

UK BIBLE STUDENTS NEWSLETTER

Issue 87 – Mid-July 2012

Frequency: Approximately once a fortnight

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GROANING

Scripture citations are to the New International Version, British text, unless noted otherwise.

The whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time (Romans 8: 22).

SOMEONE HAS OBSERVED that history is simply one thing after another. It's also one long collective lament – a 'groaning' as the Apostle Paul says of mankind, identified as 'creation' in our highlighted text from Romans 8.

Within this broad tapestry of woe, our individual lives throb with pains of one sort and another. Not that there are no joys. Given the right circumstances, health and resources, life can be wonderfully happy and productive. But in general, life is inherently unsatisfactory. For one thing, it is inconsistent in quality and, for another, well . . . it's terminal. Our own death casts its shadow backwards, and as we age our grunts and groans reinforce the message that we are irresistibly on the way out.

Humanity has for thousands of years been moving through a cacophony of troubles, from point A to point B, never really understanding where they're going. Most historians would probably laugh at the notion of the inevitability of history, that events have meaning beyond the temporal – that history has *direction*. Modern philosophy lumps mankind in with all other forms of life as a random expression of the struggle for survival, a crazy ineluctable race from conception to death, with a dash of intelligence thrown in. In short, the prevailing view of modernity is that human existence itself is without meaning.

That's the theory, at least. But in spite of it, people continue to behave as if events *do* have meaning. And so they make plans beyond the limits of their own lives – for their children, for the shaping of social order and great buildings and constructions, and they fret about life-threatening dangers which may arise long after they are dead, such as climate change. The Creator has built into mankind hope for the future – a legacy of the fact that man was originally made to live for ever.

Pangs . . .

With a loud collective sigh, humanity has been engaged in the long and tiresome push of bringing to birth a new order of affairs. The struggles associated with the effort are the experiences with sin, tragedies, and death. But mankind does not itself know the glorious object in view. God's plans and purposes are not open to scrutiny by those who have no faith in the Word of God. Subjected to 'frustration' (v. 20) and in 'bondage to decay' (v. 21), unbelieving humanity will never entirely succeed in its endeavours.

It is not possible to see in detail a future beyond one's own span of life. But as in childbirth, the final 'push' for humanity will arrive at the appropriate point of time. The unequalled period of trouble to come – described by Jesus in Matthew 24: 21 as the most severe conflict in history – will be a concentrated essence of the woes and heartaches that have marked all of history. It's impossible to say when this will occur, except that – like birth – it is *inevitable*, being the logical consequence of mankind's general resistance to God's will. The cataclysm will end the struggle and the wait, and will usher in a new order of affairs under Christ, to the eternal blessing of all mankind (Romans 8: 21): 'The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of God.'

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NOT MY OWN

The Greek word for 'bought' is *agorazo*, and means to be paid for, as in a market one might pay for a loaf of bread. See, for example, Mark 11: 15 ('those who were buying and selling'); Luke 14: 18 ('I have just bought a field'). Demeaning though it may seem at first glance, the word is intended to convey the transaction which occurred when Jesus died on the Cross. For there He paid the sinner's debt, offering to God the ransom-price which will eventually cover all mankind.

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IN THE REAR-VIEW MIRROR: *British Orators*

Julian Hawthorne, Special Introduction to *Orations of British Orators* (Vol. I) (London: The Colonial Press; 1900), pp. *iii, iv*.

'In early Christian and mediaeval times the occasions of oratory were mainly religious; for the doctrines of Christianity were then more absorbing than political ones: mankind, indeed, having fallen under the dominion of temporal tyranny in all civil affairs, and therefore finding their best consolation in aspirations toward spiritual emancipation. Arguments on points of theological controversy also assume a prominent position in the recorded eloquence of those days; because the true interpretation of ambiguous questions of this kind seemed to the contestants to involve matters of pre-eminent import to the welfare of the life beyond the grave.

'But when, a thousand years ago, the beginnings of a nation first assembled in the little island of Britain, and the Saxons and Angles and Danes and Norsemen were becoming welded together into something like a homogeneous people, the instinct for freedom of speech and self-conduct once more took a foremost place in men's minds; and the prayers of John Knox, the dying address of Thomas Cranmer at the stake, the dauntless declaration of John Eliot and of many another, bore witness to the fact that the men of England were destined to be the political orators of the modern world. Here was a nation which must needs be free; and prophets arose among them, able and resolute to give noble and memorable utterance to the vague tendencies of the masses.

'Their words became the framework on which the fabric of the future constitution of the empire was to be erected: and each period of their eloquence meant the enfranchisement and felicity of myriads still unborn.

'It was not until after Magna Carta had been wrung from John's reluctant pen, however, and Parliament had taken its place as the true court of appeal and forum of the nation, that British eloquence attained any considerable and continuous volume.'

MUSINGS

Many cinema or television programmes which purport to be historical do not justify the description. What viewers want is action, and facts do not always offer the narrative arc required by a good plot (beginning, middle, end). As the film director, Sir Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980), is reported to have said, 'Drama is life with the dull bits cut out'. Sometimes the truth is lost, too.

There is a scene in an old biblical picture in which Cain, plotting to kill his brother, Abel, uses the pretence of confidentiality to get Abel alone. ‘Let’s go over there,’ he whispers, ‘where no one can hear us.’ Or something like that. According to the account in the film – incorrect by the way – besides the two brothers, there was only mother and father, the admonition always struck me as unnecessary. Only four people on the entire planet and Cain is worried about being overheard!

The present generation of Britons have honed their impressions of the Bible and Christianity largely under the influence of the visual media. Year on year, British culture loses its honoured connection with the real, majestic story of the Bible. I don’t mean Bible *stories*, the tales told only to children. True and useful they may be, but they are often simplified to make an elementary point. The Bible is for adults, too. But the proliferation of secular ideas tends to undermine practical Christian ideals and portrays a view of religion – and religious people – as silly and unworthy of respect. Time was in this land when a working knowledge of the Bible was the ordinary inheritance of the citizen, and the precepts and principles of the Scriptures informed behaviour and the social consensus. We are all the poorer for the change. (AP)

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