

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Important Numbers in Scripture: Number 40

Last Christmas I gave my wife a picture for her present. It was soon hanging on the wall. I had used a strong length of quality string to hang it up, and we both thought it looked fine. However, by the beginning of February the nail the picture was suspended from had appeared above the top of the frame, which was hanging at a distinct angle. Down it had to come until we could replace the string, which was only millimetres from coming undone, with proper picture hanging string. Although to start off with everything was fine, the ordinary string had been found wanting over that period.

This morning we shall look at the number 40 as we continue our studies into the meaning behind the numbers in Scripture, and the lessons we can learn from their use. From any concordance, it can be quickly seen that the number 40 occurs frequently throughout the Bible, although we shall limit ourselves to just four episodes of its use. From these uses, we will hopefully come to realise that it is often associated with a time of probation, when God would seek to purify his people through testing. Just like the string, a sufficient period of time was allowed for the quality of the person to be revealed. For some, they were found wanting. For others, the reality of their experiences with God was revealed. Interestingly, in Judaism, if an individual became ceremonially unclean, he would need to bathe in a Mikveh filled with 40 measures of water. After being completely submersed, he would leave ceremonially pure. When God tests individuals it is always with the intention of purifying them, as Peter says; "that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honour, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ whom having not seen you love" (1 Peter 1:7).

Before we look at the first example of the number 40, a word of warning may be necessary. It is all too easy, particularly with this kind of study, to read too much into Scripture and to come away with all kinds of fanciful ideas that do nothing but confuse, and weaken the authority of the word of God. In studying for this article, I came across an article on the web that claimed that Christ's kingdom was set up in AD 70, 40 years after Jesus' crucifixion, because this matched the Old Testament picture of the Israelites in the wilderness. We shall indeed look at that episode, for it is full of instruction, but we must not devise human teachings and superimpose them upon the plain teaching of the word of God. That is not to say that the word of God is not profoundly complex, and incredibly intricate. Indeed it is far more so than anyone of us can hope to know in this life time. So with this word of warning in the back of our minds, let us look at our four examples of the number 40.

1. 40 days and 40 nights of rain.

"And the rain was on the earth forty days and forty nights ... The waters increased and lifted up the ark, and the ark moved about on the surface of the waters ... So He destroyed all living things which were on the face of the ground: both man and cattle, creeping thing and bird of the air. They were destroyed from the earth. Only Noah and those who were with him in the ark remained alive" (Genesis 7:12-24).

Perhaps the best known story in the Bible, spawning children's toys, jigsaws and much more, the story of the flood is one of great solemnity. It involved nothing short of the judgment and death of nearly the whole of the then known world. It seems bizarre that it should become a popular child's toy. There appear to be two massively important lessons that we can learn from this first 40. Firstly, that God keeps His word and, secondly, that He is completely able to keep those who rely upon Him. The world had reached a sorry state, so much so that God was sorry He had made mankind. So the message comes to Noah to build a boat for a flood is coming, to destroy all those who would not go into the ark. For 100 years Noah preached about the judgment to come. One can well imagine the laughter and scorn he endured as he told them of what was to come. For all his preaching, only Noah and his family went into the ark, and then God shut the door. Would God really keep His threat to destroy the world? Like a parent who has issued the final warning against further disobedience, God stood by what He had said. In the clearest possible way, for all time, God has said that what He says He will do. So when God commands all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30), we can be left in no doubt that we have no choice in the matter. It is not a case of whether I believe in Him, or whether I feel a need of Him. God has said for us to do something. It is left to us to obey Him. Because of His love, He kept His word, despite the pain it must have caused Him, so that we in our generation might know that His word is absolutely reliable. But in His love, He had provided a way of escape. Noah was told to make the ark, and exactly how to make it. Now I don't know how much experience you have had in shipbuilding. Mine is limited to an Airfix model that sank on

its maiden voyage in the bath! Assuming that Noah returned to more or less the same kind of work that he had before the flood, then here we have a farmer building the first known boat, with no previous knowledge of boats. Yet for 40 days and nights of rain, that ark remained afloat and watertight against the worst flood the world has ever known. God was able to use the weakest of human efforts to further His plan for this world. God has not changed since then. If we, like Noah, simply obey what He has said, then we too will see God able to use us to fulfill His will.

2. 40 days of spying leading to 40 years of wandering.

In Numbers 13:25, we read that the spies “returned from spying out the land after 40 days.” This was a period long enough for them to come to the conclusion that the land was indeed flowing with milk and honey. Now God had told the Israelites to go in and possess the land. But 10 fainthearted, disobedient spies reported also that the inhabitants of the land were too strong for their God! So in Numbers 14:34 God says to Moses, and the people; “According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, for each day you shall bear your guilt one year, namely forty years, and you shall know My rejection.” So the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 years until all those old enough to bear responsibility, except for Joshua and Caleb had died. During this period the people would learn the hard way that God was strong enough to provide for them. As the writer to the Hebrews tells us, “where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, and saw My works for 40 years” (Hebrews 3:9). The Israelites were to enter the Promised Land, and there be a witness for God to the heathen nations. But with so little faith they could not go into the land at first. For 40 long painful years they had to learn the sufficiency of their God, and their own sinfulness. God, who is incapable of failure, was not found wanting during those years of wandering. It was during this time that Moses spent 40 days and 40 nights with God on Mount Sinai. There, as he received the second set of commandments, God would reveal Himself to His aged, faithful servant. So it was, that when Moses came down the mountain, he “did not know that the skin of his face shone while he talked with Him” (Exodus 34:29). God had found in that period of 40 days and nights that here was a man to whom He could reveal Himself, and what a difference it made to Moses. From this second episode let us learn to obey the first time God reveals Himself to us, for He has proved Himself more than able to keep those who come to Him. As we spend time with Him, in prayer, reading His word and meditating on it, we too will be changed. We need to confidently expect God to work in us and through us now and not be intimidated by the forces of evil ranged against us. If only the spies had not persuaded the people to disobey God, how many years of suffering could have been avoided, years that would have been full of pleasure rather than pain. In the wilderness, God’s judgment of His people, that they were a stubborn and disobedient lot, was proved to be correct. God too was proved to be able to keep His promises, despite His people.

3. 40 days and nights of temptation.

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And when He had fasted 40 days and 40 nights, afterward He was hungry” (Matthew 4:1-2).

There is so much we can learn from the temptation of Jesus. It is interesting to note that it may well be when we are engaged in spiritual activity that temptation hits us hardest, not just when we are feeling down or away from the Lord. In all aspects of His life He was tempted, and yet overcame triumphantly. In 1 John 2:16 we read, “For all that is in the world - the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life - is not of the Father but is of the world.” It was in these three areas that the first man, Adam fell. He saw that it was good for food - the lust of the flesh. He saw that the fruit was good to eat - the lust of the eyes. He saw that it was able to make him wise - the pride of life. On all three counts he failed, and we with him. Not so our Lord Jesus Christ, the last Adam, the second Man. He was tempted to turn stones into bread as He was hungry - the lust of the flesh. He was shown the kingdoms of the world and told to bow down to Satan for them - the lust of the eyes, and He was told to throw Himself off the temple to be caught up by angels - the pride of life, but He remained untouched and untainted by sin. From 1 John 3:5 we see that He had no sinful nature to be acted upon. He was absolutely perfect. But having no sinful nature to respond to sin did not mean that He did not suffer, when He was tempted. Indeed it is only as we deny ourselves and the temptation that comes our way that we truly suffer. If I see a nice cake just waiting to be eaten and take it for myself, I don’t suffer at all. It is only as I remember my waist line, and the need for restraint that I start to suffer. As an infinite God, Jesus had an infinite capacity to suffer, and to feel the pain of saying “No” to temptation. In this He suffered far more than we shall ever do. In these 40 days and nights of temptation, the absolute perfection and worth of the Lord Jesus was shown out completely. The prophet Ezekiel lamented on God’s behalf as He looked throughout all of Israel that He looked for a man to stand in the hedge, and fill up the gap, but found none. Here, God at last found One Man, His Man, Jesus, able to fulfill all that God had wanted from mankind. No wonder God could find all His delight in Jesus. He was fully tempted, but remained in perfect obedience to His Father, untouched by sin. And how was the victory gained? By relying upon the written word of God. I do not believe that Jesus used any part of His nature that was not fully human to overcome temptation. No, the resources that He used are open for every child of God to use. We will not go wrong in our Christian experience if we cling tenaciously to the written word of God, and only what it says. Too often we believe what the church teaches, or what our favourite speaker says. This simply is not good enough. “The Scriptures only” needs to be our battle cry as we too are called to face, and overcome temptation.

4. 40 days of proof in resurrection.

“To whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during 40 days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3).

The miracle of Christ's resurrection stands at the very heart of Christianity. Over some 10 separately recorded instances, involving individuals as well as crowds, we are left in no doubt as to the truth of the physical, bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus. The sceptic would say that that is impossible. With man, one would quite agree. But for God, it was not only possible, but inevitable. For death had no claim against the sinless, perfect Son of God. It was impossible for Him to stay dead, and His life is the proof of the acceptance of His work by God. In resurrection, Jesus did not just make a fleeting visit to His disciples, in a hurry to get home. No, for 40 days, a period long enough to convince all but those who refuse to believe, He appeared to different people to make it quite clear that He was alive again. The soldiers' claim that the disciples had stolen the body was seen for the pack of lies that it was. In full health, making not inconsiderable journeys, He displayed Himself fully alive, clearly not just somebody recovered from a swoon. In appearing to different people, at different times of the day, and to differing numbers of people, He proved that this was not some hysterical hallucination of the distraught disciples. The tomb was, and still is empty for Jesus is alive again, and for evermore! The disciples were in no doubt as to the truth of the literal, physical resurrection of Jesus. No wonder they were on fire for Him in spreading the Gospel. No wonder they were prepared for martyrdom. They had no fear of death, for they knew One who had destroyed the power of death. But what was sheer good news for those who trusted in Him, is news that should make others pause and think. For it is the fact that He is alive again that makes the Day of Judgment a reality. Which criminal is afraid of standing before a dead judge? But to know that every action, every thought and word must be answered for before the One who lives for evermore is a sobering reality. Jesus is alive, and God has appointed the day when He will judge this world. Dear listener, if you have not made provision for that day of meeting, then today must be that day to do so. But for those of us who know Jesus as Saviour and Lord, then we have the promise that it is not a corpse we shall meet one day, but a living, glorified Man, the Word of Life.

As we draw to the conclusion of the study of the number 40 in Scripture, I think the overriding message we get is of the all sufficiency of God. Whenever God is put to the test, He exceeds all expectations and is never found wanting. Whenever man is put to the test, he is always found lacking. And yet wherever there is some measure of faith, however small, God is able to use that and perform His will through mankind. There is no excuse for the fatalistic belief that because so many others have fallen short of what God wants it is inevitable that I will. Like Noah, like Caleb and Joshua, we are able to overcome in His strength, for we have that marvellous promise that “He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4).

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