

CHRISTIAN WATCH

A PROTESTANT BIBLICAL WITNESS

"And what I say unto you

I say unto all, Watch"

Mark 13:37

NEWSLETTER

March 2015

March 2015

To all Christian Watch Members

Dear Friends,

As the General Election campaign gets under way and we have to decide on where to cast our vote on 7th May, I make no apology for reminding you of a statement made by our Prime Minister, David Cameron, just a few months ago. I quote - *"I am proud that we have made same-sex marriage happen.....making marriage available to everyone says so much about the society that we want to live in.....I am pleased that we have had the courage to change....."*

If the above statement, concerns you – and it should – you need to prayerfully consider if such a man, and the Party he leads, can any longer rely on your vote.

There are, of course, many issues that can determine which way you will choose to vote but some are more important than others. Following on from the above, and in connection with the Ashers Bakery in Northern Ireland (the Bakery was so-called because of Asher in the Book of Genesis), the Northern Ireland Equality Commission Chief, Michael Wardlow (a professing Christian), stated on 21st March – *"If someone here in Northern Ireland is running an establishment as a person of faith and is compelled against their will, but by law, to serve an LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) person, then that can hardly be said to be persecution."* (The Equality Commission is taking legal action against Ashers Bakery because they refused to make a cake with a pro-gay 'marriage' slogan).

Some 4000 people gathered at the Waterfront Hall in Belfast on 24th March for a Rally supporting the McArthur family (Ashers Bakery). We must ask ourselves – does it really matter that much? Well, the case has surely far-reaching implications for religious liberty and many other Christian businesses are concerned that they could be next in the firing line. It is encouraging knowing that we do not stand for our faith alone.

Turning our attention to our children and grand-children, we learn that – under Government-backed lessons – children as young as 11 are to be encouraged to critique the performance of porn stars and quizzed about adult films in a bid to teach them about the issue of consent. The latest PSHE guidance (personal, social, health education) – commissioned by the Department of Education and backed by Nicky Morgan (Secretary of State for Education) and Theresa May (Home Secretary) - is designed to help schools teach the issue of consent at Key Stages 3 & 4. Detailed lesson plans include pornography, sexual images, rape myths and victim blaming. A Department of Education spokesman stated *"we want to see all young people leave school prepared for life in modern Britain."* (PSHE is funded by the Government).

The Government's 'British Values' agenda on schools also includes children as young as 4 being questioned by Ofsted Inspectors about different types of families e.g. 2 Mums or 2 Dads and appears to operate a policy of hostility towards those who hold Christian beliefs. The General Election is nearly upon us – write to your MP and all the prospective candidates in your area – on these and other matters pertaining to our Christian faith. With the Election so close, candidates will be more open to hearing from you as a voter.

A major analysis by the University of Oxford has indicated that, since the 2011 census, the population of England has risen by 565,000. Two-thirds of the increase is attributed to the European Union. I quote – *"....so for British people looking for work, particularly in low-skilled and low-paid jobs, it means some competition."* The Polish Ambassador to the UK said that migrants were coming here because *"they find Britain very attractive as a country."*

Treachery by Tony Blair, when he was Prime Minister and Leader of the Labour Party, has also come to light following a 'damning indictment' of Government in connection with the OTRs (On the Runs) in Northern Ireland. OTRs are Republican bombers and murderers who were sent letters by the then British Government assuring them of a free pardon and that they would not be charged with criminal offences that occurred before the Belfast 'Good' Friday' Agreement. Currently, at least one recipient of such a 'pardon' is now an elected Sinn Fein member of the Stormont Assembly.

I could go on. There is a continual outpouring of news from all sections of our society. Many Christians understandably feel disillusioned with politics and our political representatives, but our God is Sovereign and the MPs elected will be elected because of your vote and mine and the votes of your family, friends and neighbours. Pray earnestly that God will direct you to the right candidate.

This year – 2015 – is the 70th Anniversary of the end of the Second World War. An article entitled **On War Footing** by Bill Muehlenberg of Culture Watch compares the Second World War and the lessons to be learned with the war that Christians are engaged in against the world, the flesh and the devil. It is always costly to be a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ and full obedience and full allegiance to Him is essential. We cannot pick and choose which commands to obey and which to reject.

Walk with God is a study by Dr. Alan C. Clifford on Psalm 56 outlining faith's agitation, faith's foundation and faith's affirmation. Shame, failure and despair can often trouble the believer, but here the author shows that there is a way back from such torments and that it is a privilege indeed to serve such a gracious God as our Heavenly Father. Some of the Names of **Jehovah** are also listed for your encouragement and edification, together with their meanings. What a great God we serve!

News Items cover several topics including equality in the work-place, C of E Muslim prayer services, Boko Haram/Islamic State and the possibility of an apocalyptic disaster in our lifetime.

Nothing Impossible with God by B.A. Ramsbottom – based on Jeremiah 32 – places the emphasis on the absolute sovereignty of God. Jeremiah did exactly as he was told. We can learn so much from him – and, as we think and pray about the items in this Newsletter, let us always remember that our God is the God of all flesh. All creatures obey His command and He casts down a great challenge – 'Is there anything too hard for Me?'

May the Lord strengthen your arm to fight the good fight of faith and give us the blessed consolation that, concerning faith, we shall not make shipwreck.

In closing, may I just bring your attention to the Christian Resources Exhibition to be held at ExCel London, Royal Victoria Dock, 1 Western Gateway, London E16 1XL from 19th - 22nd May, 2015. Christian Watch will have a stand at this Exhibition and we would value your prayers as we witness for Him in our capital city.

Yours in His service,

Ian R. Henderson

Ian R. Henderson,
Vice-Chairman

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On War Footing

By Bill Muehlenberg, Culture Watch

The fact that military and warfare imagery is found throughout the Bible tells us a few things. One, it may tell us that ideological pacifism is a position not fully squared with the Biblical record. But we will save that debate for another time.

It also tells us that the life of the believer is not to be seen as one of partying, playing vacations, cruise ships and a life of ease. The Biblical picture one gets is that the people of God are engaged in constant warfare, battles, difficulties, attacks and struggles.

While rest in God, of course, is always on offer, the clear Biblical picture is that the believer is involved in on-going warfare. Primarily this is a spiritual battle we are engaged in, of course, but it manifests itself on many other levels as well. Sometimes the fight is with yourself, as we war against sin, pride, self-centredness and the like.

And there are very real enemies of God out there who are warring against God's people as well. There are cultural battles and intellectual battles and social battles and political battles and religious battles, to name but a few. There are false religions; there are hostile worldviews and there are anti-Christian policies, for example, which constantly need to be dealt with.

We also speak of being involved in a war against the world, the flesh and the devil. This alone is a full-time struggle. Pretending that none of these battles exist, or that none of these enemies or opponents exist, is to be living in a world of Bible-denying delusion.

Thus we are on war footing. That phrase has been defined as “the condition or status of a military force or other organisation when operating under a state of war or as if a state of war existed.” When we know that we are in a wartime situation, things change, and it is no longer business as usual.

Now I realise, of course, that most people prefer peace to war - and rightly so. When peace in this life is possible, then by all means it beats warfare. But sometimes we have no other options. Sometimes warfare is necessary. Sometimes to refuse to engage in battle means we allow a much greater evil to prevail.

This year we celebrate the 70th Anniversary of the end of the Second World War. I for one am continually interested in and fascinated by this great conflict. Here we have a pretty clear demarcation between good and evil and here we find a very strong rationale for the rightness of just war theory. Sometimes war is necessary to prevent a much greater evil.

Fighting Hitler and the Nazis was a just cause. Seeking to stop his genocide and global domination was a good thing. Seeking to free the concentration camps and liberate the prisoners was a worthy goal indeed. We can find some lessons in WWII which readily apply to the Christian life.

One lesson is that we may be in for the long haul. Most wars do not end overnight. Plenty of hard-core fighting must take place before the enemy is finally defeated and a just peace is secured.

When the Allies launched their great counter-strike to re-take Europe on 6 June, 1944, after a rough beginning, it seemed to go well shortly thereafter with much progress made. So much so, that some felt it would be a short offensive and soldiers were writing back to loved ones saying they might be home by Christmas. But, of course, things were not that quick and easy and the Germans put up stiff resistance. For example, the Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes

Forest would be the costliest battle for the Americans of the entire war, with some 75,000 casualties (killed, injured or missing).

So the heavy fighting would continue for some months more yet. On 21 April, 1945 the Soviets reached Berlin and on 29 April the US 7th Army liberated Dachau. So the end was in sight and finally, on 8 May, Victory in Europe Day was celebrated.

Another lesson to be taken away from all this, as already referred to, is the great sacrifice which must take place in any war. No war is pain-free – it is always costly and monumental sacrifices must be made. Unless one is willing to offer one's very life, no victory will be achievable.

In addition to the 75,000 casualties of that one battle, all-totalled there were around a million US casualties for the entire war. The total Allied military deaths alone were some 14 million. That is an horrific number of lives lost. That is an ocean of blood which was shed.

But offering one's life for the cause of freedom, for the resistance to tyranny and evil is always going to be a costly thing. How can it not be? And in the Christian life, it is always costly to be a disciple of Christ. Obviously with something like the demonic evil of the Islamic State, we see real blood being shed and actual lives being lost. But even aside from such horrible martyrdom and persecution, to follow Jesus according to Biblical standards is always costly, involving our whole being. To deny ourselves, to crucify the flesh, to say no to self and to bear our cross daily is never easy. Those who think the Christian life is a piece of cake and a life of ease are likely not true disciples of Jesus Christ.

A final lesson to be learned from WWII, as well as from all war, is the importance of the foot soldier carefully and faithfully following and obeying their superiors, especially the Commander-in-Chief. In a time of war, it is essential that soldiers pay heed to and follow the instructions of their Commanders.

In the Christian life it is no different, of course. Jesus expects full obedience. He is not the Lord of our life if we exercise only partial obedience, if we decide which commands to follow and which to reject and if we think we can call the shots and tell God how things should be done. That is a recipe for disaster, as well as rank insubordination.

Jesus expects and demands of us our full allegiance. We are not here to tell Him what to do. He is here to tell us what to do. If we love Jesus we will obey him, as He said repeatedly. This is especially vital in a time of war. To think we can run the show ourselves is in fact an act of treason.

As the next few months unfold, I will undoubtedly write some more articles on the end of WWII. There will be plenty of celebration and commemoration of this in the media over the coming months. While we celebrate the great sacrifices and courage of our forebears as they gallantly fought the evils of the Nazis, we do well to keep in mind the many spiritual lessons to be found here as well.

Let me conclude with just a few relevant quotes on all this:

“Warfare with the powers of Hell is the experience of every individual member of the true church. Each has to fight. What are the lives of the saints, but records of battles? What were such men as Paul and James and Peter and John and Polycarp and Ignatius and Augustine and Luther and Calvin and Latimer and Baxter, but soldiers engaged in a constant warfare?”

J. C. Ryle

“I do not love the bright sword for its sharpness, nor the arrow for its swiftness, nor the warrior for his glory. I love only that which they defend.”

J. R. R. Tolkien

“God has appointed this whole life to be all as a race or a battle; the state of rest, wherein we shall be so out of danger as to have no need of watching and fighting, is for another world.”

Jonathan Edwards

“People who have no sense of conflict at all in their lives are patently just not Christians; they are in the sleep of death spiritually.”

Martyn Lloyd-Jones

“When a nation calls its prime men to battle, homes are broken, weeping sweethearts say their good-byes, businesses are closed, college careers are wrecked, factories are re-fitted for wartime production and rationing and discomforts are accepted – all for war. Can we do less for the greatest fight this world has ever known outside of the cross – this end-time siege on sanity, morality and spirituality?”

Leonard Ravenhill

HYMN - ISAAC WATTS

The promise and sign of Christ's coming – 2 Peter 3

Help, Lord, for men of virtue fail;
Religion loses ground;
The sons of violence prevail,
And treacheries abound.

Their oaths and promises they break,
Yet act the flatterer's part;
With fair deceitful lips they speak,
And with a double heart.

If we reprove some hateful lie,
How is their fury stirred!
“Are not our lips our own?” they cry;
“And who shall be our Lord?”

Scoffers appear on every side,
Where a vile race of men
Is raised on seats of power and pride,
And bears the sword in vain.

Lord, when iniquities abound,
And blasphemy grows bold,
When faith is hardly to be found,
And love is waxing cold –

Is not thy chariot hastening on?
Hast thou not given the sign?
May we not trust and live upon
A promise so divine?

“Yes,” saith the Lord, “now will I rise
And make oppressors flee;
I shall appear to their surprise,
And set my servants free.”

Thy word, like silver seven times tried,
Through ages shall endure;
The men that in thy truth confide
Shall find thy promise sure.

Walk with God

Studies in the Psalms

By: Dr. Alan C. Clifford

Norwich Reformed Church

FAITH TRIED AND TRIUMPHANT

Psalm 56

To the Chief Musician upon Jonath-elem-rechokim, Michtam of David, when the Philistines took him in Gath.

Introduction

This Psalm relates to the time of David's unwise association with the Philistines after he fled from Saul. Fear drove him to adopt dubious self-protective and deceitfully-bloodthirsty behaviour (see 1 Sam. 21:10-15; 27:1-28:2). These were truly dark days. We dare not pretend that God's people never do bad things. No! But are we all sure we would do the right thing in a crisis? Hence Paul's warning: 'Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall' (1 Cor. 10:12). That said, while his actions were unworthy, we are reminded that David was a 'sinner saved by grace'. There can be no doubt that in the midst of his activities, a huge struggle was going on in his soul. Together with the inspiring Psalm 34, written in the same historical context, this Psalm shows the author experiencing God's restoring grace. It shows that there is a way back from shame, failure and despair.

1. FAITH'S AGITATION

1. *Be merciful unto me, O God: for man would swallow me up; he fighting daily oppresseth me.*
2. *Mine enemies would daily swallow me up: for they be many that fight against me, O thou most High.*
3. *What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee.*

David's tormented state of mind is evident here. He's paralysed by Saul's consuming hatred. Utterly outnumbered, he's reduced to a state of panic. Yet, in the depths of his soul, God's grace was at work. Fear had not completely overwhelmed his faith. David is really saying: "Yes, Lord, I'm in the grip of terrible circumstances and I'm guilty of dreadful sins. I'm a failure; I dare not trust in myself. So I will trust in You and Your mercy alone!" This is how God's grace and power conquers man's guilt and failure.

2. FAITH'S FOUNDATION

4. *In God I will praise His Word, in God I have put my trust; I will not fear what flesh can do unto me.*
5. *Every day they wrest my words: all their thoughts are against me for evil.*
6. *They gather themselves together, they hide themselves, they mark my steps, when they wait for my soul.*
7. *Shall they escape by iniquity? in Thine anger cast down the people, O God.*
8. *Thou tellest my wanderings: put thou my tears into thy bottle: are they not in Thy book?*
9. *When I cry unto thee, then shall mine enemies turn back: this I know; for God is for me.*
10. *In God will I praise His Word: in the Lord will I praise His word.*
11. *In God have I put my trust: I will not be afraid what man can do unto me.*

What is now plain is the source of David's 'positive attitude'. Having displayed cowardice before Saul and Achish (see 1 Sam. 21:10-12), we dare not conclude that Israel's champion against Goliath has suddenly found inner resources of personal strength. No, no! His trust is in God's Word. In fact, in affirming "I will praise His Word", this remarkable Psalm states David's inspiration three times (vs. 4 and 10).

Without forgetting that David was himself one of God's prophets (see Acts 2:30) and thus an instrument in the process of Biblical revelation, one wonders when and where he's read and heard the Scripture that had been revealed before his time? The Book of the Law had been around long before Hilkiah re-discovered it during the much later reign of King Josiah (see 2 Chron. 34:15). David says he had heard 'twice' of God's power (see Ps. 62:11), so what promises of God had now come to his aid?

Was he cheered that God was aware of his sufferings, as surely as He knew of the afflictions of Israel in Egypt (see Exod. 3:9, 17)? Was he now reminded that 'the eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms: and He shall thrust out the enemy from before thee; and shall say, Destroy them. Israel then shall dwell in safety alone' (Deut. 33:27-28)? Did David now recall what the Lord said to Joshua: 'Be strong and of a good courage....Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest' (Josh. 1:6-9)? Regarding his sense of guilt and failure, but still a lover and server of God (albeit imperfectly), was David not comforted by the grace in God's law: 'Showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep My commandments' (Exod. 20:6)?

Doubtless it was truths such as these that inspired David afresh at this moment of acute crisis. If his enemies 'twisted' his words (v.5), they could not twist the Word of God! What is clear is that he is now changed, even though he continues to describe vividly the wickedness of his enemies (vs. 5-7). Instead of looking into a pit of despair, he is now looking up to God (vs. 4, 11). Therefore, despite present trials, victory is ultimately assured.

When strong men like David weep, things must be desperately distressing. Yet the God who values the blood of His saints (Ps. 116.15) was also mindful of his tears (v.8). The Apostle Paul said as much to Timothy (see 2 Tim.1:4). When our trials and testings bring us to tears, we too may be assured that the Lord will put them in His bottle (vs.8). How encouraging is another Paul:

Give to the winds thy fears:
Hope, and be undismayed:
God hears thy sighs, and counts thy tears;
God shall lift up thy head.
Through waves, and clouds, and storms
He gently clears thy way;
Wait thou His time, so shall this night
Soon end in joyous day.

Paul Gerhardt (1607-76), tr. John Wesley (1703-91)

We may also assume that David's tears were not only on account of his pain and anguish. Judging by his penitential Psalm 51, he would also have wept over his sins and failures. Are such tears not too rare in our lives? We might easily be brought to tears when we're in trouble and pain, but do we ever shed tears of humble repentance? God delights in these (see Ps. 51:17).

David also had said that God numbered his wanderings (vs.8). His travels and travails are all recorded above. We may have the same assurance, however our pilgrim path differs from David's. The famous 19th century explorer, Dr. David Livingston's favourite hymn, sung at his funeral in Westminster Abbey in 1874, was Philip Doddridge's (1702 – 51) 'O God of Bethel':

O spread Thy covering wings around,
Till all our wandering cease,
And at our Father's loved abode
Our souls arrive in peace.

David of Israel would have rejoiced to sing such words.

3. FAITH'S AFFIRMATION

12. Thy vows are upon me, O God: I will render praises unto thee.

13. For thou hast delivered my soul from death: wilt not thou deliver my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of the living?

It is not uncommon for people to make some promise to God after deliverance from a terrible crisis or experience; and yet, sadly, how often the devotion of the commitment evaporates in time. For David, he too made a binding vow to serve the Lord (v.12). Gratitude for God's deliverance demanded nothing less. Such a commitment involved serving the Lord faithfully and obediently for the future. A constant sense of gratitude avoids the vow becoming a burden. Indeed, it remains a privilege to serve such a gracious God.

Do vows feature in our spirituality? Or are we content to enjoy the comforts without the commitments. Matthew Henry reminds us how easily we forget God's just claim upon us:

'It ought to be the matter of our consideration and joy that *the vows of God are upon us* – our baptismal vows renewed at the Lord's Table, our occasional vows under convictions, under corrections; by these we are bound to live to God.

As for our baptismal vow itself, (in the words of Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer*), do we not promise 'to fight under Christ's banner against the world, the flesh and the devil'?

As David learned to his cost and anguish, Psalm 51 reminds us that the 'fight' is not always fought as it should be. How vigilant we have to be against every temptation, in every skirmish of life. If we 'walk in the light' (1 John 1:7), we shall have more than pardon for failure. Victories are to be had when we 'walk before God in the light of the living' (v.13). With a faith as bright as the promises of God, let us rejoice that the work of grace begun shall be completed (Phil 1:6).

JEHOVAH -

JIREH	- The LORD will Provide
NISSI	- The LORD is my Banner
ROI	- The LORD is my Shepherd
ROPHI	- The LORD is my Healer
SHALOM	- The LORD is Peace
TSIDKENU	- The LORD is our Righteousness
YAHWEH	- The LORD is Unchangeable
MEKADDISH	- The LORD who Sanctifies you
METSODHATHI	- The LORD is my Fortress

NEWS ITEMS

1. Equality chiefs: Christians are too scared to admit beliefs, By Steve Doughty, Social Affairs Correspondent, Daily Mail – 12 March, 2015

Christians are frightened to reveal their religious beliefs to colleagues at work, Equality chiefs admit.

When they do declare their Christianity, whether in the office or on the shop floor, they are often mocked or treated like bigots – and their children are even ridiculed at school.

Christians also think their faith is being pushed out of its role as a cornerstone of life in Britain, according to a major study by the Equality and Human Rights Commission. And, ironically, many feel they are being persecuted by the same anti-discrimination and equality laws supported by the equality watchdog.

Nearly 2,500 people of all faiths were quizzed about religion at work for the nationwide study. It follows years of conflict over Christians' right to act in accordance with their religious beliefs.

A series of high-profile court battles have left many feeling that the law is tilted against them and that gay rights trump their own. Many of the major test cases have been backed by the Equality Commission itself, including the successful Supreme Court case brought by a gay couple against hoteliers Peter and Hazelmary Bull, who declined to rent them a room because they were not married.

The Commission is currently backing a legal claim against a Belfast-based Christian-run bakery that wouldn't bake a cake bearing a slogan that supported gay marriage.

Of those who responded to the Commission's survey, 1030 said they were Christian. The next largest group – 188 – were atheist. People of other faiths made up the rest.

The Commission's Report said: 'A recurring theme among some employees was the pressure they felt they were under to keep their religion hidden at work and feeling discriminated against when it came to bearing religious symbols or expressing their beliefs. This was particularly felt by Christians.'

'People reported being mocked for their beliefs, including Christians, who said their colleagues assumed they were bigoted. Some Christian-run services or businesses said they felt in turmoil about behaving in ways that they feared might breach the Equality Act 2010, which protects people from discrimination in the workplace and in access to goods and services.' There were also protests from some humanists and atheists, the Report said, including complaints there were no humanist chaplains at hospitals. Several atheists felt left out if they worked for companies that staged events in churches.

Commission Chief Executive, Mark Hammond, said of the survey: 'What came out strongly was the widespread confusion about the law, leading to some resentment and tensions between groups and anxiety for employers who fear falling foul of what they see as complicated equality and human rights legislation.'

He said that the Commission would produce new guidance to 'help everyone address some of the issues.' Simon Calvert of the Christian Institute – a think tank that has supported opponents of the Commission in court – said: 'It is a relief that the Commission is beginning to realise there is a problem.'

But, he added: 'It would help if it admitted that it may have been part of the problem. In many cases the Commission has aggressively promoted cases against innocent Christians like Peter and Hazelmary Bull.'

‘There was an appalling case a few years ago when a Commission lawyer referred to the spread of Christian views using the word “infected”. It is going to have to do an awful lot of work to re-build confidence among Christians and persuade them that it does not regard secularism as the solution to all problems.’

2. No more Muslim prayer services in Churches, says Bishop – By Ruth Gledhill, Christian Today, 17 March, 2015

A Bishop has investigated the Muslim prayer service that took place in a Church of England building in London and has pledged that no such service will take place again. The Vicar, Canon Giles Goddard, today apologised for the “great consternation” and for “any offence” caused by the event.

The Bishop of Southwark, Christopher Chessun, had earlier asked the Bishop of Kingston, Richard Cheetham, to “investigate fully” the service at St. John’s Church, Waterloo earlier this month.

Bishop Chessun said: “The Bishop of Kingston has, at my request, now met with the Vicar of St. John’s, Waterloo to discuss the Inclusive Mosque event which took place at St. John’s, Waterloo on 6 March. Whilst it is very important to build good inter-faith relations, it is clear that an act of worship from a non-Christian faith tradition is not permitted within a consecrated Church of England building.”

“The Vicar has issued a statement expressing his sorrow at the offence this has caused and any infringement of Church of England guidelines. He has assured me of his intention to work within these guidelines in the future.”

Canon Andrew Stevens, of St. Nicholas, Plumstead said Anglicans knew Jesus was “the unique and final revelation of God.” Covering up the symbols of salvation, in order not to offend or to allow others to worship, was an act of “sacrilege”, he added, and it was especially an “affront” because it was done by a priest.

Abbreviated

3. Boko Haram Pledges Loyalty to Brutal Islamic State - www.christianheadlines.com by Katherine Lackey (USA Today), 11 March, 2015

Boko Haram’s leader has pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in a new audio message, according to a group that monitors extremist activity. In the recording, a man claiming to be Abubakar Shekau, leader of the Nigerian terrorist group that has killed thousands, vowed to follow Islamic State leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the US-based SITE Intel Group announced on 7 March.

“We announce our allegiance to the Caliph of the Muslims....and will hear and obey in times of difficulty and prosperity, in hardship and ease and to endure being discriminated against, and not to dispute about rule with those in power, except in case of evident infidelity regard that which there is a proof from Allah,” Shekau said in a tweeted message that went along with the video, according to the Associated Press. Al-Baghdadi is the self-proclaimed head of the caliphate.

Flashpoint Intelligence, a global security firm, confirmed the recording to NBC News and said it was posted on Boko Haram social media accounts. USA Today was not able to independently verify the message.

The pledge would make Boko Haram the largest extremist group to agree to fight under the Islamic State, the New York Times reported. Still, it is uncertain what level of co-ordination the two terrorist groups would have, though there has been growing signs of a link between them.

“It’s quite clear that since at least mid-January, the Islamic State has had some level of connection with Boko Haram,” Aaron Zelin, a fellow at the Washington Institute who tracks propaganda by Islamist extremists, told the Times. “The key question is whether the Islamic State dispatched individuals from Syria or Iraq or else from Libya down to northern Nigeria to help out with operations on the ground, or else with methodology, or in terms of governance activities.”

The developments came as five suicide bombing attacks hit the north-eastern Nigerian city of Maiduguri on 7 March, killing at least 54 people and injuring another 143 in an attack that bore the hallmarks of the group, the Associated Press reported.

The blasts occurred over four hours in locations from a busy fish market to a crowded bus station, said Police Commissioner Clement Adoda.

Boko Haram, which kidnapped hundreds of schoolgirls last year, has killed at least 13,000 people and forced nearly 1.2 million to flee to southern Nigeria, as well as neighbouring Chad, Cameroon and Niger. Its name means “Western education is forbidden” in the Hausa language. The militants claim a territory in northern Nigeria that is the size of West Virginia.

In recent months, Boko Haram has upped its threats, vowing nearly three weeks ago to disrupt Nigeria’s elections, which had been moved six weeks later than scheduled to 28 March, over security concerns related to the group. The delay, however, brought scepticism that President Goodluck Jonathan – who has largely been ineffective against the militants – is trying to hold on to power in an historically tight race.

In the meantime, Boko Haram has only increased attacks, entering neighbouring countries, including Chad, Cameroon and Niger. The African Union has assembled a multi-national force of 8,800 troops to combat the group.

Earlier this week, Boko Haram militants began massing at their headquarters in the northern Nigerian town of Gwoza in preparation for a battle with the multi-national troops, the Associated Press reported, citing residents and an intelligence officer. In recent weeks, Chad and Nigerian troops have been able to re-take several towns from the militants, but victory at Gwoza would be a major boost for Jonathan.

Boko Haram’s pledge adds to a growing number of jihadist groups that have pledged allegiance or support to the Islamic State, which has seized large swaths of Iraq and Syria and been under near-constant attack from US coalition-led air strikes since last year.

Abbreviated

4. One in four Brits expect an Apocalyptic Disaster in their Lifetime - by Mark Woods, Christian Today, 18 March, 2015

Nearly a quarter of Britons think it likely that an apocalyptic disaster will strike the world during their lifetime – though not many believe it will be a literal Judgment Day.

A YouGov poll was conducted among an on-line sample of 1,745 people earlier this month. It reflects greater optimism than in the US, where a similar poll showed that 31 per cent expected a disaster. The majority in each country opted for nuclear war as the most likely scenario.

UKIP voters are more likely to believe in an apocalyptic event, with 31% of UKIP supporters saying they believe it is somewhat or very likely – much more than the average of 23%.

However, while 16 per cent of Americans linked disaster to the Second Coming – reflecting the much higher figures for church-going in the US – only 3 per cent of British people did, though this rose to 7 per cent in London.

The survey also showed that most people had given no thought to preparing for an apocalyptic disaster and that more than half (54 per cent) thought that if it happened they would stay near their homes.

The percentage expecting Judgment Day was the same as the percentage expecting a zombie outbreak but higher than the number expecting an alien invasion (1 per cent). 13 per cent thought that an apocalyptic disaster would be caused by climate change.

“Ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord.”

Isaiah 43:12

We are to witness to the truth, power and sweetness of religion; to the goodness, holiness and faithfulness of God. We are to witness to the world by our spirit, testimony and conduct. We are to witness to poor, doubting, fearful souls. Our witness should be unequivocal and should be borne with courage, constancy and love. Our testimony should be from experience. Do we know the Lord? Do we daily experience the power of truth in our hearts? Does it free us from slavish fear, the love of the world and the dominion of sin? Can we say, “We have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love?” Are we saying to those around us, “O taste and see that the Lord is good; there is no want to them that fear Him?” Suppose we should be called to bear witness before Judges and Kings, in the prison or at the stake. How would it be with us then? Could we witness that God is good and gracious; that He is enough to make us happy; if He were to strip us as He did Job, or try us as He did Paul? He says, “*Ye are my witnesses.*”

Give me to bear Thy easy yoke,
And every moment watch and pray;
And still to things eternal look,
And hasten to Thy glorious day!
I would Thy daily witness be,
And prove that I am one with Thee.

*Pastor James Smith,
Daily Remembrancer*

“It is not he who receives most of the truth into his *head*, but he who receives it affectionately into his *heart*, that shall enjoy the happiness of having his judgment sound and clear, when others shall be deluded and deceived by those who make it their business to infect the judgments and undo the souls of men.”

Thomas Brooks

Nothing Impossible with God

From 'Saturday Evening Meditations'
by B. A. Ramsbottom

Please read Jeremiah 32:1-23

The emphasis is the absolute sovereignty of God. He does as He pleases. He says, "I will work, and who shall let it?" "He doeth according to His will in the army of Heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay His hand, or say unto Him, What doest Thou?" - the great, infinite, almighty, omnipotent, most high God. Now this is the emphasis and this was a time of dreadful crisis in Israel, for the Chaldeans had overthrown the land. The people were being punished for their sins. They were in bondage and darkness and captivity. We know what it is in these days to have times of distress in England.

Amidst it all, the Lord gives a most strange command to His prophet Jeremiah. He tells him that there is a field down in Anathoth and Jeremiah must buy it from his cousin Hanameel and he must go through everything that was needful legally. There had to be the weighing of the money, the subscribing of the evidence, the sealing of it, the witness, the sealed evidences and the open evidences - all this had to be done. Now the strange point about it was that Anathoth was in the hand of the enemy; the Chaldeans had overthrown it and they possessed it. Whatever was the point of Jeremiah buying a field there? And whatever was the point of making such a sacrifice and paying such an amount for it? And whatever was the point of all this legal procedure, the evidence of the purchase, the sealed evidence and the open evidence? What was the point of it, because this field, this town of Anathoth, no longer belonged to the Jews? It was gone and it seemed it was gone for ever; yet the Lord gave him this strange command and He did not explain it.

If the Lord gives you a strange command, obey it. God is not bound to explain it to you.

"Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never-failing skill,
He treasures up His bright designs,
And works His sovereign will."

"Whatsoever He saith unto you, do it." So Jeremiah did exactly as he was told. The seventeen shekels of silver were weighed and the transaction took place in the presence of the witnesses and there were the evidences of the purchase, the sealed and the open evidences; and they were hidden in an earthen vessel that they might be kept for many days. Then the Lord explained:

"God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain."

You may have some very strange things, mysterious things.

"Still pray, for God will all explain,
Nor shalt thou seek His face in vain."

The explanation was this: that the time would surely come in Israel when once again land would be bought and sold, when the legal evidences would be required, when that field down in Anathoth would be freed from the hand of the enemy. That is why the Lord gave this strange commandment. He does not do anything by accident or mistake or without purpose.

It seemed such an impossible thing that Anathoth and the field should ever be possessed and all this legal procedure a waste of time, and then the Lord puts it like this. This is the summary

and substance of it all: "I am the Lord, the God of all flesh: is there any thing too hard for Me?" Is it too hard for Me to drive out the Chaldeans? Is it too hard for Me to restore peace and prosperity in Zion? Is it too hard for Me to set that field down in Anathoth free that you might possess it? "Is there any thing too hard for Me?"

Now in every time of need, nationally or personally, may you hear the Lord speak. He tells us who He is. "Behold, I am the Lord." Then He proclaims His complete, His absolute sovereignty: "The God of *all flesh*" – not just His people. The hearts of all men are in His hand. "The king's heart," the heart of the most mighty, "is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: He turneth it whithersoever He will."

"His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour."

He declares His absolute sovereignty - "The God of all flesh." All creatures obey His command, whether they are ravens, or lions, or cruel men, ungodly men, Pharaoh, Nero, or whether they are His own people. "I am the Lord, the God of all flesh." And on this, His declaration of who He is and His absolute sovereignty, He casts down this challenge: "Is there any thing too hard for Me?"

It touches everything. Is there any prayer that I cannot answer? Is there any soul that I cannot save? Is there any heart that I cannot soften? Is there any grief that I cannot assuage? Is there any trouble that I cannot sanctify? Is there any crooked thing that I cannot make straight? Is there any cross that I cannot make easy? Is there any mysterious providence that I cannot explain? Is there any door that I cannot open? "Is there any thing too hard for Me?" Anything in grace, anything in providence, anything concerning the body, anything concerning the soul, anything in the church of God, anything in your circumstances, *anything*? O what a word is this! And this is the summary of it all: "Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh: is there any thing too hard for Me?"

"Having a good conscience."

I Peter 3:16

We cannot often see our faith, but we can sometimes see our conscience. We cannot always rejoice in the Lord, but we can see whether we fear His great Name. We cannot always triumph over our enemies, but we can sometimes observe whether there is a sentinel upon the look out. Thus, if you want to know whether you have faith, look at faith's companion, see what faith is attended by; and if you find not "a good conscience," write death upon your religion. Throw away your sword; it is useless; it is of human manufacture; it will break in pieces when you have to encounter your enemy, the king of terrors; God's lightning will shiver it then. But if the Lord has given you "a good conscience," a tender conscience, a pure conscience, He will strengthen your arm to fight the good fight of faith. You will often think your sword is so short and your arm so weak that you cannot fight the Lord's battles. But, if He has given you "a good conscience," a conscience tender in His fear, He has put into your hands the sword of faith and He will one day manifest it clearly, that He has Himself equipped you with it, by giving you victory over all your foes. Oh, may the Lord raise up in our hearts some sweet testimony that we have "a good conscience," and then we shall have this blessed consolation that, concerning faith, we shall not make shipwreck.

*J. C. Philpot,
Through Baca's Vale
Daily Portions (14 November)*

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