

can face. But all of us have to face it at some point if we *truly* love God and Jesus. Some people have accepted this challenge. You might have come across speakers who suddenly are not willing to speak any more. They may be taking stock and reappraising what they truly believe. Or there are people who suddenly stop teaching Sunday school, or commenting in Bible discussions. These people have taken up the challenge to become a fool, taking down the house they've built, before starting again with the right materials. Thankfully, not all of us may have to pull down the whole house. If you are one of those brave ones, God will bless what you build. If you are tempted to speak out with non-Biblical solutions, take warning: "For the wisdom of this world is foolishness

with God. For it is written, 'He catches the wise in their own craftiness'" (v. 19).

Question time

Readers will know the famous saying of Jesus in John 15:4, just before he went to his death: "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me". Jesus obviously felt this was such a vital message that he was willing to spend most of his last precious moments delivering it. So what did he mean? How can Jesus live in us and we in him? To demonstrate the importance of context, find the answer by looking at all the places where the idea of abiding/dwelling and fruit appear in this chapter.

(To be continued)

Exhortation

Contentment

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At their request, Jesus taught his disciples how to pray. The prayer is a model for our own prayers. It is also a rich source of spiritual encouragement for those who meditate on it. The simple requests help the disciple to be content with the Father's gracious provisions even in trying circumstances, because the love of Christ constrains us.

AS WE READ the story of the life of our Saviour in Luke's Gospel record, we may notice particularly occasions on which Jesus prayed: in 3:21 at his baptism; in 5:16 during a very active time of teaching in Galilee (here he goes into the wilderness to pray); in 6:12, still in Galilee, spending the whole night alone in prayer on a mountain; in 9:18, just after the feeding of the five thousand, in the company of his disciples. And not long afterwards he takes Peter, James and John with him to the transfiguration mount; Luke tells us he went there specifically to pray (v. 28).

We come in chapter 11 to the best-known prayer of all. Look at the first verse, which introduces the occasion. Our Lord has been praying again, and his disciples are present. Very often we read that Jesus contrives to pray in private, away from the crowd, away even from his closest disciples. On this occasion, however, he is in the presence of

disciples. In Matthew's record of the Sermon on the Mount (5:1) it looks as though there is a great crowd present. If Matthew and Luke are describing the same incident, it is not clear whether Jesus goes up a mountain to get away from the multitude or whether he does so to gain height to

enable him to talk to them more easily. Certain it is that his more earnest disciples—not necessarily just the twelve—are drawn to be close to him; and perhaps others gather on the fringes. But Luke's account begins with Jesus' own prayer, and so the disciples present are prompted to ask him to teach *them* how to pray as John the Baptist had apparently taught his disciples to pray. And so we have the brief and basic Lord's Prayer in Luke 11:2-4.

Brothers and sisters, ought we not to be taking aspects of this prayer and making them our own? Matthew's record makes it clear that privacy is important. Brevity is also important; there should be no "much speaking"—a practice common among the heathen in praying to their idols in order to get them to hear, like the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel. The true God, our heavenly Father, knows what we want before we ask (Mt.

6:8), does He not? But Jesus does not actually say that; he says, “for your Father knoweth what things ye have *need* of, before ye ask Him”. The word is not ‘want’, but ‘need’.

Identifying our true needs

What do we need? There are very few things that should figure in the list. First we should be praying for the Kingdom to come, for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. We need the Kingdom to come; it is the twenty-first century’s only hope for the future. Four requests follow: daily bread, forgiveness, keeping us from temptation, and delivering us from evil. And it is on the first of these four that we will concentrate. Certainly, without forgiveness through the blood of our Saviour we cannot hope to have eternal life; we find the world such a tempting place that we want to be kept from what may cause us to sin; evils are all around us—at home, at college, at work, on journeys—everywhere, and we want God to keep us in safety. And the only thing we need otherwise is food.

When we come to think about it, we can manage without an awful lot of things. How did we arrive at the Breaking of Bread this week? By car, train or bus? Could we live without such means of transport? Well, yes, we could indeed. Our lifestyle would be very different if we did; we would manage with bicycles or simply by walking. We would probably not meet together as an ecclesia so easily or so often, but we would take steps to meet regularly and break bread with our nearest brothers and sisters in Christ. We would change the way we live accordingly and adapt. We might not find it sensible to meet in an ecclesial hall, but we would make do with our own homes, as our brethren and sisters did in the first-century ecclesias. Even then we should be better off than our Lord Jesus, who had not where to lay his head.

Necessities or luxuries?

Do we need all the electrical and electronic gadgets we fill our houses with? The televisions and radios, the computers, the telephones, the washing machine and the dishwasher, the tumbler-dryer, the fridge and the freezer, the vacuum-cleaner, the central heating, the cooker, the microwave oven—I can just remember life without all these things except the gas cooker and the radio (or ‘wireless’!). I can even remember going on holiday to stay in a cottage that had no hot running water or electric light. All we had were paraffin lamps and an earth closet at the end of the garden.

And we did not feel especially deprived! Some of our parents and grandparents grew up in such a world at the end of the nineteenth century. More recently we went camping, and it was remarkable to appreciate what we could live without. Of course, it is very nice to get back to normal afterwards; but ‘normal’ is merely what we have become accustomed to, and we do not actually need many of these things at all.

On the TV news we have all seen the results of war, political intrigue, man’s mismanagement and natural disaster. Refugee camps in Africa, displaced persons in the Middle East, victims of flooding in Bangladesh (and closer to home), victims of the tsunami around the Indian Ocean. Lacking homes, people can just manage for a while. They can even manage with a minimum of clothing if the weather is not too cold. But what they cannot do without is food and water. That is the absolutely basic need.

Our heavenly Father knows what we have *need* of, before we ask, Jesus tells us; and he teaches us to pray for that and nothing more! His teaching later on in Matthew focuses on those three basic things: food, water and clothing: “Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on” (6:25). How reassuring for us to know that, whatever our circumstances, the Lord will care for these basic needs! The assurance is repeated: “Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?” (v. 31). And Jesus adds: “for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things” (v. 32). Get your priorities right. Focus your attention on the Kingdom: “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (v. 33). So in our prayers we do not need to ask for anything more than these things, and it is rather in the spirit of acknowledging that these things come from the good hand of our Father that we need to ask at all.

Learning contentment through trial

Learning to be content with what we have is never easy. There are things we may specially want in our lives. We may ask, and the Lord may say, No! It might be children; it might be health; it might be that someone special to us may recognise and accept the gospel. And it is hard when the Lord says, No! The Apostle Paul knew God would sometimes say, No! His “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7), whatever that was, was a problem to him.

He prayed three times that it should be taken from him; and the Lord said to him, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (v. 9). So, No! You have to learn to live with it! You must be content.

Recalling this occasion in his life, Paul explains that God Himself had imposed that limitation for a very important purpose—that Paul should not become proud: "lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations" (v. 7). The thorn had a very important purpose in his flesh: it was to continue to hurt for the rest of his life. This was hard to accept at first; but when Paul came to think about it, the purpose would become clear and his attitude to the problem changed, as he continues: "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (v. 9).

The reason he could glory in this physical weakness was that it enabled Christ's influence to do its work in him. Evidently Paul was at something of a crossroads in life and had now to make a decision that would change his attitude to many things: "Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake" (v. 10). Notice the list: the infirmities naturally come first, but then there follow the reproaches, the necessities, the persecutions and the distresses—all the other unpleasant things Paul had to put up with. Embarrassments and taunts from those who opposed him and his preaching the Truth; the privations of travel, hunger, thirst and where he should lay his head that night; the opposition of unreasonable hatred that led to beatings and stoning; the distresses of shipwreck and imprisonment—yet all these things he took *pleasure* in "for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong" (v. 10).

We do not imagine for a moment that Paul enjoyed any of these reproaches, privations, persecutions or distresses at the time they were happening, any more than we would. But "no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby" (Heb. 12:11). It is our response to these unpleasantnesses that makes the difference.

The joy which was Paul's, and which should be ours, arises from a quiet confidence that "all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28). This joy is not mirth, but

an assurance of faith giving an inner happiness because we look forward to the return of our Master and the setting up of the Kingdom of God. The development of this frame of mind finds its beginning in contentment with what God has given us. He indeed gives us much more than we need for our daily life. If food and water is the baseline, and clothing itself a bonus, we should not be asking for more for ourselves. "Give us this day our daily bread". It is not even bread for tomorrow for which we should ask—just for today, for our immediate needs. "Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" (Mt. 6:34).

Godliness is true gain

The members of the ecclesia at Philippi had of their own free will helped Paul on several occasions, yet Paul tells them that experience had taught him to be satisfied with what the Lord had given him, even when the going was tough: "for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content" (Phil. 4:11). He remembers with special gratitude, therefore, the time when he had been in need in Thessalonica and the Philippians had sent a present (probably money) to relieve his difficulty. The Lord had provided.

Again, the apostle counsels Timothy against "men of corrupt minds" (1 Tim. 6:5) who "[suppose] that gain"—financial gain, verses 9,10—"is godliness: from such withdraw thyself. But godliness with contentment is great gain" (vv. 5,6). In this chapter Paul spells things out in plain words, quoting the same basic items of need that Jesus had identified in Matthew 6: "having food and raiment let us be therewith content" (v. 8). Just the same advice is given in Hebrews 13:5, again with a warning about the love of wealth: "Let your conversation [manner of life] be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for He hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee". What a wonderfully clear and reassuring message we have here! Oh that we would heed it, and learn to be content with what the Lord provides for us!

Jesus our example

We come together week by week to remember the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul bore a thorn in the flesh and had to learn that this was the Father's way for him, and be content. And so it was with the perfect Lamb of God. Throughout his life he accepted what his Father provided

for him, and was content. He set his sights on the Kingdom of God and showed us how to get our priorities right. For Jesus it was always a struggle with the flesh, as it is for us; but the sober reminder of the writer to the Hebrews sets the contrast between our Saviour and ourselves: "consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin. And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children" (12:3-5).

'Compare yourselves with Jesus,' he says, 'who shed his blood even to death in his struggle against sin. You have not had to go through an experience like that!' The exhortation is derived from Solomon's words in Proverbs 3:11,12: "My son, despise not the chastening of the LORD; neither be weary of His correction: for whom the LORD loveth He correcteth; even as a father the son in whom he delighteth". But do we notice the difference? Hebrews 12:6 says that whom the

Lord loves He chastens, *and scourges* every son whom He receives. Under inspiration the author has added the word "scourgeth" to the text of Proverbs 3:12. It is the same Greek word used for the flogging that Jesus suffered at the hands of the soldiers of Pilate (Jno. 19:1). Our attention is being drawn to our Saviour's sufferings before the cross. If the difficulties of our lives are severe and hard to bear, let us remember that Christ went through much worse. Our heavenly Father's hand is there, and our scourging is light compared with His beloved Son's.

As we remember him, let us be so very thankful to our heavenly Father for His mercy, His restraint with us, for the great love He has shown us in Jesus. And let us be quietly content indeed with the provision He makes for us day by day, and pray for help in facing the trials of our lives; that, though grievous at the time, they will yield "the peaceable fruit of righteousness", and that we may gain a crown of righteousness at the Lord's coming.