

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #6:
BIBLE INCIDENTALS AND COINCIDENCES, PART ONE
By John Temples

I want to share with you some of the little things of the Bible--details that either don't seem important or are buried in the text and don't jump right out at us when we read.

I call them "Bible incidentals and coincidences," NOT "Bible trivia"! The definition of "trivia" is "facts or details that are common, insignificant, of little importance or value." Nothing in the Bible fits that definition! I believe there is a reason for every word in the Bible, and it is up to us to discover why God has recorded something that seems trivial or insignificant. For instance...

PAUL'S CLOAK

As Paul was nearing the end of his life, languishing in a Roman prison, he told Timothy to "bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas when you come; and the books, especially the parchments" (2 Timothy 4:13). Why would such a serious book--the last Paul wrote--have such a minor detail in it?

For one thing, it makes Paul's circumstances more real to us. And it makes us contemplate some questions: Why would he leave his cloak at Troas with winter coming on? Was he forced to leave in a hurry, to escape persecution? We cannot fully appreciate or know the suffering Paul was willing to go through for the church.

Paul said in 2 Corinthians 12:15, "I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls, though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved." These were not idle words. Paul was no stranger to cold and inadequate shelter. We need to drink of his sacrificial spirit.

And this brings up another question: Where were the saints in Rome during this time of Paul's need? Where were the enthusiastic crowds of Christians who rushed out of the city to meet him when he arrived in Rome years before (Acts

28:15)? You can mark it down: people can change, and love can wax cold; but our Lord will never forsake us.

THE MAN WITH THE WATERPOT

Jesus told His disciples to prepare for His last Passover. The Bible says, “So he sent out two of His disciples and said to them, ‘Go into the city, and a man will meet you carrying a pitcher of water; follow him’” (Mark 14:13).

Did you ever stop to think how many people there would have been in Jerusalem at Passover? Probably over a million. And how many of those people would be carrying pots of water? Hundreds or thousands of them. How would the disciples find the right person?

Because of one little detail: Jesus said a MAN would be carrying a waterpot. He would stand out like a sore thumb! Why? Because WOMEN always carried waterpots (John 4:7,28). The book “New Manners and Customs of Bible Times” says, “Since it was always the woman’s job to carry water, a man doing the job would be distinctive enough to be identified quickly. Jesus therefore used this means to help Peter and John locate the room where the last supper was to be prepared.”¹

What does this teach us? That Jesus was, and is, ALWAYS IN CONTROL of every circumstance. This is another demonstration of His omniscience.

THE HOUSE OF SIMON THE TANNER

The Roman centurion Cornelius received a visit from an angel, who told him, “Now send men to Joppa, and send for Simon, whose surname is Peter. He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. He will tell you what you must do” (Acts 10;5,6).

¹ Note: I will use quotes from this book several times in this article. I’m using an old sermon outline to prepare this, and I no longer have the book; so I cannot give full citations and reference locations. But trust me!

The “incidental” detail is that Simon’s house was by the sea. Why is that important? Simon was not living on the beach just because he enjoyed the ocean view and could afford a nice beach house--he was there because he was not welcome in polite company! The Zondervan Bible Dictionary says, “A tanner was one skilled in dressing and preserving hides or skins of animals. Among the Jews, ceremonial uncleanness was attached to the occupation of the tanner, and hence he was obliged to pursue his calling outside the town.”

Not only that, but there was probably a strong smell around his house! So here was Peter, a fisherman accustomed to the stench of fish, staying with a tanner, whose house reeked of animal hide smells. A pretty appropriate pair!

This little detail shows us that even in the most minute references, the Bible is in agreement with known historical facts and cultural customs. Not only that, it goes to show that we should not be ashamed of any accommodations the Lord provides for us, whether they be in a fine hotel or a humble home.

WHITEWASHED TOMBS

Matthew 23:27 says, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.”

This was an especially appropriate analogy for the Lord to use, because it was the Passover; and all along the roads leading to Jerusalem, travelers would see whitewashed tombs.

Why did the Jews decorate the tombs at Passover? To warn travelers that a grave was there. If a Jew touched a grave, he was ceremonially defiled (Numbers 19:16). He would be unclean for seven days and could not observe the Passover. The “New Manners and Customs of Bible Times” says, “Before the festival itself, roads were repaired and tombs whitened so that people might avoid accidental defilement that occurred when a place of the dead was touched.”

DAVID'S FIVE STONES

1 Samuel 17 records the thrilling account of David's slaying the giant Goliath with his trusty sling. There's an interesting small detail in verse 40. It says that David chose "five smooth stones" to take with him when he faced Goliath. Why smooth stones? Because ragged stones might wobble in the air. Smooth stones would fly swift and true.

And why five stones? Was he afraid he might miss, or need more than one stone to dispatch the giant?

I rather believe this fact shows David's utter confidence in God, not fear. It turns out Goliath was not the only giant in the Philistine army; there were others who were either relatives or sons of Goliath. How many others? Four! Study 2 Samuel 21:15-22 and 1 Chronicles 20:4-8 for this information.

It seems that David not only intended to take on Goliath, but the other four giants if he had to, and to use only one stone for each! That is faith! No wonder David was a man after God's own heart.

CLEANNES OF TEETH IN ISRAEL

Amos 4:6 contains a fascinating incidental--it says God gave Israel "cleanness of teeth." Did the ancient Jews had advance knowledge of dental floss and Crest toothpaste?

No; in fact, "cleanness of teeth" was not a good thing at all. The Israelites had clean teeth for the same reason the starving children you see on TV have clean teeth--they never have enough to eat.

This cleanness of teeth was due to punishment from God for Israel's sins. The whole verse says, "Also I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places; yet you have not returned to Me, says the Lord."

DID JESUS NOT KNOW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN NIGHT AND DAY?

No, He didn't, say many skeptics and infidels, when they read Luke 17:30-36. This text has Jesus looking ahead to the siege of Jerusalem in AD 70 and, by extension, His second coming of which the Jerusalem siege was a type.

The second coming of the Lord will be a worldwide event, instantaneous and simultaneous in every location, involving every person on earth. But in one verse (31), Jesus said that His coming would be in the daytime; in an adjacent verse (34), He said it would be at night. Bible critics accuse Jesus of scientific ignorance here. How could a singular, instantaneous worldwide event happen in both the day and in the night?

Simply because at any given instant of time, it IS both day and night at different and opposite places in the world. While it is day here, it is night in Europe and Asia. Again, the Bible is precise and correct in even the smallest incidental matters, even scientific matters.

By the way, did you notice verse 34? "I tell you, in that night there will be two men² in one bed." Is there anything sinister about this? Does it imply a homosexual relationship? It does to those whose mind and conscience are defiled. But two men in one bed would be the normal sleeping arrangements in Israel in the first century! In fact, all the members of the family slept together, and if you were a guest in someone's house, they would consider it inhospitable for you to sleep alone; so they would assign some family member to sleep with you!

"New Manners and Customs" says, "There were a number of kinds of accommodation where one could stay in New Testament times, apart from the inn. A stranger would normally go to the gate or wait by the well until an invitation to stay had been given by someone locally....When a person was invited to sleep, it was not normally alone. Other members of the family slept with him because it was believed to be discourteous if a person lacked company through the night."

(To be continued)

² The word "men" is not in the Greek text, but the pronouns "one" and "the other" are both masculine gender; so the translators usually supply "men."

