

I can't remember a time when so much has been so uncertain. Normally around this time of year (January), I would actively start to formulate holiday plans, relating to perhaps six months ahead. In a similar vein, in the civil service it's standard to have a 'Business Plan' for the forthcoming financial year, and often a Corporate Plan looking several years further ahead. But such plans can end up being overtaken by unforeseen events. As I write, in the depths of the early-2021 surge in coronavirus cases, even planning six days ahead is fraught with uncertainty. 'Uncertainty' has become one of the characteristics of the times in which we are living.

Of course, uncertainty is nothing new. As it says in Ecclesiastes 1:9, "there is no new thing under the sun". In this article I want to consider some biblical references to uncertainty, and then two references to certainty. All of these references are highly relevant today.

An uncertain sound: lack of preparedness (1 Corinthians 14:8)

In this verse, Paul asks a rhetorical question: "if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?" Obviously, the meaning of a military signal must not be mistaken, or it will fail in its purpose. Similarly, the apostle reasons, those proclaiming a message from God must be easily understood (v9). This should result in the teaching of those who already know the Lord (v19), and the conviction (in their conscience) by God of those who do not (vv24-25).

Uncertain riches: loss of pleasure (1 Timothy 6:17)

This verse really needs to be read along with the next two verses in the chapter; the paragraph is about the dangers and responsibilities of material wealth. The reader is exhorted in v17 not to hope in wealth but to hope in God, the source of true enjoyment. One problem with trusting in riches is their uncertainty – that they can be taken from us, and we can be taken from them. Any satisfaction we derive from them will be short-lived. The proper use of wealth is set out in v18, and v19 looks forward to eternity. The Christian should 'lay hold on eternal life' (vv 12,19).

An uncertain aim: loss of prize (1 Corinthians 9:26)

Here Paul is likening the Christian to a competitor in the Games: an athlete in a race. The point is that being in the race doesn't guarantee a prize at the end.

In v24 he writes, “so run, that ye may obtain”. In athletics, success requires constant self-control. In the Christian life, this is also true. Winning the prize will not come by running “uncertainly” (v26). Despite his preaching, the great apostle was aware that he could “become disqualified” (v27, NKJV). In chapter 3, Paul has written (v15) of one whose “work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved”. These are sobering verses.

Now let’s look at two important certainties.

The certainty of the gospel record: evidence for belief (Luke:1:1-4)

Luke starts his Gospel with an explanation of why he wrote it: “that thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed”, v4. There had been eyewitness testimony to the events (v2), but Luke saw the need to put things in writing. The phrase “having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first” (v3), means he had accurately investigated the course of all the events, right from the earliest, about which he was writing. F. F. Bruce remarks: “One of the most remarkable tokens of his accuracy is his sure familiarity with the proper titles of all the notable persons who are mentioned in his pages.” Luke is not the only New Testament writer who stresses the historical reality of what he is writing about. John, at the start of his first epistle, writes, with reference to the Lord Jesus Christ, “we have heard...we have seen with our eyes...our hands have handled...” See also John 19:35, an eyewitness account from the scene of the crucifixion. In 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, Paul reminds his original readers of the message he had earlier proclaimed to them – “how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures [i.e. Old Testament prophecy]; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures” – and proceeds to give copious evidence:

“he [Christ] was seen of Cephas [Peter], then of the twelve: after that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, ... after that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. And last of all he was seen of me also” (vv 5-8).

He goes on to explain the implications of Christ’s resurrection – and what the implications would be if it were not a fact (1 Cor 15:14-19). It was a certainty for which Paul was willing to give his own life (vv 30,32) – and eventually did.

The certainty of God’s promise: encouragement for believers (Hebrews 6:16-20)

In these verses, the divinely inspired writer draws attention to the fact that God not only made a promise to Abraham (“I will bless thee... v. 14), but also confirmed it with an oath! Both the promise and the oath are guaranteed to be unchangeable (v18). This provides “strong consolation [encouragement]”

(v18) to those who have “fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope”. The phrase ‘fled for refuge’ has strong echoes of the cities of refuge in the Old Testament (see Numbers 35), where a person who had unintentionally killed someone could take shelter without fear of being killed in revenge. This pictures the sinner who realises his/her guilt before a holy God, and takes refuge in Christ – who is the object of ‘the hope’ in this passage. The hope is described as ‘an anchor’, and ‘sure and steadfast’, alternatively translated as ‘certain and secure’. With reference to v. 20, one commentator says, “Our hope is therefore anchored where Jesus is, in the sanctuary itself”.

I hope that the consideration of these scriptures will prove a blessing to you.