they can really see the Ways of the Eternal.

Notice some other Scriptures which speak to this very same event, the way in which people are going to learn the Way of the Eternal:

*Isaiah 57:14 And one shall say,
"Heap it up! Heap it up!
Prepare the way,
Take the stumbling block out of the way of My people."
Isaiah 62:10 Go through,
Go through the gates!
Prepare the way for the people;
Build up,
Build up the highway!
Take out the stones,
Lift up a banner for the peoples!
Isaiah 2:1 The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.
2 Now it shall come to pass in the latter days
That the mountain of the LORD'S house
Shall be established on the top of the mountains,
And shall be exalted above the hills;
And all nations shall flow to it.
3 Many people shall come and say,
"Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
To the house of the God of Jacob;
He will teach us His ways,
And we shall walk in His paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
4 He shall judge between the nations,
And rebuke many people;
They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
And their spears into pruning hooks;
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
Neither shall they learn war anymore.*

A parallel Scripture is:

***Micah 4:1 Now it shall come to pass in the latter days
That the mountain of the LORD'S house
Shall be established on the top of the mountains,
And shall be exalted above the hills;
And peoples shall flow to it.***

People will come to it. And for what reason will people come?

***2 Many nations shall come and say,
"Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
To the house of the God of Jacob;
He will teach us His ways ...***

There is going to come a time when all nations are going to have the opportunity of understanding the Way of the Eternal. They don't at this present time. You and I have that privilege. You and I have the privilege of understanding the Way of the Eternal. You and I have that privilege for a very great purpose.

2 ... And we shall walk in His paths ..."

It's not just an academic exercise here. There's practical application as well, because not only are we going to be taught His paths, but we have got to walk God's paths!

***2 ... For out of Zion the law shall go forth,
And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
3 He shall judge between many peoples,
And rebuke strong nations afar off;
They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
And their spears into pruning hooks;
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
Neither shall they learn war any more.***

Hostility exists between peoples today, either at the individual level, the tribal level, the national level or whatever level it may be at. People are going to learn to live without hostility towards one another. They are going to be able to learn to live the Way of the Eternal.

We look forward to a time like that. But what about you and me today? You and I today have the opportunity of picking up on something that Jesus Christ talked about in the Sermon on the Mount. It fits in perfectly with what we have been discussing. Jesus Christ said:

Matthew 7:13 "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it.

It is very broad. How broad? It is broad enough for six billion people to do their OWN thing, to live whatever way of life they like. Six billion people live different ways. But if that was the way in which Satan was to confuse humanity, where there were six billion DIFFERENT ways of life, that shows how BROAD the way is! And as Jesus Christ said, it leads to destruction.

14 "Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.

The only people who find it are those who are called to live that Way of Life, who are called to have a relationship with the Eternal, with Jesus Christ, with Abraham etc, etc. You and I are called to live that difficult way of life, just as Abraham was called to live that difficult way of life.

Why are we called to live that difficult way of life? Because, like John the Baptist, we are also involved in

preparing the Way of the Eternal. You and I have to learn to LIVE the Way of the Eternal, to be followers of that Way. We are preparing the Way of the Eternal, preparing a people who are fit for the Eternal.

How do we see ourselves? Do we see ourselves in terms of that? If we see ourselves in terms of it, we don't see ourselves purely as some New Testament phenomenon. Because the people who are followers of the Way have antecedents that take them right back into the book of Genesis, right back to Abraham, to Noah, Enoch and Abel beforehand; the people who have walked with God.

The one thing that we know about Enoch is that he "walked with God." He followed the Way of the Eternal.

So how do we see ourselves? Oftentimes in the Church, people describe themselves as being "Christians." We think of ourselves as being Christians. Let me assure you one thing. The Christian world does not consider us Christian! It sees us as being heretical. I think we need to bear that in mind.

Oftentimes we think of ourselves as being Protestant. We are NOT Protestant! The Protestants have nothing to do with the Way of the Eternal. They may be nice people or great neighbours, but that's not the issue. The Reformation was about reforming the great church that was never the Church of God! There was somewhat of a debate in the time of the Reformation as to whether it was going to be a Reformation or a Restoration: restoring the Church of God. The Reformers won out.

The Protestant ideology has NOTHING to do with the Way of God. It is part of the deception that exists within this world today. At times I shake my head and wish that people wouldn't speak that way about themselves. I know it's very difficult to describe yourself to the normal man in the street. How do you describe yourself? I guess that "A follower of the Way," is one way we can do it. To them the only thing that matters is that you are a Christian as opposed to being a Muslim or a Jew.

But in the academic world, people get very SPECIFIC about DEFINITIONS. It is very difficult to put yourself into a category which they could understand. One time I was taking a class in the gospel of John. The teacher asked me something. I guess it was just one of those things that the Eternal gave me on the spur of the moment, and I said, "We would see ourselves in being the tradition of the Johanne group."

As an academic, she understood it perfectly because they have a pigeonhole for Johanne Christians, or Johanne types. There is another group for Ebionites, and another group for Nazareans, and this group and that group. They get pigeonholes everywhere. Oftentimes all they wish to do is to put people into pigeonholes as an academic exercise!

But the important thing for us is that we see OUR ROLE in being involved in preparing the Way of the Eternal.

As I read to you earlier, the New American Standard Bible doesn't talk about PREPARING the Way of the Eternal. It talks about CLEARING the Way of the Eternal! I can tell you that there's a lot of garbage out there that needs to be cleared! I've been to a conference of 8,000 biblical scholars and theologians. You've never heard such a collection of tripe and codswallop in all your living days! In reality, they have no real understanding of the Way of the Eternal. They have great minds. They are nice people, but they have no real UNDERSTANDING of what the Bible is about, and the Way to which people are to be called. They are quite happy with the way they are!

Oftentimes when they get to understand us, we become a bit of an enigma to them - because we are not at all Christian in terms of their definition of Christianity. We are a challenge to them - and we will always be a challenge to them. It's one of those areas which requires wisdom to be able to handle in an appropriate way.

The apostle Paul was not the only one who spoke and defined himself in the context of the Way. The apostle Peter did as well. Peter's second letter gives us some warning and some instruction that we need to be very aware of. He starts by talking about false prophets. It's a very similar situation to that which we read in Isaiah 30.

2 Peter 2:1 But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction.

When you get down amongst these people, they are having great debates about the resurrection, whether the resurrection occurred. They get in all sorts of mind games. It's incredible to see what they get up to!

2 And many will follow their destructive ways ...

It's very easy for humanity to get caught up in the wrong way, and be led into a destructive way ...

2 ... because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed.

Peter is issuing a warning to us, that there is a chance that we can be led into destructive ways, and as a result of that, the Word of Truth becomes blasphemed.

15 They have forsaken the right way and gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness;

They have forsaken the RIGHT way. He is talking to people who KNEW the right way, who knew the Way that they should live, but they have forsaken it.

21 For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them.

He warns us about the Way, the Way we should live; the Way of righteousness to which we have been called. We are called for a purpose.

The focus upon John the Baptist is fascinating in terms of archaeological discoveries and the way in which people in the 4th and 5th centuries looked upon John the Baptist and characterised him in rock drawings etc, etc.

But what is important about John the Baptist is the message that he taught, the purpose of his ministry, the fact that you and I have the opportunity, as we await the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, to be involved in a type of that ministry as well. We also have to WALK IN THE WAY OF THE ETERNAL. We have to PREPARE the Way of the Eternal.

... Peter Nathan
27 Nov 04

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