

So many people today worship their church or denomination, and follow it, never dreaming of disagreeing with it or seeking to follow Jesus Christ for themselves. And if the Exodus and Babylonian exile are pictures for us today, we have to say that these poor souls, even though they may have been good church-goers all their lives, won't escape the wrath to come.

Going to church makes nobody a Christian. We must come to Jesus Christ for ourselves personally. Have a real relationship with Him. Talk to Him, pray to Him, learn of Him.

John 8:12

I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.

The visible church today is a huge edifice, consisting of millions of followers. But throughout history, God has always by-passed it's hierarchy and instead used ordinary people.

Who were the prophets? We don't know much about most of them at all. We know Jeremiah and Ezekiel were priests, but in those days men were born into the priestly line rather than chose it as a vocation. The only other prophet we know anything about, was Amos, who was a simple herdsman:

Amos 1:1

The words of Amos, who was among the herdmen of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash king of Israel, two years before the earthquake.

And when Christ came to earth, He didn't come to the Temple and reveal Himself to the great church leaders of the day, asking them to proclaim Him to their followers. He revealed Himself to ordinary people: a young couple from Nazareth, shepherds, fishermen. The priests and great religious leaders of the day completely missed Christ's coming. God by-passed them altogether. In fact, they ended up becoming Christ's worst enemies.

We should feel sad at this, even though it was always the Lord's will to by-pass them. The church is the visible witness of Christianity to the world. When the world wants to know what Christians think, where do they go? The church. So when the church is a bad witness for Christ, we should be sighing and crying over it. The witness has been ruined, the glory has departed, and it will one day be judged with greater judgment even than the world:

Ezekiel 9:4-6

And the Lord said unto him, Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof. And to the others he said in mine hearing, Go ye after him through the city, and smite: let not your eye spare, neither have ye pity: Slay utterly old and young, both maids, and little children, and women: but come not near any man upon whom is the mark; and begin at my sanctuary.

Luke 12:48

For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.

I'm sure there are some good leaders in the hierarchies of the various churches today. But not many. Most leaders in the churches miss what Christ came to do and teach altogether. They set up their own empires, get themselves involved with politics, embrace the trends of the day, do anything but read and teach what their Bibles clearly tell them.

A church can, and ought to, be useful, and we should be fully involved with one that teaches the truth if at all possible:

Hebrews 10:25

Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.

But the church is not a means of salvation. We don't go to hell without it. We need to read the Bible. Ask God to give us His Holy Spirit so we may understand it properly. Start a real, living relationship with Jesus Christ. That's true freedom. That's real religion. Religion of the heart. That's what the Lord came to earth to give us. Let's worship Him.

Joel 2:12-14

Therefore also now, saith the Lord, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil. Who knoweth if he will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind him; even a meat offering and a drink offering unto the Lord your God?

The Church or Christ?

In the Old Testament, two major events stand out above all the others.

The first one is the Exodus of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. They were in sore bondage for over four hundred years, until the Lord provided Moses who, through a series of miraculous events culminating in the parting of the Red Sea, set the Israelites free from their slavery. They wandered in the wilderness for forty years, before Joshua led them into the promised land they were to inherit, west of the River Jordan.

All this actual history is for us today a picture of the way God deals with us spiritually. We are all in spiritual bondage as slaves to sin. Christ leads us out of that bondage by miraculously changing our hearts and making us new creatures. We wander in the wilderness of this world just for a short while, before being translated into the real promised land, which is in the next world. That's true religion, about which the history of the Israelites is merely a picture.

1 Corinthians 10:1-4

Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; And did all eat the same spiritual meat; And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ.

It is good that we have physical pictures of spiritual realities like this, because we're physical beings, and without pictures we would find it difficult to learn about spiritual things:

1 Corinthians 10:11

Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.

And there's something else in this physical picture too:

1 Corinthians 10:5

But with many of them God was not well pleased: for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

God miraculously led the Israelites out from their slavery, but after they were freed, not all of them by any means reached

the promised land. Most of them lusted after evil things, were idolaters, committed fornication, tempted Christ and murmured (vv. 6-10). So God quite rightly overthrew them in the wilderness. Only a remnant entered the promised land. Even Moses, because of a particular sin, didn't get there.

So what does this physical picture teach us spiritually? It can't be teaching that we can be saved by Christ into the freedom He brings, only later on to be lost again and never get to heaven in the end. There are so many other verses that teach that can't happen. We can't be un-born-again:

Philippians 1:6

Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.

Romans 8:38-39

For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Moses never made it into this world's promised land, but he did make it into the real promised land in the next. And many got into this world's promised land who never made it into the real one. So we see it's simply a picture.

To understand this picture more clearly, let's look at the other major event in the Old Testament, the exile into Babylon.

The Israelites entered and conquered the land west of the River Jordan. For many centuries they lived there. They built a Temple in Jerusalem. They thought that they were in the real promised land, and would be there forever. They became so proud of the idea that they were God's chosen people, never realising that none of what they had was true religion, but only ever meant to be a picture of the spiritual reality.

They needed to repent as individuals. They needed to call on the Lord to save them from their sins, because they couldn't save themselves. They needed to put their trust in the Messiah that God had promised was to come. But they never did any of these. They performed all the animal sacrifices, the dietary laws, and so on, and they really thought that by doing these things outwardly they were pleasing God, after all, God had told them to do these things. Again and again, God sent to them prophets to tell them they needed to turn their hearts towards Him, not rely on outward observances, which were only ever pointers to the real thing:

1 Samuel 15:22

And Samuel said, Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.

Isaiah 1:11-13

To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the Lord: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats. When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts? Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting.

Amos 5:21-24

I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts. Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols. But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.

But they wouldn't listen, so finally the unthinkable happened. God sent the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem and its Temple. And He sent His prophet Jeremiah to tell them that it was too late to try to defend their city, and that they should give in to these enemies and go into exile with them:

Jeremiah 38:2-3

Thus saith the Lord, He that remaineth in this city shall die by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence: but he that goeth forth to the Chaldeans shall live; for he shall have his life for a prey, and shall live. Thus saith the Lord, This city shall surely be given into the hand of the king of Babylon's army, which shall take it.

But most were too proud and didn't listen, so they were destroyed. They believed in being loyal to their doomed nation to the end. But those who took Jeremiah's advice, and did go into exile in Babylon and settled there, were saved, and seventy years later their children were allowed to return.

Jeremiah 29:4-14

Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, unto all that are carried away captives, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem unto Babylon; Build ye houses, and dwell in them; and plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them; Take ye wives, and beget sons and daughters; and take wives

for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; that ye may be increased there, and not diminished. And seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray unto the Lord for it: for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace. For thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; Let not your prophets and your diviners, that be in the midst of you, deceive you, neither hearken to your dreams which ye cause to be dreamed. For they prophesy falsely unto you in my name: I have not sent them, saith the Lord. For thus saith the Lord, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end. Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart. And I will be found of you, saith the Lord: and I will turn away your captivity, and I will gather you from all the nations, and from all the places whither I have driven you, saith the Lord; and I will bring you again into the place whence I caused you to be carried away captive.

The majority worshipped their nation, rather than obeying God. And, just as in the Exodus, they were destroyed for their sins. But the remnant who didn't worship their nation, but rather obeyed the Lord, survived and had their lives saved. Again, this is another picture of spiritual things.

Throughout the Old Testament, the Israelite nation is a picture of the visible church:

Acts 7:38,39

This is he [Moses], that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us: To whom our fathers would not obey, but thrust him from them, and in their hearts turned back again into Egypt...

Most of the visible church throughout history has rebelled against God, only a remnant from within that visible church has ever been the true church, God's true chosen people:

Isaiah 10:21-23

The remnant shall return, even the remnant of Jacob, unto the mighty God. For though thy people Israel be as the sand of the sea, yet a remnant of them shall return: the consumption decreed shall overflow with righteousness.

And this phenomenon continues today.