

The month when I am writing this (May 2021) marks one hundred years since the Government of Ireland Act came into force, creating Northern Ireland. This anniversary is the latest in an ongoing series of centenaries of significant events in the history of our island. One hundred is certainly a memorable number: and so far as years of earthly life are concerned, a milestone attained by very few people.

The recent publicity started me thinking about 'one hundreds' in the Bible. When I researched this, I discovered some that initially hadn't come to mind. In this article, I want to consider seven New Testament references to this number. After reflecting on each of these, I've grouped them under three headings.

Forgiveness through Christ

A hundred years of age: Forgiveness obtained.

In Romans 4, the apostle Paul is discussing the patriarch Abraham, and in particular, the basis on which he was declared righteous ('justified') by God. Paul quotes David's words in Psalm 32:1-2, "Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin." The apostle has already quoted from Genesis 15:6, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness." The context of this is God's promise to the then childless Abraham that he would have a vast number of descendants. The passage of time made this promise from God seem, humanly speaking, even less likely to be fulfilled; yet even when aged one hundred, Abraham didn't waver in his faith – taking God at His word. This faith – *not* Abraham's works (see verses 2-4) – was why God counted him as righteous (v. 22). Similarly, Paul argues, this is the way that we can be justified by God: "Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification" (Romans 4:23-25).

A hundred sheep: Forgiveness illustrated.

The parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7) is surely one of the best known. Just before the Lord tells the parable, He has been criticised for receiving sinners (Luke 15:2). The Lord Jesus proceeds to narrate three stories (the lost sheep, coin, and son respectively), each of which is an illustration about a sinner who repents, and is then joyfully received. In the first story, the one we are considering here, a man had a hundred sheep. The lost sheep pictures

each of us as a sinner (Isaiah 53:6), but the story is really about the shepherd; a lovely picture of the Good Shepherd (John 10:11,14). We see his concern for the lost, helpless, individual; his determination to find the one that was lost; the lengths to which he went; and how he brought the lost one back to safety, placing it on his shoulders. The rescue was entirely due to the shepherd, who rejoiced at its success. “For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6); “For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls” (1 Peter 2:25); “The LORD thy God...will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing” (Zeph. 3:17).

A hundred pence: Forgiveness not appreciated.

In Mathew 18:21, Peter asks the Lord how often he should forgive a brother who sinned against him. Seven times? No – seventy times that! Jesus then tells a parable about a servant who owed his master, the king, ‘ten thousand talents’ – more than a million pounds. The servant, utterly unable to pay, faced the terrible prospect of being sold, together with his family and possessions. The king, with amazing generosity, cancelled the servant’s debt. (The king is a picture of God, and His tremendous grace in offering forgiveness – the opposite of what we deserve, and something we can never even start to earn.) The servant, however, was also owed some money, one hundred ‘pence’ (denarii) – a matter of pounds in our money. He roughly demanded that his debtor pay up. The debtor’s request for time to do so was harshly rejected, and he had him imprisoned! Tragically, the servant had no true appreciation of the king’s compassion. The challenge of the parable is this: are we like the unforgiving servant? If we truly know the Lord, we surely can’t be (see v. 35). But inconsistency and a tendency to unforgiveness lurk in all of us. We need to heed the Lord’s exhortation at the start of this parable, and reiterated elsewhere in the New Testament: “And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you” (Eph. 4:32).

Faithfulness to Christ

A hundredfold recompense: the earthly reward for loss of earthly comforts.

In Mark 10:28, Peter says to the Lord Jesus, “Lo, we have left all, and have followed thee.” The apostles had left their secular jobs, so this was no idle boast. Few of us may be called to take such a step, but the cost of true discipleship remains high (read Luke 14: 26-27 and 33). In Mark 10:29-30, Jesus responds by saying that the disciples will be recompensed in two stages, “now in this time” (an hundredfold!) and “in the world to come”. The loss of house or family is made up for by the hospitality, friendship and fellowship of a much larger spiritual family.

A hundred pound weight: the courageous devotion of a previously timid disciple.

We first read of Nicodemus in John 3, prior to his entry into the kingdom of God; and then in John 7:50-51. At some point between, he had evidently experienced the new birth of which Jesus had spoken to him (John 3:3-8). In John 7 he is a believer, but doesn't directly confess this. However, at the time of the Lord's burial (John 19:39-42), he identifies courageously with the cause of his crucified Saviour. Nicodemus was a very senior figure in contemporary society, and this was a major step for him to take. It was also costly financially. By bringing "a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight" to embalm the Lord's body, he shows the depth of his appreciation of the Lord Jesus Christ, as well as his association with Him.

Fruitfulness for Christ

A hundredfold yield: the result of the word of God sown.

The parable of the sower is another very well known one, found in the first three gospels. Luke's account reads: "and other fell on good ground, and sprang up, and bare fruit an hundredfold" (Luke 8:8). "But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience" (Luke 8:15). In verse 11, Jesus has explained: "The seed is the word of God."

A hundred measures of oil and of wheat: making friends for the future.

The parable of the unjust steward is found in Luke 16:1-13. A rich man's steward is facing dismissal, and realises he'd better prepare for life in unemployment. He therefore ingratiates himself with his master's debtors, by giving them massive discounts (20% off the wheat, and 50% off the oil!). His strategy is to make friends, who will offer him support when he loses his job. In a worldly way, the steward demonstrates wisdom. The meaning of what the Lord Jesus tells his disciples in verse 9 is, I feel, brought out very clearly in J. B. Phillips' translation: "Now my advice to you is to use 'Money', tainted as it is, to make yourselves friends, so that when it comes to an end, they may welcome you into eternal habitations." What is spent on others, in the Lord's name, may have consequences far beyond what we imagine.

I trust that our consideration of these biblical references to one hundred may be blessed by God.