

CHAPTER 6

BIBLE CUSTOMS

We are generally unfamiliar with many of the manners and customs of the people who lived in the Bible lands of the Middle East and the Mediterranean World. How these people lived, traveled, dressed, farmed, cooked, ate, worked and worshipped sometimes seems very strange to us. We are separated from these people by thousand of miles (**the GAP OF DISTANCE**) and by thousands of years (**the GAP OF TIME**).

(GAP OF DISTANCE)--Suppose you were to spend a year abroad--in England, France, Germany or Spain. Do you suppose you would find people living somewhat differently than what you were accustomed to?

(GAP OF TIME)--Suppose you were to enter a time machine and go back 250 years to the time when our country was first being settled. Do you think you would notice some differences in the manner and style of living?

Can you imagine what life would be like without cars, airplanes, tractors, bicycles, television, radios, computers, newspapers, telephones, cell phones, the printing press, refrigerators, soft drinks (soda), fast food restaurants, elevators, wristwatches, disposable diapers, baby bottles and washing machines? Could you survive? In the Bible we read about men and women who had **none** of these things, and yet they had to communicate, travel, tell time, eat, wash and raise their children just as we do today! They did all these things without any of the "modern conveniences" which we depend upon each day.

In this lesson, we shall consider only three of the hundreds of customs found in the Bible. Many passages of Scripture become alive with meaning when we begin to understand some of the customs which at first seem so strange to our "Western" and modern minds.

1) FOOTWASHING

Men in Bible times did not walk on nicely paved sidewalks, nor did they wear the kind of shoes we wear today. Their feet were clad with sandals and they walked upon dirt roads. Obviously the feet would be exposed to the sand and dust and would become quite dirty. Thus, upon arriving at one's destination, footwashing became quite necessary.

As you could imagine, this was a menial and lowly task usually done by a servant or slave. In 1 Samuel 25:41, Abigail expressed her humble attitude towards David's servants when she said, "let thine handmaid be a _____ to _____ the _____ of the servants of my Lord." She was willing to serve the servants! Likewise John the Baptist felt totally unworthy to even stoop down in front of Jesus to unloose His sandal straps (compare Mark 1:7).

We are therefore amazed to read John 13:4-16 and to discover WHO it was that did the footwashing! The Lord of glory humbled Himself and washed the dirty feet of His disciples!

Notice carefully verse 10: "He that is _____ (bathed, meaning that the whole body has had a bath, from head to toe!) needeth not **save** (except) to _____ (this word means to wash a certain part of the body, in this case the feet) his _____ but is _____ every whit (completely, entirely, every part of his body was washed in the bath).

What custom was Jesus referring to in verse 10? The guest was supposed to bathe before coming to a feast, and so upon arrival only the feet would need to be washed (on the walk from the bath house to the feast room, the feet would become dirty). Knowing this, the spiritual meaning becomes clear. Peter already had his salvation bath (Titus 3:5--"the _____ of regeneration") and he was CLEAN and WASHED (1 Cor. 6:11); all his sins were completely cleansed and forgiven. But as the believer WALKS in this sinful world, his feet get dirty (1 John 1:8,10), and he must come to Christ for daily cleansing. Christ cannot have any partnership or fellowship with a disciple who has dirty feet (John 13:8)!

Questions:

1. Which disciple was still filthy and had never had his salvation bath (John 13:10-11)?
2. _____ Have you had your salvation bath? _____
Are you sure? How can you be sure? ("I know so because God said so!")
3. Will God allow any UNCLEAN person into His Kingdom (Ephesians 5:5; compare John 3:5)? _____
4. How can a believer get his feet washed (1 John 1:9)?
5. _____ Who does the cleansing (1 John 1:9)? _____

2) TEARING (RENDING) CLOTHES

Suppose you go to town one evening with your family to enjoy a meal at a fine restaurant. After enjoying the conversation at the table, you leave the restaurant, get into your car and head towards home. As you approach your street you discover that the road is blocked off, and you can see flashing lights in the distance. You park in a nearby lot and start walking home. In the distance you can see fire engines and you begin to realize that something is seriously wrong. You can see flames shooting up into the night sky. Whose house it is? As you get closer your worst fears are realized as you see your own house burning down and all your possessions going up in flames. IF THIS SITUATION SHOULD EVER ACTUALLY HAPPEN TO YOU, WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU WOULD DO? If you were living in Bible times you would probably TEAR YOUR CLOTHES!

The tearing or rending of clothes was an **outward sign** of grief and distress over some disaster or calamity. It was also a sign of deep sorrow and mourning over someone who has died. Sometimes it indicated a **holy indignation** (righteous ANGER) against sin and what is contrary to God's Word. To see how this custom was actually carried out in Bible times, match the following:

- | | | |
|-----------|---|---|
| 1. _____ | Genesis 37:29 | |
| 2. _____ | Genesis 44:12-13 | A. Sign of distress over some calamity or disaster |
| 3. _____ | 1 Samuel 4:11-12 | |
| 4. _____ | 2 Samuel 3:30-31 | B. Sign of mourning over someone's death |
| 5. _____ | 2 Samuel 13:30-31 | |
| 6. _____ | 2 Kings 18:37
(Jerusalem was about to be invaded by the mighty King of Assyria.) | C. Sign of righteous indignation (anger) over sin. |
| 7. _____ | 2 Chronicles 34:24-27 | |
| 8. _____ | Ezra 9:3 | |
| 9. _____ | Matthew 26:65 (of course, the Lord was not guilty of this sin) | |
| 10. _____ | Acts 14:14 (the sin of "creature-worship") | |

Note: The tearing of clothes would usually be done by tearing a slit in the bottom of an item of clothing, not by tearing the entire garment into shreds.

Sometimes people go through the **outward signs** of grief and sorrow for sin, but there is no true inner repentance or change of heart. It is only an outward show to cover up the true condition of a heart that is not right with God. This is why God said, "and _____ your _____ and not your _____, and _____ unto the LORD your God" (Joel 2:13)! Can people today go through the **outward motions** of honoring God, but not have their hearts right with Him (compare Mark 7:6)? _____ People may be fooled by our outward show, but is God (compare 1 Samuel 16:7)? What is God concerned about most of all, the outward or the inward (Psalm 51:6 16-17)? _____ If the "inward" is right, will the "outward" be right also (compare Psalm 51:16,17,19)?

3) THE USE OF SALT

In Bible times salt was used in two different ways. First, it was used to season food, which is how we use salt today (although today there are salt substitutes and other flavorings that make food palatable and these options were not available in Bible times). Can something tasteless be eaten without salt (see Job 6:6)? _____ Salt makes food taste good.

It helps to make our meals appetizing and agreeable to the taste (though some of us may tend to use too much!)

There was another use of salt in Bible times which we are less familiar with but which was even more important. In the pre-refrigerator, pre-freezer days, salt was essential in preserving food. Salted foods would not tend to immediately spoil or become corrupt. Salt in food combats deterioration and decay.

In Matthew 5:13, Jesus said to His followers, "Ye are the _____ of the earth." This world is becoming more and more corrupt and evil (as men and women allow their sinfulness to express itself openly). Yet, in this world there are believers who are constantly combating moral and spiritual decay. When a believer is obedient to God's Word, his life will help to restrain the forces of evil. When a godly Christian steps into a group of worldly individuals, often the profanity is left unspoken and the off color joke is held back.

A good example of this is found in the Old Testament. Jehoiada was a godly priest who functioned as "salt" during the reign of King Joash. As long as Jehoiada was alive, what did Joash do (2 Chronicles 24:2)?

_____ But after Jehoiada died and the "salt" was gone, we are shocked to see how CORRUPT King Joash became (2 Chronicles 24:15-22).

Consider your own life. Are you helping to corrupt this world or are you combating the corruption? Are you the salt that is preserving or the food that is spoiling? Are others restraining you (parents, pastors, godly Christians) or are you restraining others? If others followed your life and example, would the world be the better for it?

* * * * *

Can you think of other customs mentioned in the Bible which when understood would help to make the Scriptures more meaningful?

Manners and Customs of Bible Lands

by
Fred H. Wight

Washing the feet. After bowing, greeting, and kissing, the Eastern guest is offered water for washing his feet. Wearing of sandals would naturally necessitate foot washing, but it is often done when shoes have been worn. A servant will assist the guest by pouring the water upon his feet over a copper basin, rubbing the feet with his hands, and wiping them with a napkin.¹⁸

When Jesus and his disciples were gathered together, the Saviour took the place of the servant, and washed the feet of His disciples, who themselves had disdained to do such a humble task. John tells us that He "laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself. After that he poureth water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel" (John 13:4, 5). Paul gave as a recommendation of a widow: "If she have washed the saints' feet" (I Tim. 5:10). This custom was also common in Old Testament days (Gen. 18:4; 19:2; 24:32; 43:24; I Sam. 25:41, etc.).