

Malcolm's Monday Musings : 8 July 2024

Greetings.

As you know, we are now well into the month of July. This is the month of the year which marks the conversion of the 18th-century poet and hymnwriter, William Cowper (1731-1800).

Mr Cowper became a close friend of John Newton and, together, they published what became known as the 'Olney Hymns'. By way of example only, Mr Cowper penned the words of the hymns, 'God moves in a mysterious way', 'There is a fountain filled with blood' and 'O for a closer walk with God'.

Writing of his conversion, which took place in late July 1764, Mr Cowper relates how:

'The happy period which was to shake off my fetters, and afford me a clear opening of the free mercy of God in Christ Jesus, was now arrived.

'I flung myself into a chair near the window and, seeing a Bible there, ventured once more to apply to it for comfort and instruction. The first verse I saw was the 25th of the 3rd (chapter) of Romans: "Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God".

'Immediately I received strength to believe it, and the full beams of the Sun of Righteousness shone upon me. I saw the sufficiency of the atonement He had made, my pardon sealed in His blood, and all the fullness and completeness of His justification. In a moment I believed, and received the Gospel ... 'Unless the Almighty arm had been under me, I think I should have died with gratitude and joy ... I could only look up to heaven in silent fear, overwhelmed with love and wonder'.

(Source: 'Memoir of the Early Life of William Cowper, Esq. written by himself and never before published', 1816, pages 67-68.)

Several riddles are scattered throughout Mr Cowper's writings. Here is one for you today:

*I am just two and two, I am warm, I am cold,
And the parent of numbers that cannot be told.
I am lawful, unlawful—a duty, a fault,
I am often sold dear, good for nothing when bought;
An extraordinary boon, and a matter of course,
And yielded with pleasure—when taken by force.*

(Source: Letter of 30 July 1780 to John Newton; quoted in William Hayley, 'The Life, and Posthumous Writings, of William Cowper', 1804, Volume III, page 46. The same riddle is also quoted in 'The Poetical Works of William Cowper', 1799, page 188.)

Just in case you fail to solve Mr Cowper's riddle, I have added three clues of my own in the main 'Musings' section below.

Yours in our Lord Jesus,

Malcolm

(i) Scripture.

When Christ came into the world, He said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book'".

When He said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), then He added, "Behold, I have come to do your will".

He does away with the first in order to establish the second. And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, He sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until His enemies should be made a footstool for His feet.

Hebrews 10. 5-13 (*English Standard Version*)

(ii) Food for thought.

Sin, death and sorrow.

'God sent Jesus to die on the cross to take care of our sin problem (Heb. 9. 26). Then He raised Him from the dead to take care of our death problem (1 Cor. 6. 14; 2 Cor. 4. 14). One day, He is coming back ... to take care of our sorrow problem (Rev. 21. 4).'

(J. Merritt, '52 Weeks through the Bible', page 38.)

[The first clue to Mr Cowper's riddle: Sometimes a gesture of salutation, respect, affection or adoration ... sometimes a genuine gesture and sometimes a deceptive gesture.]

'They drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ' (1 Cor. 10. 4).

1. 'I suggest that Paul was giving the word 'rock' a double meaning. There can be no doubt that Paul has in mind the fact that the water which God gave Israel to drink had (on at least two occasions) come quite literally from a rock (Exod. 17. 1-7; Num. 20. 1-13). But, by playing on the word, he switches the meaning from a literal rock to a well-known title of God Himself—the Rock'.

'It is worth noting that this particular title of God occurs five times in Deuteronomy chapter 32 (verses 4, 15, 18, 30, 31) ... I suggest that 'the Rock' was a particularly appropriate divine title for God to reveal Himself by in the wilderness, conveying, as it does, ideas of stability, permanence, immutability and faithfulness, and standing in stark contrast to Israel's own fickleness and faithlessness at the time.

'It was Christ, Paul is saying, who accompanied Israel through the wilderness, and it was, therefore, 'Christ' who they 'tempted' there (1 Cor. 10. 9). It was, Paul is saying, Christ who constantly provided them with water to drink ... it was Christ who was their true source of refreshment for forty years. This passage certainly speaks volumes about Paul's convictions concerning the deity of the Lord Jesus'.

('Studies in First Corinthians' (Precious Seed Publications), pages 58-59.)

2. 'In light of 1 Cor. 10. 4, which shows Christ to be the antitype of the rock, it is hard to resist the conclusion that the reason God had insisted the rock be struck in Exod. 17. 1-7, and condemns it in Num. 20. 7-12, is that He perceives a wonderful opportunity to make a symbol-laden point: the ultimate Rock, from whom life-giving streams flow, is struck once, and no more'.

(D. A. Carson, 'For the Love of God', Volume 1, reflections for 11 May.)

Three Israelites made leprous as God's judgement on their sin.

(i) 'Behold, Miriam became leprous, white as snow' (Num. 12. 10). The sin of unjustified criticism (Num. 12. 1-2, 8).

(ii) 'Elisha said to him, "Where have you been, Gehazi?" ... And he went out from his presence a leper as white as snow' (2 Kings 5. 25-27). The sin of deceitful covetousness (2 Kings 5. 20-25).

(iii) 'And King Uzziah was a leper to the day of his death' (2 Chron. 26. 21). The sin of presumptuous conceit (2 Chron. 26. 16).

[The second clue to Mr Cowper's riddle: The actual word is found in each of the first three gospels and in the correspondence of both the apostle Paul and the apostle Peter.]

The Gospel of Matthew and the Books of Moses.

'By arranging the teaching of Jesus into five discourses (chapters 5-7, 10, 13, 18, and 24-25), Matthew has mimicked the five-book arrangement of the teaching of Moses (Genesis-Deuteronomy). Besides the five-fold arrangement, evidence for this interpretation is seen in what the evangelist says at the conclusion of each discourse:

(i) "And when Jesus finished these sayings ..." (Matt. 7. 28).

(ii) "And when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples ..." (Matt. 11. 1).

(iii) "And when Jesus had finished these parables ..." (Matt. 13. 53).

(iv) "And when Jesus had finished these sayings ..." (Matt. 19. 1).

(v) "And when Jesus had finished these parables ..." (Matt. 26. 1).

These formulaic endings echo similar endings we find in Deuteronomy, the fifth and final book of Moses:

(i) "And Moses finished speaking all these words ..." (Deut. 31. 1—Greek Old Testament).

(ii) "Now when Moses had finished writing down in a book all the words of this law ..." (Deut. 31. 24—Greek Old Testament). Note that Deuteronomy says that Moses wrote his words in a "book"; it is perhaps not a coincidence that the evangelist Matthew chose to introduce his Gospel as a "book" (Matt. 1. 1).

(iii) "And Moses finished speaking to all Israel ..." (Deut. 32. 45) —Greek Old Testament.

'The recurring "five" pattern [in Matthew] is part of a Moses motif, in which we have: (i) *five* women [in the genealogy of chapter 1], (ii) *five* prophecies fulfilled in the infancy narrative, (iii) *five* major discourses, and (iv) *five* examples of how the Law of Moses is to be fulfilled; Jesus quotes or paraphrases Mosaic Law and then says, "But I say to you" (Matt. 5. 21–26, 27–32, 33–37, 38–42, 43–48).'

(Craig A. Evans, 'The Use of the Old Testament in the Synoptic Gospels', *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, Volume 64, No. 1, pages 34-36.

[The third and final clue to Mr Cowper's riddle: The actual word is found in the following 'Musing' about Elijah's 'one-man stand' on Mount Carmel.]

'I, even I only, am left ... I have left me seven thousand in Israel' (1 Kings 19. 14, 18).

At the time when the 'prophet of the Lord' (*Elijah*, 1 Kings 18. 22) had been hiding in *Jezebel's* home country (1 Kings 16. 31; 17. 9-10), Ahab's steward (*Obadiah*, 1 Kings 18. 3) had been hiding a hundred of 'the Lord's prophets' in *Ahab's* home country (1 Kings 18. 4)!

Yet, for whatever reason, no other 'prophet of the Lord' is seen on Carmel. Clearly, no one else in the whole of Israel is prepared to take a public stand against Jezebel and the widespread introduction of Ba'al worship—not even from among the seven thousand who steadfastly refuse to bow their knees to Ba'al and to kiss his image (1 Kings 19. 18).

'The Lord sent an angel, who cut off all the mighty warriors and commanders and officers in the camp of the king of Assyria' (2 Chron. 32. 21) ... 'an hundred fourscore and five thousand. And when arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses' (2 Kings 19. 35).

'A "messenger" ("angel"; מַלְאָךְ) of the Lord came and killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers. There surely is irony in the work of a "messenger" to counter the Assyrian "messengers" (2 Kings 19. 9, 14, 23; מַלְאָךְ), who earlier were so arrogant but now are completely impotent and irrelevant.

'The Lord's "messenger" is decisive because the Lord has sent him. Conversely, the Assyrian "messengers" do not matter now because— it turns out!—they were dispatched by impotent kings and feeble gods ...

'The rhetoric is surely designed to recall the narrative conclusion of the Exodus: "Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and *Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore*" (Exod. 14. 30).'

(W. Brueggemann, '1 & 2 Kings', pages 514-515.)

'We beheld His glory' (John 1. 14).

'The glories of the Lord Jesus are threefold—(i) personal, (ii) official, and (iii) moral.

(i) 'His *personal glory* He veiled, save where faith discovered it, or an occasion demanded it.

(ii) 'His *official glory* He veiled likewise; He did not walk through the land as either the Divine Son from the bosom of the Father, or as the authoritative Son of David. Such glories were commonly hid, as He passed on in the circumstances of life day by day.

'But

(iii) 'His *moral glory* could not be hid. He could not be less than perfect in everything—it belonged to Him, it was Himself ... It illuminates every page of the four evangelists, as it once did every path which the Lord himself trod'.

(J. G. Bellett, 'A Short Meditation on the Moral Glory of the Lord Jesus Christ', page 7.)

'Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil' (Jonah 4. 2).

'Jonah (was) confident the Lord would extend mercy to the Ninevites (because of his) awareness of how merciful the Lord had been to Israel over the years. In the days of Exodus 34, Israel weren't in a good way. They'd emerged from the Red Sea, entered into a covenant with the Lord which prohibited idolatry, and promptly engaged in that very sin (with the help of some golden calves).

'Israel therefore deserved to be destroyed, just as Egypt did (and was). But, despite the fact that He'd said He'd destroy Israel, the Lord chose to have mercy on her. And, significantly, Israel's preservation in Exodus 32–34 is described in very similar terms to Nineveh's.

'To spell out some of these points of similarity more fully:

(i) Just as Nineveh was 'a great city' which had done 'evil' in God's sight, so Israel was 'a great nation' which had committed a 'great sin' in God's sight.

(ii) Just as Nineveh's judgment was due to fall on them at the end of a forty-day period, so also was Israel's.

(iii) Just as the king of Nineveh commanded his cattle not to eat fodder as the nation sought the Lord's favour, so Moses commanded Israel's cattle not to graze on Mount Sinai as he went up to meet with the Lord.

(iv) Just as the king sought to persuade the Lord to relent and turn from His anger, so also did Moses (Exod. 32. 12).

(v) Just as the Lord did in fact relent from the disaster which He said He'd bring on Nineveh, so also the Lord relented in Israel's case ...

'Nineveh's response to their situation is described in far more impressive terms than Israel's. Whereas the king of Nineveh took off his robe, covered himself in sackcloth, and commanded his people to follow suit, the Israelites merely laid aside their adornments/jewellery for a while. And whereas the Ninevites called out to God, fasted, and turned from evil, the Israelites merely bemoaned their state, and only Moses abstained from food and drink (Exod. 33. 4–6, 34.28). Moreover, in contrast to Israel's 'great' sin, Nineveh's evil is one of the few things not to be described as 'great' in the book of Jonah'.

(J. Bejon, '*Jonah, the Golden Calf, and the Cross*', pages 8-10.)

Prayer and salvation.

'*Prayer is absolutely necessary to a man's salvation.* I say "absolutely necessary", and I say so advisedly ...

'I hold salvation by grace as strongly as anyone. I would gladly offer a full and free pardon to the greatest sinner that ever lived. I would not hesitate to stand by his dying bed and say, "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ even now and you shall be saved". But that a man can have salvation without *asking* for it, I cannot see in the Bible ... I can find that nobody will be saved by his prayer, but I cannot find that without prayer anybody will be saved.

'It is not absolutely needful to salvation that a man should *read* the Bible. A man may have no learning, or be blind, and yet have Christ in his heart. It is not absolutely needful that a man should *hear* the public preaching of the gospel. He may live where the gospel is not preached, or he may be bedridden, or deaf. But the same thing cannot be said about prayer. It is absolutely needful to salvation that a man should *pray*'.

(J. C. Ryle, '*Practical Religion*', page 46; italics original.)

Prayer and the Lord Jesus.

The Lord Jesus was a man of prayer. Ponder, for example, these five recorded occasions in the Gospel according to Luke:

(i) 'And He Himself often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed' (Luke 5. 16).

(ii) 'And it came to pass in those days that He went out into the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God' (Luke 6. 12).

(iii) 'And it came to pass about eight days after these sayings, that He took Peter, John, and James and went up on the mountain to pray' (Luke 9. 28).

(iv) 'And it came to pass, as He was praying in a certain place' (Luke 11. 1).

(v) 'And He was withdrawn from them about a stone's throw, and He knelt down and prayed' (Luke 22. 41).

Romans 8. 1-3 looking back over Romans 5-7.

'By considering attentively the first three verses of chapter 8, it will be easily seen that:

(i) 'Verse 1 ('There is then now no condemnation to those in Christ Jesus') corresponds to chapter 5;

(ii) 'Verse 2 ('The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and of death') corresponds to chapter 6; and

(iii) 'Verse 3 ('What the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God, having sent His own Son, in likeness of flesh of sin, and for sin, has condemned sin in the flesh') corresponds to chapter 7.

(J. N. Darby, '*Deliverance from under the Law*', Collected Writings, Volume 7, page 133.)

An interesting quotation from Charles Dickens.

Charles Dickens (1812–1870) was the most popular author of his day and is still widely considered the greatest novelist of the Victorian era. His books include 'Oliver Twist', 'David Copperfield', 'A Tale of Two Cities', 'Great Expectations' and 'A Christmas Carol'.

In September 1868, Mr Dickens wrote a letter to his son Edward, who was about to emigrate to Australia at the age of sixteen. In his letter, he said:

'Try to do to others, as you would have them do to you, and do not be discouraged if they fail sometimes. It is much better for you that they should fail in obeying the greatest rule laid down by our Saviour, than that you should.

'I put a New Testament among your books, for the very same reasons, and with the very same hopes that made me write an easy account of it for you, when you were a little child; because it is the best

book that ever was or will be known in the world, and because it teaches you the best lessons by which any human creature who tries to be truthful and faithful to duty can possibly be guided. As your brothers have gone away, one by one, I have written to each such words as I am now writing to you, and have entreated them all to guide themselves by this book ...

'I now most solemnly impress upon you the truth and beauty of the Christian religion, as it came from Christ Himself, and the impossibility of your going far wrong if you humbly but heartily respect it ...

'Never abandon the wholesome practice of saying your own private prayers, night and morning. I have never abandoned it myself'.

(Charles Dickens, *'A Collection of Letters of Dickens'*, 1833-1870', pages 242-243.)

(iii) Go on, smile.

The taxi and the tie—a Jewish smile.

Micah and Feivel are strolling home from the synagogue one Saturday morning. Suddenly a taxi cab speeds past, and their friend, Hirsh, is running frantically behind it, flailing his arms wildly. 'Do you see that?', Feivel asks, 'I never imagined our friend Hirsh to be a Sabbath violator! Just look at him running for that taxi'.

'Now hold on a minute', Micah replies. 'Didn't you read that book I lent you about judging other people prematurely? I suspect there are hundreds of possible sound reasons for Hirsh's action'.

'Oh yes? Such as what', Feivel challenges.

'Well', Micah responds, 'for example, maybe he's sick and needs to get to the hospital quickly'.

'You must be joking', objects Feivel. 'There's nothing wrong with Hirsh's health. He was doing all of 40 miles an hour. He was running faster than Asahel ever did'. [See the Explanatory Footnote below.]

'Maybe his wife's having a baby', Micah speculates.

'No way', says Feivel, 'she gave birth to twins last month'.

'In which case', Micah tries, 'maybe he needs to visit her in the hospital'.

'Hardly', Feivel fires back, 'she's been home for six weeks!'

'OK', concedes Micah, 'but maybe he's running to the hospital to get a doctor'.

'You forget', says Feivel, 'Hirsh *is* a doctor'.

'Possibly', Micah has another shot, 'he needs supplies from the hospital'.

'But', Feivel points out, 'the hospital is a three-minute walk in the opposite direction!'

Clutching now (metaphorically speaking) at straws, Micah has one last go: 'Maybe he simply forgot that today is the Sabbath'.

'Not a chance', Feivel replied. 'Of course he knows it's the Sabbath. Didn't you see his tie? It was his light blue patterned 100% silk Gucci tie, all the way from Italy. Hirsh never wears that tie on any other day'.

'Wow', exclaims Micah, 'you're really observant, aren't you! I didn't even notice that he was wearing a tie'.

'How could you not notice?' Feivel asks incredulously. 'Didn't you see how the tie was caught on the back bumper of the taxi?'

Explanatory Footnote.

Asahel (the nephew of King David and brother of Joab) 'was as swift of foot as a wild gazelle' (2 Sam. 2. 18.) I chose the name of the fast runner above because the name 'Hirsch' means 'deer' in Yiddish (the spoken language of a considerable portion of the Jewish people, the Ashkenazim, for the past one thousand years).