

The meaning of...

THE DARK AGES

To the reader: Keep your Bible beside you. Always read your Bible first, then read these notes. Check the references and read them also. Invite a friend to study with you. You will be blessed.

THE ANCIENT WORLD

History is a great teacher. History is a record of what happened in our world. Men wrote down what others said and did. History tells how men thought and acted. The history of things that happened long ago is called 'ancient history.' What happened more recently is called 'modern history.' The Bible is part history. Thousands of years ago men who had faith in God kept records. God gave the first man and woman language. They spoke to each other. In the cool evening, God came to the garden in Eden to walk and talk with them. They answered Him in their language (Genesis 3:9-10).

From the beginning, one generation told the next generation things that were important to their people group. Leaders of clans kept lists of names, family records.

In ancient Egypt men began to use crude pictures which expressed their thoughts. The Egyptian form of writing is called hieroglyphics. Another form of writing was called 'hieratic.' This hieratic form of hieroglyphics was used to write on papyrus, a type of paper made from the stems of reeds which grew along the Nile River. The papyrus sheets were put together like the pages of a book.

In Babylon men used wedge-shaped marks pressed into wet clay tablets. The tablets were baked in the hot sun. This form of writing is known as cuneiform. The Babylonians wrote legal documents, court records, law codes and official letters. Later the Phoenicians used symbols to make what is thought to be the first alphabet.

The earliest Old Testament writings we know of were written in early Hebrew. The New Testament was written in Greek. Jesus probably spoke Aramaic.

MANY BELIEVED THE GOSPEL

All people groups need the Bible in their own language. God speaks through the words of Scripture. Paul asked, "How can they believe in One of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them" (Romans 10:14)

When Jesus told people about the Kingdom of God, many believed. Paul said the common men and women of His day heard the message gladly (Acts 17:11). They had joy and peace in their hearts. Joy and peace comes when we know our sins are forgiven. The Holy Spirit gives us this joy as He fills us with His presence.

The Jewish Rabbis and leaders did not believe. They rejected the Messiah-Christ (John 1:11). Jesus said to them, "O Jerusalem . . . how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate" (Matthew 23:37-38).

Judaism was empty and cold and stood in the way of men and women entering God's Kingdom (Matthew 23:14).

TALK ABOUT

1. Are all men and women sinners (Romans 3:23)?
2. Can good deeds we do earn God's favour?
3. Who did God raise up to lead a revival of faith?
4. How can men be made right with God (Acts 16:31)?
5. How can we have peace in our hearts (John 14:27)?
6. Can those without peace in their hearts bring peace to this world?

CHRISTIAN WRITINGS

For two or three centuries after Jesus Christ died on the cross, the Christian Church flourished. Church congregations in Asia Minor were loosely organized with overseers and deacons in charge (1 Timothy 3:1-13). The churches had copies of the Old Testament books (the Septuagint), and maybe some of the Gospels. Then Paul wrote his epistles or letters to the churches in Asia Minor. Only a few copies existed. Every new scroll had to be copied by hand, so every copy was very costly. The Letters of Paul were passed from church to church and read to the people who came to worship.

At that time, the Roman Empire dominated the world. Roman Emperors and the laws of Rome had a powerful influence on the early Christian Church. Emperors demanded worship; a demand rejected by the Christians who believed they should worship God only (Deuteronomy 6:5). Christians refused to say "Caesar is lord," and many died violent deaths for their faith.

In the fourth century, the Roman Empire split. The eastern branch was headed by Constantinople who decreed that the East would be Christian.

In Rome the Popes began to have greater power. The Pope proclaimed himself head of the Christian Church. Pope Leo I declared that the apostle Peter "speaks to the whole Church through the bishop of Rome."

TALK ABOUT

1. Many men of faith shared in writing the Old Testament: can you name some of them?
2. How were records kept?
3. How did people make copies of the Bible before printing was invented?

THE CHURCH WAS PERSECUTED

The followers of Jesus Christ (later known as the Christian Church) were persecuted from its earliest days (Acts 8:1). Orthodox Jews did not want a 'new' religion pushing its way into their social and religious system known as Judaism. Zealots like Saul tried hard to destroy Christ's followers who called themselves 'people of the Way.'

Saul (who changed his name to Paul) was a Pharisee and one of the leading persecutors of the early Church. He said, "I persecuted the followers of this Way to the death" (Acts 22:4).

God stopped Saul as he was going to Damascus. He carried with him letters from the High Priest to have the Christians in Damascus arrested and put in chains. A bright light from heaven blinded Saul and he heard a voice say, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me" (Acts 9:1-16). Saul asked, "Who are You, Lord?" The voice from heaven answered, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting . . ." God chose Saul to be a missionary to the Gentiles, people who were not Jews.

When the apostles Peter and John preached in the temple courts, the Jewish leaders arrested them and brought them before the Sanhedrin, the Jew's highest court. The High Priest told them, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name (Jesus Christ). Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man (Christ's) blood" (Acts 5:27-28).

JESUS' DISCIPLES WERE KILLED

Before 100 AD or soon after that, the disciples had died as martyrs for their faith. John was exiled to Patmos for his faith in Christ and probably died there of old age. Judas, who betrayed Jesus, hanged himself on the night Jesus was crucified (Matthew 27:5).

In the centuries that followed, many Christians who lived in the Roman Empire was persecuted and killed for their faith in Christ. At the same time, the Christian Church was blessed with many great men of God. They believed God's word and held to it against all false teaching and persecution.

Paul, Peter, James, John and many other church leaders wrote against the false teachers who rose up in the churches (1 Peter 2:1-22; 1 John 2:18-19).

Other heresies developed outside the churches and attacked the Christian doctrines. At different times, these had to be addressed by councils of leaders.

TALK ABOUT

1. Why would the Jews want to persecute the Christians?
2. What happened to Saul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-13)?
3. What great work did God give Paul to do?

4. What does the Bible say about suffering for our faith (1 Peter 4:12-14)?
5. How can we know a “false teacher”?

GREAT MEN OF GOD

History has left us a record of some of the great Christian leaders, men who studied the Scriptures in the first centuries after Christ and wrote comments on them.

Clement of Alexandria (ca 150–215). Clement was born in Greece and went to Alexandria where he became head of a religious school. He studied the Scriptures and wrote many books and papers. Only small pieces (fragments) of these remain.

Tertullian (ca 155–220). Tertullian was an early Latin theologian. He was born in Tunisia and was sent to Rome to study law. He hated the immorality of Rome and the Roman church. He wrote on the Trinity (God expressing Himself as three persons, yet one God) and said, “The blood of Christians is the seed of the Church.” Many of his writings remain to this day.

Origen (ca 185 – 254). Origen was the greatest theologian of the early Greek churches. He was the son of a martyr and contended strongly for the faith. He taught that God created all things, that Christ was the eternal Son and Word and that the third member of the Trinity was the Holy Spirit.

Athanasius (ca 296 – 373) was Bishop of Alexandria and considered the greatest theologian of his time. He stood against Arianism at the Council of Nicaea. He was exiled five times for his profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

Jerome (ca 347–419). His Latin name was Eusebius, (also known as St. Jerome), revised the older Latin Bible. He worked from the Hebrew Scriptures and the Greek New Testament to give the world the Vulgate Bible.

Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna in Asia Minor, was burned at the stake for his faithful witness. In the first centuries after Christ thousands of devout Christians were killed for their testimonies.

THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE

The word ‘canon’ means ‘a collection or list of literary works, especially holy books etc. accepted as true’ – the holy Bible is a canon of Scripture. Both Jews and Christians have ‘canons of Scripture.’ It took many years and much thought and prayer to decide which books would be included in the canon of Scripture. The earliest list of New Testament books appeared in 367 AD. In a letter the Bishop of Alexandria named twenty seven books.

The number of books in the Bible was not always fixed at 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament, making a total of 66 books. Roman Catholic Bibles have 80 books because the Catholic Bible includes books called “the Apocrypha.” In the Jerusalem Bible, the writings known as the Apocrypha are an additional section of thirteen books. The early ‘church fathers’ did not consider these books to be inspired by the Holy Spirit. But some thought them to be useful reading.

The Jewish church refused to accept the Apocrypha and these thirteen books are not found in Hebrew Bibles. In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) they are a section added after the other books (the canon of Scripture), as an addendum.

Little was done to confirm the list of books in the canon of Scripture until the Council of Carthage in 397 AD. The Council decreed that nothing should be read in the churches under the name of divine Scripture except the canonical writings – the 39 Old Testament books and the 27 New Testament books.

Jesus used the Old Testament Scriptures. He called them “the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44).

TALK ABOUT

1. Can you name any early Christian leaders who were great men of faith?
2. What happened to many of them?
3. What did Jesus say would happen (Matthew 10:17–20)?
4. What is the ‘canon’ of Scripture?
5. How many books are there in the Old and New Testaments?
6. Have you learned to name the books?

ALL SCRIPTURE IS GOD BREATHED

Paul wrote to Timothy: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16).

The Scriptures have come to us from the hand of God. He breathed the message into the minds of His servants. They used the words of their own language to write God's message, but the Scriptures are God's word. He will honour His word and bless those who keep it. The Holy Spirit teaches us that God's word is truth.

God, the Holy Spirit, takes the word and uses it to speak to men and women. He uses the words of Scripture to "convict the world of guilt in regard to sin . . ." (John 16:8). No other book, written by men, can change a man or woman.

God is a speaking God! The Word speaks to us. It has the power to change lives. God never stops speaking. He fills the universe with His voice. "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands" (Psalm 19:1).

I often watch the sunset. The bright gold and red colours draw me toward them. I see God's glory in them. He dwells in brilliant light and colour. Men who had visions of God saw these brilliant colours (Ezekiel 1:26).

God's voice and His words in Scripture tell us His will and purpose in the world. He created all the beauty for His own pleasure. Man was created to honour and worship Him. We are saved to have fellowship with Him. This was God's desire from the beginning.

"The Voice of God is alive and free as the sovereign God is free" (Tozer). Which takes us back to Jesus saying, "The words that I speak unto you, they are Spirit, and they are Life" (John 6:63).

A CENTURY OF PERSECUTION ENDED

A succession of Roman emperors persecuted those who followed "the Way." After 260 AD emperor Gallienus allowed the Christians a time of peace. Officials and ordinary men and women were able to worship God freely. Property that the State had taken from Christians was given back to them and the gospel spread quickly.

A new wave of persecution began in 303 AD when Emperor Diocletian came to Rome. Christians were ordered to stop making the sign of the cross at public gatherings and were told to make sacrifices to the Imperial Cult of Rome. Thousands refused and were killed. Yet the Christian Church grew and became stronger.

In 312 AD emperor **Constantine** became ruler of the Eastern Empire. He reversed the tide of persecution. In a battle just outside Rome, Constantine said he saw a fiery cross in the sky and that Christ gave him victory in the battle. He professed to believe the Christian gospel and halted the persecution of believers. He supported the clergy and sought God's blessing on the Roman Empire by making Christianity the State religion.

TALK ABOUT

1. How do we know that God revealed the Scriptures to men of faith (2 Timothy 3:16)?
2. What does the gospel do to those who receive it?
3. Which Roman Emperor embraced Christianity and made it the State religion?

SATAN FIGHTS AGAINST THE TRUTH

Satan fought hard to destroy the Christian Church. When persecution failed to stop the gospel of Christ spreading, Satan tried false teaching. Various heresies quickly followed in the footsteps of the gospel.

Arian was a priest probably born in Libya. He was made Bishop of Alexandria (300–311), but later lost that position. He questioned the deity of Christ.

Constantine called together the Council of Nicæa. Two hundred and twenty bishops met in 325 AD in the city of Nicæa in Anatolia. They met to confront this false teaching that Jesus Christ was a created being like the angels and not the Son of God. Finally the Arian heresy was put to rest.

Jesus Christ was one with the Father before the world began (John 1:1–3). He told Philip, "Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father . . . I and the Father are one" (John 9–10).

The Council of Nicæa also established an official creed for the Christian faith and agreed on a date to celebrate Easter.

A Second Council of Nicæa was called in 787 AD, the emperor **Leo III** and his son **Constantine V** had tried to end the worship of images, especially that of the virgin Mary. This

image worship had been growing in the Roman church for several centuries. The Council tried, but failed to stop these practices. This matter was not put to rest until the Reformation.

TALK ABOUT

1. How did we get the Bible?
2. Is God still speaking to us? How (Hebrews 1:1)?
3. Is Jesus Christ equal with God the Father (John 14:9)?
4. Who is the third person of the trinity?
5. What work does the Holy Spirit do (John 16:8-9)?
6. Do you have the Holy Spirit to teach you?

GNOSTICS AND THE EARLY CHURCH

False teaching called “Gnosticism” was a problem in the early churches.

The Gnostics taught a strange mixture of Greek philosophy and mysticism. Paul met the false teachers in the churches and wrote some of his Epistles (letters) to counter their false teaching. He said they taught “a different gospel - which is really no gospel at all” (Galatians 1:6-7).

The Gnostics wrote many books and a large library of their writings was found in Egypt at Nag Hammadi.

The Gnostics came in many shades:

Ebionites taught that Jesus Christ was just a man, a prophet from Nazareth, but no more. They held to the Law of Moses and lived by its regulations.

Docetists taught that Jesus was not really flesh and blood, but an alien spirit. They said the sufferings of Christ recorded in the Gospels was only imagined. That Jesus did not really die; He only appeared to die.

Adoptionists thought Jesus was born a man but later became divine by adoption. This idea continued to be taught long after the early apostles and theologians refuted it.

Deceiving spirits caused new believers to doubt the gospel message. The apostle John wrote, “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of anti-Christ . . .” (1 John 4:1-3).

THE RISE OF FALSE GOSPELS

In the days of the early Christian Church, the Gnostics wrote false gospels. They framed these ‘gospels’ with many of the same words that the apostles of Christ used. They said their writings were those of the apostles or even of Jesus, Himself. Yet they were written several hundred years after Jesus was crucified.

The Gnostics set out their mystic teaching in books that looked very much like the books of the Bible. They have names like “The Books of Esdras”; “The Gospel of Barnabas”; “The Acts of John”. There were books based on the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Gnostics felt free to make these forgeries because they rejected the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They claimed a higher knowledge and said material things were just an illusion. Man’s body was not important, so they abused it with sexual orgies. Bible writers called this “the way of Balaam” the false prophet (Jude 11). Balaam opened the way for God’s people to sin with heathen women “by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality” (Revelations 2:14).

TALK ABOUT

1. Who were the Gnostics?
2. Did they teach the true gospel?
3. Why did they make their false teaching look like the truth?
4. Who was Balaam (Numbers 25)?

THE DARK CLOUDS OF ISLAM

Muhammad, the founder of Islam, was born into an Arabian desert tribe called Bedouins. His birth date and birth place were given as Mecca in the year AD 570. Centuries of war between

the great powers of Egypt, Persia and the Byzantian Empire added to the unsettled nature of the times.

The Bedouin Hashimites were traders. As a young man, Muhammad was involved in trading rich goods between the Arab states. When he was about 40 years old, Muhammad was said to have had visions and received revelations from the spirits. At such times he went into a trance and spoke words which were later recorded by his friends.

Muslims and students of Islam say that their god Allah inspired the prophet and Allah is the author of the Koran. "Their theological experts do not accept the obvious fact that 75% of the Koran is composed of distorted laws and stories from the Old Testament" (Who is Allah? By Abd-Al-Masih, pp. 65; Light of Life, Austria).

Muhammad probably heard Bible stories everyday when trading with Jews and others. At one time he became friendly with a Jewish Rabbi. He mixed the stories he heard with tribal folklore and gave them back to the people as Islamic law.

Because the Bedouin Arabs worshipped many idols and spirits, Muhammad chose Allah the moon god as the god he and his followers would worship. In ancient Middle-East mythology, Allah was married to the sun goddess. Allah was one of the most common idols worshipped by the nomadic tribes in the region.

The first literate civilizations - the Sumerians - left behind thousands of clay tablets on which they recorded their religious practices. They worshipped the moon god under many different names. His symbol was the crescent moon. The Babylonians and Assyrians call the same god 'Sin.' The sun goddess was the wife of Sin and the stars were their daughters, Istar or Ishtar, goddess of love and war, worshipped in Babylon, was a daughter of Sin. The prophet Jeremiah called her "the Queen of Heaven" (Jeremiah 44:18-19).

Nabonidus of Babylon (556-539 BC) built Tayma in Arabia as a centre for moon-god worship. Mecca was built as a shrine for the moon god. This made it the most sacred site of Muslim pilgrimage.

Sin also had the title of alilah or "the deity." This name was changed to Allah in pre-Islamic times and Muhammad taught it to his followers. Pagan Arabs even called their children Allah.

Archaeology has proved that Allah was the moon god described in the Ras Shamra texts, found at the Mediterranean port of that name. This god was worshipped by the Canaanites from pre-historic times. Among all the pagan gods of the Middle east, Muhammad raised Allah to a place of "supreme" deity. He taught that "Allah was not only the greatest god but the ONLY god." The Arabs never accused Muhammad of preaching a different god to the one they already worshipped.

TALK ABOUT

1. What do you know about the religion of Islam?
2. What do the Muslims worship?
3. Is Allah the same as the living God? How can we be sure of this (Matthew 7:15-20).
4. Who should men worship? Why (Deuteronomy 6:5)?
5. Who do you worship?

THE LIGHT WENT OUT

Islam says there is no trinity, no Christ the Son, no Holy Spirit and no loving Father. Islam converts men by the sword and rules by the sword. Allah pronounces death on all who do not convert to Islam.

Under the fiery onslaughts of Islam, much of the light of the Christian faith in Asia was snuffed out. The churches of Asia Minor, so prominent in the New Testament, were destroyed. In Islam's god Allah there is no love or mercy for 'infidels' as they call Christians and Jews. All infidels must convert to Islam or be killed. Such onslaughts continued until World War II. They continue today.

Many have forgotten that Syria and North Africa were once Christian. In the first Islamic invasion (632-732 AD) these countries were overrun by Muslims and came under Arabic control. Damascus was taken from the Christians and Muslim armies swept into Western Europe. They conquered Spain, took Central Asia and drove a wedge into present-day Pakistan.

The Muslims established their capital in Baghdad, the seat of goddess worship and the cradle of many other forms of idolatry. They built great palaces for their concubines and elaborate mosques along the Tigris River.

THE POPES GAINED POWER

In the middle of the eighth century, Roman Catholic Popes gained more power when the collapse of the Western Empire created a vacuum in civil leadership. The Popes demanded absolute loyalty and any dissenter was put in prison or killed.

The Roman Emperors said they were gods and demanded worship. Christians who refused to say, "Caesar is lord!" were burned at the stake.

Christians refused to bow to the Emperor of Rome. For this they were driven from their homes. Some lived in exile and some were caught and killed. Despite intense persecution, the Christian Church grew and flourished. The world stood and wondered!

A secular historian wrote, "This triumph of a once obscure, despised sect of simple religious enthusiasts in a mature, well-organized, rich and intellectually sophisticated society is one of the dramatic facts and unsolved problems of history" (A History of Civilization, Vol. 1, pp. 150, Brinton, Christopher and Wolf).

TALK ABOUT

1. How did Satan try to destroy the Church from within?
2. How can we know false teaching when we hear it?
3. What became of the churches Paul established in Asia Minor?

THE MIDDLE AGES - THE DARK AGES

This long period (500 – 1,000 AD) is sometimes called "the dark ages" because men and women were kept ignorant of God's truth. The Bible was not available in the language of the common people and the darkness of sin reigned. Even if a man had a copy of a part of the Bible, he was not allowed to read it. Very few men had access to a Bible because the Scriptures had not been translated into the common languages of the people. Copies of the Bible were very rare and had to be made by hand. People were killed for having a copy of the Scriptures in their possession. This penalty was imposed by the church and the Roman authorities.

What a contrast to Ezra having the Law of God read to the people (Nehemiah 8:1-9). The Jews had just returned from Babylon and they had not heard God's word preached or explained for many years. Ezra was a priest and leader among them. He gathered all the people to hear God's word.

Ezra and the Levites read the Law of God to the people from morning till noon. Then the Levites went among the people and explained the meaning of God's word. People must understand the Scriptures.

The clergy and those in authority in the Roman church told the people very little of what was in the Bible. They kept the great masses of common people in ignorance and darkness. This was not what God wanted.

Finally, the Roman Empire broke up. Man, with all his abilities, failed to organize and manage such a vast Empire properly. People were immoral, undisciplined and without the law and the order for which the Roman Empire was noted.

Great men of God continued to teach and preach about Jesus Christ. But church growth was slowed by the lack of the Scriptures. The Roman Popes survived and wielded even greater power than they had earlier. And the persecution of Christians continued, both by the Roman church and by Islam.

TALK ABOUT

1. Why were the early Christians persecuted?
2. When did the persecution begin (Acts 8:1)?
3. What Book of the New Testament did the Apostle John write while he was in exile?
4. What caused the Christian Church to grow and spread?
5. What religion spread across the Middle East and North Africa?
6. How did it spread so quickly?

IGNORANCE BRINGS DARKNESS

During the Dark Ages, the only copies of the Bible were in the hands of the Roman clergy. These Bibles were written in Greek (the Septuagint) or Latin (the Vulgate).

The Church of Rome penetrated and controlled all human activity. In most towns and villages, the parish priests were the only connection people had with the outside world. They influenced public opinion from their pulpits. They sold prayers and 'indulgences' - letters

promising to forgive sins. “. . . the Pharisees and teachers of religious law said to each other. ‘This is blasphemy! Who but God can forgive sins?’ ” (Luke 5:21). They charged high prices to christen, marry and bury their parishioners.

GOD’S WORD BRINGS LIGHT

The Bible is the word of God. God wants His word to go out to the farthest corners of the earth. That is why missionaries working with Wycliffe Bible Translators have gone into most countries and translated the Scriptures into the local languages. Jesus Christ told His disciples, “Go and make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). He also said, “This gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations . . .” (Matthew 24:14).

Without the light of God’s word, the world is a dark place. We speak of “the dark ages,” that period in history when men had no Bible to guide them. The darkness is in men’s hearts and shows in their actions. Only God’s truth can take the darkness away. Paul said Christ’s gospel “rescues us from the kingdom of darkness” (Colossians 1:13).

Jesus said, “the Scriptures testify about Me” (John 5:39). Men and women must be able to read the Bible to find Jesus Christ and to learn His teachings. No one should keep us from owning a Bible or understanding the salvation that Christ brought to all peoples.

God’s Spirit will teach us the truth as we read the Bible. Jesus told His disciples, “When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13). Believers need no other person to guide them or tell them what is truth.

No priest is needed. Believers can come directly to God (Hebrews 4:16). God’s Spirit has given some people special gifts as teachers. They can help us understand the Bible. We should listen to their teaching and read the Scriptures. We must ask the Holy Spirit to help us because, in the end, God holds each person responsible for his or her decisions.

TALK ABOUT

1. What keeps men and women in spiritual darkness?
2. Do people need a priest or pastor to help them worship God?
3. Who will guide us into the truth as we read the Bible (John 16:13)?
4. Do you ask the Holy Spirit to guide you as you study God’s word (Luke 11:13)?
5. Why must the Scriptures be translated into the local languages of every people group (Matthew 24:14)?
6. Who alone can forgive sins?

A GREAT CHANGE WAS NEEDED

When the light of the Gospel seemed as if it was almost going out, God raised up Martin Luther (1483-1546). God used Luther to bring about a great change in the way people thought and worshipped. As a youth, Martin became a Catholic monk. Later he became a professor at a university in Germany. He treated his body harshly and did everything the Church told him he must do to gain favour with God. But Martin was not satisfied; he had no peace in his heart. He felt God was not pleased with his way of life.

One day, while he was still a monk, Martin read the Scriptures and what Paul said about receiving salvation as a free gift (Ephesians 2:8-9). He trusted Jesus Christ as his Saviour and began to preach. He told the people the truth - that they did not need to fear God, but only confess their sins. They did not need to buy indulgences because the grace of God was free! Martin Luther read this in God’s Word. It is the truth! It set him free!

The Roman Church told Martin to stop preaching. He went on preaching that men and women could be justified before God by faith alone and not by any good works which they did (Galatians 2:16,17). And he went further by writing his complaints against the Roman Church. These he published and nailed to the church door.

In 1518 Martin Luther was summoned to appear before the Pope. Finally, in 1521, Luther was thrown out of the Roman Church and made an outlaw by the Emperor Charles V. A bounty was put on his head. They wanted to kill him, but his own country protected him.

Luther said, “The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me.” No one on this earth could stop Luther preaching what he knew to be the truth. May we be as determined to hold to the authority of the Scriptures as he was.

TALK ABOUT

1. What has brought the most blessing to men and women, laws, literacy, industry or the Bible?
2. Who was Martin Luther?
3. Why did he rebel against the teaching of the Roman Church?

SALVATION BY FAITH ALONE

Luther's teaching of the true meaning of the Scriptures spread across Europe. In the years that followed, Luther's reformed teaching spread around the civilized world. He wrote many books to explain certain favourite Bible passages. Then he translated the Bible from Latin and Greek into German so that the common people could read God's word for themselves.

Thousands of people flocked to the churches and thousands were saved. We call this time in church history "the Reformation," Luther restored church doctrine to what the Bible taught. The people who followed Luther and turned against the Roman Church and its teachings were called "Protestants" or protestors.

It is all right to protest if you believe something is not right. Paul protested when men came from Jerusalem and said the Gentile believers had to be circumcised and live according to the Law of Moses. Paul said, "A man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ" (Galatians 2:16).

False teachers tried to force the believing Gentiles to follow Jewish customs (Galatians 2:14). They said almost the same thing as the Roman Church said - you must do as we say or God will not forgive your sins.

Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians to correct this wrong teaching. False teachers came from Jerusalem and told the new believers to keep the law of Moses. They preached a false gospel. Paul told the Galatians "there is no other gospel than the one (I) preached to you" (Galatians 1:8).

All false religions teach that men must do good deeds and keep certain man-made rules or they will not go to heaven. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6), and "Whoever hears My word and believes on Him who sent Me, has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed from death to life" (John 5:24).

DARK TIMES WILL COME AGAIN

The Bible is the truth. It is our only authority for faith and practice. Yet, in our day, the Bible is put aside as not relevant and is even criticized. Man has twisted the truth of the Bible in order to suit himself and he ignores God's word.

One day a man said to me, "They have changed what is in the Bible. It is not the same as it was when men wrote it." So I told him the story of Jesus visiting the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:10-21). It was Jesus' home town, the place where He had grown up as a boy. He probably went to school at that synagogue in Nazareth.

At that time, Jesus went around Galilee preaching in their synagogues (Luke 4:14-15). On the Sabbath day, He went into the synagogue at Nazareth, "as was His custom."

The leader handed Jesus the scroll of Isaiah the prophet. Jesus unrolled the scroll and found the place where the prophet wrote, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour . . ." (Luke 4:18-21).

Then Jesus spoke the most amazing words. He said to the people, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." He proclaimed Himself to be the "Anointed One," Israel's Messiah. But that is not the point. The point is that what Isaiah wrote 700 years ago had not changed. Jesus quoted it word for word; check it for yourself.

TALK ABOUT

1. What period in history do we call "the Dark ages"?
2. What made that period so "dark"?
3. What brings light to men's minds?
4. Did false teachers rise up in the early churches?
5. What did the Gnostics teach?

6. Which apostles wrote letters to warn Christians about the false teaching?

DARK TIMES FOR MANY BELIEVERS

Today, many believers are suffering persecution. Someone said “just as the cross has four arms of wood, pointing in different directions, so the Christian in the Muslim world must endure pressure and persecution from four different directions.”

This is true also of believers in many cultures.

From above: The government may put pressure on them. State police may raid their church and arrest the pastor. Bibles and hymn books are burned and the believers scattered. This is common in the hills of South East Asia.

From the right and left sides: Every society conforms to a ‘code of conduct.’ The culture of every people group is different. Tradition or culture may say, “Do it the old way,” but God’s word says, “Put off the old way . . .” The Christian who goes against the culture of his or her tribe will be persecuted, maybe put out of their family home.

From below: In many cultures family bonds are stronger than anything else. No one in the family would disobey their family head. When a father dies, family rites are performed by the eldest son. In cultures where the spirits of ancestors are worshipped, every member of the family is expected to participate.

Stop for a moment and pray for persecuted believers everywhere.

AS IT WAS IN THE DAYS OF NOAH

Some say the world is getting better. Others say it is turning back to the “dark ages”. Jesus said the last days will be like the days of Noah: “people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, right up to the day Noah entered the ark.” They did not repent, until the flood came and took them all away. “This is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man” (Matthew 24:38-39).

In the Scriptures, God set out a plan. His plan is for our good. His plan is to save men and women from sin and take them to heaven. When we follow His plan and receive Jesus Christ as our Saviour, we are blessed. When men and women reject the way of righteousness God has set out in His word, they become hopelessly lost. That is what has happened to modern civilization.

Our ignorance of God’s word cannot be excused. We have Bibles in our homes, schools and libraries. Even when we respect the Bible, we do not always study what God has to say to us. We pay polite attention to the preacher without listening to what he says.

The Holy Spirit was sent by God “to convict the world of guilt in regard to sin . . . in regard to righteousness . . . and in regard to judgment” (John 16:8). But the Church, as a whole, has not embraced the Holy Spirit. Our ignorance and carelessness has offended God’s Spirit and He has withdrawn from us (Ephesians 3:30).

In His place we have put other things – education, work and even church activities. Our intentions are good, but misdirected. We choose the lower, easy road when God wants us to follow the higher road. Luke said the men and women of Berea were more noble because “they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said (his preaching) was true” (Acts 17:11-12). The Holy Spirit moved among them – “a number of the Jews believed . . . also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.”

TALK ABOUT

1. Did Jesus say the world would get better?
2. What was the world like in Noah’s day?
3. Will it be the same when Jesus comes again (Matthew 24:34-35)?
4. How will this world end (2 Peter 3:10)?
5. Are you ready and watching for Jesus Christ to come again (Matthew 24:42)?
6. How will He come (Matthew 24:30-31)?

PRAY FOR REVIVAL

In the last two centuries there have been many great revivals of Christian faith. They are called “Great Awakenings”. God sent revivals of faith and doctrine in answer to prayer and the faithful preaching of His word. People were hungry for God!

God is pleased to revive us when we humble ourselves and pray and seek His face. He said, "You will seek Me and find Me when You seek Me with all your heart. I will be found by you . . ." (Jeremiah 29:13; 2 Chronicles 7:14).

David wrote, "Revive us, and we will call on your name" (Psalm 80:18). God's Spirit is abroad in the earth. He seeks men and women who will offer themselves "a living sacrifice" for His Kingdom. This means doing all we can for Him and putting His word first in our lives.

Peter wrote many things about the power of evil in "the last days" (2 Peter 2:1-22). He spoke of "scoffers," men who attacked Christ's Church and scoffed at His promises. Such men will dispute the truth and argue with believers.

Paul wrote to Timothy, "Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. The Lord's servant must not quarrel . . ." (2 Timothy 2:23-26). Rather, pray for men and women to be revived in their walk with God.

REVIVAL IN ENGLAND AND AMERICA

Great awakenings began in England and in America in the early eighteenth century and at about the same time. In 1726 William Tennant, a Presbyterian minister, started a 'Bible school' to train young men to preach the word of God. They went out and called men and women to repent. Many turned to the Lord and were saved.

Ten years later, Jonathan Edwards, saw many people saved in his church in Massachusetts. The Revival moved to the southern states and touched most communities.

Revival came to England under the preaching of John Wesley and George Whitfield. Wesley moved across the country on horse back preaching the gospel to the common people. Thousands came into God's Kingdom. New believers filled the churches in America and England.

In the 19th century Charles Finney ministered at "camp meetings", popular with evangelical Christians. He believed that God had set out the "laws of revival" in Scripture. When believers pray and obey God's word, revival comes.

Revival came to East Africa in the 1900's. Sadly, few were trained to teach the new believers in God's truth and much fruit was lost.

A FINAL AWAKENING?

Some people believe a revival of faith will come upon the earth before Jesus Christ comes again. This would be very wonderful. But Jesus said evil would get worse and worse (Matthew 24:37). He will come again to save His people out of the world!

Here and there we see God's Spirit at work. Thousands of people are coming into house churches in North India. Pentecostal churches have made great advances in Latin America. The "Passion of Christ" movie is drawing large crowds in the Middle East. And the movie "Jesus" has been seen by more people than any other movie. In many lands there is a deep hunger for the word of God and Bibles are in great demand. In other places the Christian Church is being attacked. We find many enemies within our churches, willing to compromise the truth for popular trends in culture. Other enemies are people who burn churches and kill pastors.

Satan fights hard, but the Church grows stronger under persecution. In places where authorities tried to get rid of the Christian Church, it went underground. Many house churches sprang up. Believers met and studied the Bible in secret meetings.

No one can count the number of Christians in these countries. But God knows and cares for each one. It is a "Dark Age" for them, but the light and glory of a new day will surely come. Jesus said He will come again in the clouds and gather all the Christians of all ages to live with Him forever (Matthew 24:30-31; John 14:2-3).

"They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory . . . He will send His angels . . . and they will gather His elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other" (Matthew 24:30-31).

Jesus told His disciples, "I am going there (to My Father's house) to prepare a place for you . . . I will come back and take you to be with Me so that you also may be where I am . . ." (John 14:2-3).

Paul said, "Encourage one another with these words."

WHERE WAS GOD?

Many ask, "Where is God in this time of trouble?" Others ask as they suffer, "Has God left us?" After the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York, many asked "Where was God on 11th September 2001?"

God has not changed (Hebrews 13:8). He is waiting for men and women to repent of their sin and come to Him. Peter reminded us, "Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation" to many, many more (2 Peter 3:15).

In the storm, God is watching. He is there for those who trust Him. Seek Him in His word and you will surely find Him (Jeremiah 29:13).

TALK ABOUT

1. What makes the Christian Church grow stronger?
2. What can Christians do to encourage other believers?
3. How do you encourage your Christian friends?
4. What might you do to encourage your Pastor?
5. What plan do you have to study the Bible?
6. Do you pray for the persecuted Church in other lands?

TRANSLATIONS OF THE BIBLE

The word of God is immortal, forever established in heaven (Matthew 24:35).

The Bible is a miracle! It is the oldest book in the world. If you own a Bible, you have a book that has survived many attempts to destroy it. God has protected His written word and will continue to send it out by the hands of His servants.

The oldest versions of the Bible were written in Hebrew, Greek and Latin. Fragments of these remain in some museums. They were used from about 200 BC to 400 AD and very few copies existed. The Old Testament books were translated into Greek by a team of seventy Jewish scholars living in Alexandria, Egypt. It is called the Septuagint or LXX (Septuagint is the Latin for 70). This translation was based on a Hebrew text that was much older than most surviving fragments of ancient manuscripts of the Bible. Most of the quotations from the Old Testament that are in our New Testament today, come from this Greek Bible.

When the Roman Empire defeated the Greeks, Latin became the main language and the Bible was translated into Latin. Jerome's translation of the Bible is called the "Latin Vulgate" and was completed in 405 AD. One good manuscript of this Bible is housed in a library in Florence, Italy. At this time all copies of the Bible were made, very carefully, by hand.

Nearly one thousand years later, the Bible was translated into English by men like Wycliffe (1313-1384), Tyndale, Coverdale and others. Their work was helped greatly by the printing press which had just been invented. A Latin Bible was first printed in 1456, The King James Version of the Bible was published in 1611.

Now we have many 'versions' of the English Bible, too many to name here. And you may wonder which one is better or more accurate. They are all useful and no one version is "the best." The King James Version (KJV) is very good, but in old style English. Spoken and written English has changed over the years and the newer translations show this. The Revised Standard Version (RSV) is a revision of the King James Version. The New International Version (NIV) of the Bible is a completely new translation sponsored by the International Bible Society. Bible scholars from many countries helped with the work. It is written in the language used by the great majority of people and is widely used in the English-speaking world.

Some Bibles have study notes which explain the text. These are very different from the Bible! The Bible is the "Sword of the living God," whereas the study notes are the words of man. Some study notes are very good, while others can be quite misleading. Check study notes against the Scriptures.

Always ask God to show you the meaning of His word and how it applies to your life. He has promised, "The Spirit of truth (the Holy Spirit) will guide you into all truth . . ." (John 16:13). Jesus also said, "If you keep to My teaching, you are really My disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31).

TALK ABOUT

1. Why did the Bible need to be translated?
2. What Old Testament translation was made in Egypt?
3. Who will guide your mind into the truth (John 16:13)?

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