

THE BIBLE HISTORY TOLD TO OUR CHILDREN

- NEW TESTAMENT -

Chapter 2

The fullness of the time

What wonderful stories we have told you from the Old Testament, haven't we? The creation, the first world, the Flood, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses, the Judges, the Kings - Oh I could go on and on. It would take too long to repeat, but throughout all those stories we have been able to see that God reigns. Lands and people are controlled by Him.

But above all the Lord has watched over the Jewish people. The Lord has protected them against all the mighty enemies which came against them. Again and again God helped them and brought a solution. Why? Because the Israelites were such good people? Because they had earned it? Oh come, we know better than that, don't we?

Of all the nations which were on earth at that time, it was just the Jewish nation which were the greatest grief to the Lord. Frequently they angered and insulted their God. Time after time they left Him and made for themselves other gods, idols, and served them. Sometimes the whole land was filled with the groves of idols.

Why then has God throughout the ages guided and helped, blessed and protected the Jewish people? Because the Lord had made a covenant with them. God had given to that people His laws and statutes. To that people were the most wonderful, the richest promises given. From among them would be born the King of kings, the Saviour. The Lord had promised that, and it would come to pass. God never breaks His promises. Alas, we do!

At last the time had come when the

promised Messiah would appear. It had been a long time, but come He did.

Man had sinned against the living God; man had been disobedient. Disobedience is followed by punishment! Therefore man also must be punished. God must punish sin, because He is Righteous.

No, the animals did not sin, but we did, and it is because of us that God's curse also rests upon the brute beasts. That is our fault. Through our sins the whole creation groans. Oh children, have you ever thought about that? Never tease or torture animals, for they have done no wrong.

All men have sinned, without one exception. So, God must punish the sins of everyone. Therefore everybody will go into eternal misery? Probably you are answering "No, God's people don't go to hell. Their sins are forgiven".

But how does that come about? Does the Lord then not punish the sins of His people? ... That is more difficult perhaps? Perhaps you cannot answer that. Listen then!

The sins of God's people are also punished. God punishes all sin without exception. But the sins of converted people are punished in ANOTHER. That is why the Lord Jesus became MAN. He has borne the punishment in the place of His people. The Lord Jesus was punished and now God's people are forever free from the punishment. The stripes which they had deserved, He has received. That is why He, as a tiny baby, lay in the Manger, and that

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is why He died the cursed death on the cross. And why did He do that? Because He loves His people.

So you see children, for this the Son of God came to this earth, and for this He took upon himself HUMAN NATURE.

I know that this is still really rather difficult for some of you. Later you will understand it better. But perhaps you can yet understand something of what is written.

But before I tell you anything about the birth of the Saviour, I would like first to show you how men lived on earth at that time. Pay careful attention because this chapter is also difficult!

Far distant from Jerusalem was the great city of Rome in Italy. That was a marvellous city. The most beautiful palaces and temples had been built in Rome. In one of the biggest palaces lived the emperor of the great Roman Empire. His real name was Octavian! But he thought that name wasn't good enough, no, he had to have another name. So he made a decree that henceforth he would no more be known as Octavian, but as Augustus. "Augustus" means "glorious one" or "the lofty one". He wanted to be honoured like God from now on. Priests had to bring him incense offerings as to a god.

The Romans ruled almost the whole world. The mighty kingdom of Babylon no longer existed. The Persian kingdom had been beaten and subdued. No, the Romans now ruled over all those lands. The land of Canaan also formed a small part of that mighty Empire. And over all those millions of people Augustus was "Caesar". They were all his subjects.

Formerly, when there were so many little kingdoms, there was nearly always war. How often did the Israelites have to fight against the Philistines, against the Moabites and against the Syrians. When there is war, the roads are unsafe. Great armies march through the land and cause universal devastation and destruction. But while Augustus ruled there was no war. Over the whole world reigned peace! Nobody dared even to attempt fighting against the Romans for they were sure to lose.

When later the disciples of the Lord Jesus went to preach the Gospel in all parts, they were able to travel from city to city untroubled because peace reigned.

The Roman emperors had good roads built and on these roads it was no longer unsafe to travel. God's servants were also able to make good use of these roads.

If we journey to Germany, the people there cannot understand us. We speak English, but in Germany they speak German. There they may not understand English. In Holland people speak Dutch, in France, French. In short, each land has its own language and understands only its own language. But in the time of Augustus this was not so. At that time those millions of people understood the Greek language. They certainly did not all speak Greek, but they did understand it.

Let me give you an example. In Wales the inhabitants speak Welsh, in parts of Scotland they speak Gaelic and in Ireland yet another language. Yet throughout the whole United Kingdom the English language is understood. So it was, you see, at that time in the Roman Empire

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too. This too was very useful when later the Gospel was proclaimed everywhere.

How happy people must have been in those days, don't you think? - But no, children, they were not happy. Why not then? What did they lack still?

Oh, everywhere heathendom reigned; everywhere stood temples with stone idols, everywhere heathen priests walked about, offering up to these idols. But, the priests no longer believed in them. They knew that they were really deceiving the people.

Many of the people also no longer believed in these idols. Yes, they may perhaps have gone to the heathen temples, but they did not take it seriously any longer. With all their riches, with all their prosperity, they were still not really happy. They wanted something different. They longed for something better. What did they want then? What did they want to happen? - Well, they really didn't know themselves, but things couldn't stay as they were, for lies and deception ruled everywhere. Godlessness became worse and worse. Men lived in terrible sins. And there was no one who could alter it; there was no one who could help them.

In the time of the Roman Empire millions of Jews lived no longer in their fatherland. Countless numbers lived spread out over the whole world. They lived in every land. In Egypt, in Greece, in Asia Minor, yes even in Rome, the chief city, lived thousands of Jews.

True, they made their way to Jerusalem for the great feasts, and celebrated there the Passover and the Pentecost, but when these feasts were over they returned to their homes in

strange lands.

Yet these scattered Jews were no heathens. No, they served the God of heaven and earth, the One, True God. Certainly most of them served the Lord only outwardly, very few served Him uprightly, and with all their heart. But still they did not kneel down to idols.

Do you know what these scattered Jews also did? They announced everywhere that their God was the only true God, but they also said that one day the Lord Jesus would be born.

Millions of heathens were rather jealous of these Jewish people, because they felt "That was truth". Almost without realising it they also began to look forward to the unknown Redeemer, to the unknown king. Oh, perhaps then things would be better.

So you see boys and girls, this was how many heathen people lived. They were no longer satisfied with their heathen worship. Secretly they hoped that that Saviour, who one day would be born in the land of the Jews, would help them.

That is one reason why, when later the disciples went forth to preach, thousands and thousands of heathens became Christians.

But let us just go and have a look in the land of Canaan itself, how did the Jews live who were there? Did they also long for the coming Redeemer? Did they expect the Messiah?

Since the Babylonian captivity the Jews no longer served idols. Before that time they certainly did, but not afterwards. No, they diligently read the laws which God had given them. Some Jews studied very carefully the writing in the book of the law of the Lord. These were very well-educated men, so they were called SCRIBES. Do you know what they did? They

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started to teach the people.

In many cities and towns church buildings were erected. These were the SYNAGOGUES. Each Sabbath the Jews attended Synagogue, in order to receive instruction from the Scribes.

There, a portion of Scripture was read, for example from the Books of Moses, or from Joshua, or from one of the Prophets, because even then they had all the books of the Old Testament. These were not printed as we have them, but were written upon large rolls of parchment.

They taught the people the history of earlier times, but also they pointed out to them the promises of God. They told them that one day the Messiah would come, the Son of David. But they also said that the Lord Jesus would come to free them from the Romans. That great king would defeat the Roman armies and He would become King over the Jewish race. One day they would again live in peace and prosperity, as they had done earlier during the reigns of David and Solomon. The Messiah would set up an earthly kingdom - nothing more.

But that was not the truth. That the Lord Jesus would come to discharge the debt of sin, that He would suffer and die, the Scribes did not tell. That was not necessary. If only the Romans were driven out that would be quite enough, then they would be happy and peaceful.

In this way the Jews gradually came to think that the Lord Jesus would be a powerful King. Certainly the Jewish people did long for the promised Saviour. But why? - Well, then those hated Romans, whom they so much disliked, would be driven out. Then they would be free

again as in former days.

So this is how the Jewish people were taught and educated. What a pity! In this way the people were deceived. And when the Lord Jesus came, there was no place for Him among the people because they had expected Him in quite a different way.

Before I complete this chapter, I must just tell you something else! When we deal with the New Testament history in the following pages we shall often hear about Pharisees. Now who are they?

Look, there through the streets of Jerusalem a man walks slowly and solemnly. He is walking right in the middle of the street, so that all can see him.



A Pharisee

Passers-by greet him politely. They make a deep bow.

When the walker gets to the corner of the street he suddenly stops. He raises his hands on high and prays! Half an hour later he is still standing there. Oh, what a devout man he must be, because prayer is a good exercise. Is he then a devout man? Well, it would appear so, but he is not really so.

What sort of man is he? ... Boys and girls, that, now is a Pharisee. They were men who to all outward appearance lived very uprightly. They read much in the books of the Old Testament. They prayed much in the Temple, or often in the

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middle of the street or at the corners of houses.

Now, was that not good? Was that not allowed?

Oh, they did not do it to honour God, they did it only for their own glory. They hoped that all men would see them. They were proud and haughty in their prayers. If anyone looked at them, they glowed with happiness.

But would such prayers be heard by the Lord? What do you think? No, you say. That was not prayer.

The Pharisees thought they could earn heaven. They thought that the Lord Jesus would give them heaven as a reward. These devout Pharisees had no need of a Saviour. No, they could manage on their own. That is why later the Pharisees were the fiercest enemies of the Lord Jesus.

The Lord Jesus taught that man was dead in trespasses and sins. He taught that all men were lost in their sinful state. But He also showed the people that He had come to pay for sins, that He had come that His people might live. Yes, He taught them that they could be saved by GRACE. Not that they could EARN salvation, but that it would be of GRACE.

But the Pharisees would have none of that, they did not believe it. They would have nothing to do with the Lord Jesus and therefore they hated Him.

Poor, poor Pharisees. They did not realise that they were deceiving both themselves and the people. They were unaware that their hearts were evil and depraved, and that their hearts must be renewed by the Spirit of God.

You will also hear about the sect of the Sadducees. They were another group of Israelites.

But the Sadducees never prayed. No, they were more interested in eating and drinking and feasting. They did not believe in the existence of angels and devils. They did not believe that one day the dead would rise again. No, if a man died, then he was dead, dead forever! So, man was, according to them, just like the beasts.

Therefore the Sadducees said "let us enjoy ourselves in this life and be happy, because there are no such places as heaven and hell".

Don't you think that is terrible? We know better, don't we? In the Bible it says that there is a resurrection from the dead, that there is a heaven and a hell. In the Day of Judgment the Lord Jesus will come in the clouds of heaven to judge the living and the dead.

The Sadducees deceived themselves, they were quite mistaken. They discovered that, when death came, and they opened their eyes in hell. For them too will the last day, the Judgment Day dawn, but for them it will be a terrible day. Then they will regret their foolishness, but then it will be too late. Then they will be beyond recovery.

The most prominent priests belonged to the Sadducee party.

There were also in the land of the Jews a few thousand Essenes. These were a kind of monk. They wouldn't live amongst other people, they were too pious and too holy to do that. How foolish, don't you agree? They lived very quietly in a lonely, desolate place where hardly anybody ever came. They lived close to the Dead Sea.

So now, you too know something about the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Essenes. Bear it in mind, because later you will hear a lot more about them.