

A WORD IN ITS SEASON

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THE BEARING THAT HEAVEN HAS ON THE DISPENSATION

Luke 3: 21-22

Acts 7: 54-60; 10: 10-16

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NJH I would like to speak together as to the bearing that heaven has on this dispensation. It commences with this mighty action of God in opening the heavens, first on the Lord Jesus. The heaven was opened! Being a companion of Paul, Luke would write with the assembly in view. We see the blessedness of this praying Man, Jesus, which is peculiar to Luke's gospel, and the Spirit descends on Him, a feature that should mark the dispensation, that we appreciate the Father's infinite delight in Christ in marking Him out.

In Acts Stephen saw the heavens opened; he would see Christ where He is, another truth that is meant to lay hold of those of the assembly - Christ where He is. And then Peter gets an impression, the heaven was opened there; and he would see the true place of the assembly. Whilst the sheet is not exactly a glorified thought it is taken up after it had descended three times and it remained in heaven. The assembly's position, dear brethren, is heavenly.

And finally the apostle Paul was caught up. What was given to the apostle was in a sense peculiarly for himself. God had been pleased to reveal His Son in him (Gal 1: 16); that was for the preaching of the glad tidings, the Word of God, but you get some special touch that the atmosphere of heaven came through in Paul's ministry. Therefore, I think that when God goes to such a length to open the heavens in these three cases He has got something particularly in mind for this family. I wonder if we could converse together in a brotherly way to draw from it, and draw our young people into it too. It is not just another church that is being formed by the Spirit; it is not something slightly better where people get on together, which we hope they do, but it is actually an atmosphere that is heavenly. There should come in to the local assembly that which is different, which is heavenly. That brings up exercises, because in the early centuries, probably about the third century, the heavenly aspect of the assembly was lost and that was because they gave up the purification by the water from the side of Christ. They did not maintain purity here, and therefore they lost the essential divine thought for the assembly that was heavenly.

JRW I am sure that it will lift our thoughts and hearts above what

might occupy us here, and give us a link with what is heavenly which would strengthen us. The scripture that you started with, referring to the Lord Jesus Himself, has been going through my mind as you have been speaking; He says in John, "no one has gone up into heaven, save he who came down out of heaven" (chap 3:13), and then he finishes by saying, "the Son of man who is in heaven", which would really support what you are saying as to what is heavenly, but perhaps something that can be enjoyed down here.

NJH Yes, exactly. It is not only that He was of heavenly character, but He never ceased to be heavenly. I think that is very precious to remember, that divine things are never brought down to this world's level, but persons are secured out of it. That is what struck me, persons have been redeemed with heaven in mind. Redemption for Israel was in God's mind; they proved the protection of the blood, the Passover lamb, and they are going out of Egypt and through the Red Sea. But Moses laid hold of it in his song, Exod 15. The final thought was that there is an objective in the divine mind in redeeming His people.

JW Was the heaven opened in Luke 3 to express its delight and pleasure in Christ? I wondered if that is confirmed by the Holy Spirit descending upon Him and the voice coming out of heaven.

NJH It was the first assertion as to heaven being opened. There was now Someone in place that the blessed Holy Spirit could come down on restfully. There was never such on earth before; God looked for it, there was not even one! And here is a Man praying; Luke's gospel is very precious; it is the priestly gospel, and it says, "having been baptised and praying": what a delight to the Father! And He asserts His power, opens the heavens; it as if He says, 'I have got one Man here, a blessed Man, who can be anointed by the blessed Holy Spirit'.

PJW I was wondering if you could say a little more as to prayer, because in the first three scriptures the three persons were praying.

NJH Prayer is our access to the presence of God. I think we should be praying more. And God sees that! He says as to Saul of Tarsus, "behold, he is praying", Acts 9: 11. There is more record of Paul praying than of any other apostle. It was an attitude of prayer that Saul of Tarsus was in.

PJW So it was characteristic?

NJH Yes, I think so, a praying man.

DAB Are you thinking that, when we speak about prayer, it is not only that we are seeking access to the presence of God, but prayer also brings God in. does it not, or I might say brings God down into the situation where His people are?

NJH Yes, that was what happened here. The Lord Jesus was praying and the heavens were opened. It was not after He prayed but it was as He was in that attitude of prayer that He brought God into the matter. Have you got more to say?

DAB I was reflecting on how precious it must have been to God to have the prayers of Jesus going in: the prayer going in brought God out!

NJH Yes, what He covered we are not told. In this gospel He prayed all night before the choice of His apostles (chap 6: 12, 13); think of that, spending a night in prayer, going over each one. Think of the holy emotions between Christ and the Father, going over the eleven and then speaking about Judas, who He knew from the beginning would deliver Him up. He spent the night in prayer, dear brethren; how could you sustain that? But He could! The piety of Christ was unique, and here immediately the heavens were opened; I think it is the power of God to identify the uniqueness of Christ, the praying Man, and the blessed Spirit descended, the Person of the Spirit descended.

PM Was it the first time there was a Man in total accord with heaven? There was nothing to hinder.

NJH Yes, and “the Holy Spirit descended in a bodily form as a dove upon him”. It was the first time that the Spirit had been seen. We know of course He is never incarnate, but it is “as a dove”. It is something special, the embodiment of the Spirit coming on Christ; He was so precious to God that He opened the heaven.

PM In this setting the Spirit is not sent; He could not help but come!

NJH Yes, and later it says He fell, the same word as Luke 15: “the Holy Spirit fell” on them in Cornelius's house (Acts 10: 44); and the Spirit was delighted. But here in Luke 3 you might say with holy reverence that you can refer to the emotions of the Spirit, that He could not withhold coming upon this blessed Man who was praying; the reference is, “baptised, and praying”.

RHB He is distinguished in Corinthians as “the heavenly one”, but the apostle goes on to speak of “the heavenly ones”, 1 Cor 15: 48. You

have said what the saints are in the mind of God, but help us as to answering to that in practicality, what brings heavenly character into expression. I suppose we may be conscious of not being up to our heavenly calling when we should be.

NJH Well, I would say the first thing is you are dependent on the Spirit, because the Spirit brings what is heavenly into the saints. I believe the heavenly side is formed in the saints by the Spirit; He comes from heaven, and He leaves with the assembly. But I think what was said already about prayer opens the whole matter for us. Christ did not need the anointing; it did not change Christ personally. He did not need baptism although He identified Himself with the faithful remnant; how gracious of the Lord. The anointing changes us, and we need it so that the right order of man is presented in testimony, the new man, but I think that is how it comes.

RHB That was said to the saints at Corinth, “such as the heavenly one, such also the heavenly ones”; the conditions that he had written about in Corinth were anything but heavenly, but he reminds them of what they were in the mind of God, and labours to bring that about in practical expression.

NJH I think as you are occupied with what is heavenly you will become changed. When you sit down at the Supper and you look round the brethren there you think of all that they have come through in faithfulness to Christ, the suffering that has entered into every heart, because they are already heavenly before the Lord comes in. The Spirit is in persons, forming them after Christ; He is forming Christ in us, and I think prayer will get you away from being occupied with yourself, and through prayer you realise you have a link with what is above. That is what Stephen had. Stephen could say, “receive my spirit”. You say you are not equal to that. Stephen laid hold of that thought; he says, “receive my spirit”; he was in complete accord with Christ where He is. Now that is where we are brethren. It is said that Mr Stoney rose up in the room in Park Street in London and said, ‘Brethren, you are heavenly; act like it! We are heavenly, act like it brethren!’ (see also JBS vol 2 p246). And I think if we get occupied with the opened heavens it will help us.

DJW I thought it was interesting that the one hundred and twenty in the upper room, “gave themselves all with one accord to continual prayer”, Acts 1: 14. That was the company upon which the Holy Spirit

came at Pentecost and it sets the dispensation forward.

NJH Yes, they were ready for it. We are not dependent enough. Prayer is an evidence of dependence. You cannot do things of yourself; you are not able for them, but you are dependent, you pray, and God comes in. Every heart should go back to the last experience that it had, when God came in through prayer.

JRW It says of those persons that were converted at the beginning, “they persevered in the teaching and fellowship of the apostles, in breaking of bread and prayers”, Acts 2: 42. That really supports what we are saying.

NJH That is good! It is clear that not only the beginning of the dispensation in Acts 1 was marked by prayer, but in Acts 2 the continuance requires prayer, and that is making room for God to come in, dear brethren. There are a lot of burdens; we need God to come in.

JB It seems as if this was a continuation of the prayer, that the communication was from the Father to the Lord Jesus Himself, “*Thou art my beloved Son*”.

NJH Yes; “praying” is present tense; that helps. It would come through in testimony to them too, “This is my beloved Son”, Matt 3:17. But here it is just confirmation to that perfect obedient life. The greatest weapons that Jesus had were His dependence and obedience.

QAP The Lord Jesus tells us in Matthew 5 that the heaven is the throne of God, v 34. Does the thought of rule, and the love of God and blessing in government too, help us in our understanding of it?

NJH In Daniel, “the heavens do rule”, chap 4: 26. The earth was His footstool there, was it not? So the idea of rule is there; it controls everything, and while the world goes on independent of God, and because it is independent and lawless in the sight of God, we want to be a dependent people and an obedient people here; and I think this is the way to it.

DB When Daniel knew that the writing was signed he went in to pray, “as he did aforetime”, Dan 6: 10. It was not something he commenced just when he needed help; it was characteristic of him.

NJH Exactly, and it was three times a day. That is a good thing! I know the value of it. It is good to commit yourself to prayer three times a day, morning, noon and night. You have got your family prayer, but your

own prayer has to be maintained to be here dependent on God, and as has been said, to bring God in.

DAB God has always maintained His right to administer to the earth. I was thinking of "the bread of heaven" (Ps 105: 40), for example. There is an unbeliever in the Old Testament who says, "if Jehovah should make windows in the heavens" (2 Kings 7: 2), as if there were not any, but there are! I like what you say; now the heavens are opened for the Spirit Himself to come.

NJH Yes, the Spirit comes down, and there is the power now to maintain all that comes in through the opened heavens; that is what I understand. And I want to get the gain of that.

AJMcK Does heaven remain open?

NJH Hebrews has been referred to as 'the book of the open heavens', JT vol 61 p76. In principle it is open to us; the trouble is we do not use that access as we should but the access is available. It is God that opens it.

AJMcK I was just thinking about the Spirit coming; the Spirit is still here, and you cannot think that heaven will be closed on a scene where the Spirit is dwelling. And I wonder whether what we are saying as to prayer really brings it in to relationship with an already opened heaven because what Stephen says is, "I behold"; he sees it.

NJH Yes. And that is in the face of the rejecters, those that were guilty of the crucifixion of Christ, and are now rejecting the testimony of Him glorified. Stephen was in liberty with what was in heaven. I think that is very beautiful.

PJW In connection with that, in Matthew 11 it says, "Jesus answering said", (v 25), and it has been asked what He was answering. But it has been said that He was in constant communion; there was always something from the Father, and He "answering said, I praise thee, Father, Lord of the heaven and of the earth". I was thinking about what has been said as to the heavens always being opened, and it is a question of whether we take advantage of it by constant communion. Mr Darby said, 'I dread great activity without great communion', Collected Writings vol 16 p240. It is a test, is it not?

NJH Yes, that is it exactly; it is only opened to dependence and for communion. If I have got my own mindset and opinions, this has the

effect that heaven is not opened to me, but the principle is there, and it is a wonderful thing. The heavens were closed to the wise and prudent; you could tell that from Matthew 11; the wise and prudent did not have access to the heavens, but they are open to those that are dependent and looking to God, and He will surely answer that request.

RJF Does the veil of the temple teach us about access to heaven? At the time that the Lord died, it was rent in two from top to bottom (Matt 27: 51), and that gives an illustration of the way that God shines out in love. He is able from His eternal habitation to shine out in love. But now we have access “through the veil, that is, his flesh”, as Hebrews brings out, chap 10: 20. So that there is that which is opened and that which we are able to go through in the power of Christ.

NJH Yes, that is an interesting reference. Of course in one sense we go in because of Christ's Person rather than His work, but His work remains, and it was the basis for God to come out. What was shut up to Israel is now open. God was justified first by the death of Christ, and He came out, so the veil was rent, and this gives liberty; “through him we have both access by one Spirit to the Father”, Eph 2:18. I think we should just lay hold of the kingdom of the heavens; for us that means Christ where He is, and the Spirit here; so there is a whole area of things opened up for us, but it is opened to the state of the individual. I am not saying the local assembly does not know it, but it is available, it is there; God has come out, and it is for those that come into the good of it. I think, by showing this praying attitude, dependence on God.

DJW You said at the outset that the Lord Jesus was always the heavenly Man, although coming into manhood. Now this statement in Luke 3 is before His public service: “*Thou art my beloved Son, in thee I have found my delight*”, so that He was always in communion with heaven. Is that how a heavenly man operates here?

NJH Yes, that is right. Why do you make the difference? You were saying it is before the Spirit comes down.

DJW I wondered if heaven took account of His private life, speaking reverently, how He was from day to day. It was a delight to heaven to have that kind of dependent Man here.

NJH Exactly, and we know very little of the first thirty years, but there is just a small window open to show the perfection of the natural growth, at twelve years old, the perfection of it. But it was always a dependent

manhood. He trusted in God from His mother's breasts, (Ps 22: 9); how dependent that order was. It was unique!

MJC The oblation was mingled with oil before it was anointed with oil, was it not, Lev 2: 5, 6? There is a sense in which the Spirit of God indwelt Christ from the time when He was here, but then He descended publicly upon Him at the beginning of His service, did He?

NJH Yes, I think the anointing is primarily a Levitical touch, but you need the Spirit for serving; so He took that place. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit; it was a holy manhood, perfect manhood; it was all a oneness of perfection! What can you say about it! Beautiful contemplation! But He went that way for public service; He was anointed. As we know in one gospel He waits until John the baptist completes his testimony before He comes in Himself; that was the diligence to follow the Levitical role: I think it is very beautiful. And here He is an order of man that is special; the anointing did not change Him; He was perfect through and through, the mingling was there. But with us we need that the anointing, otherwise we will come out in the wrong spirit, we will say hard things, we will be marked by the wrong things that are not in keeping with a heavenly man. But I think if the Spirit is made room for it will change what is expressed amongst us. Why should we have as in Galatians, the attitude of biting and devouring, Gal 5: 15? It is not in keeping with the anointing. We must be faithful, but we should not be ostracised for being faithful; we must be faithful, but everything should be done in the spirit of the anointing.

JW Would it be right to say that God will only anoint what is of this character of manhood now? The Spirit does not come upon the flesh, does He? The things you mentioned are things of the flesh; the anointing can only be identified with what is of this character of manhood.

NJH Yes. The anointing could not come directly on the flesh; it was on the blood. The blood was put on the ear, the thumb of the right hand, and the great toe, Lev 8. The whole person was affected by the death of Christ, the redemptive, powerful effect of the way Christ went and it is only on the blood that the oil was placed; so it is not after what I am but what Christ is. There was the spirit of obedience marking them; at the beginning they were obedient, they were praying, and God answered that in the coming of the Spirit.

KJM Yes; I think that is very helpful. I have been thinking as you have

been speaking as to faith, that that underlies it. You speak of a heavenly view, and what is heavenly, but we need faith to apprehend that. I was thinking of Abraham, he waited for a city, (Heb 11: 10); he saw something that was outside his present circumstances, but it lifted him to something that God would have in mind for him, v 13.

NJH Yes, that is good. Abraham is a great type; young people should look at the history of Abraham and Lot and find out what motives they had, who received the promise, who received communications. Well, Abraham got it, and he had faith, he laid hold of it; so we need to do that.

Just to go back a moment to where we were speaking about the Spirit, it is clear that when you receive the Spirit God puts you "in Christ"; so right away that settles your heart. You cannot work up to things; Israel tried to work up to things but only got so far, then the Levites got a bit further, and then the priests got a bit further again: in Christianity you start from the top! When you get the Spirit you are put in Christ - I think that is wonderful - and the Spirit comes here, and He forms that order of man in me. I need formation, but I am already placed there; that is to be laid hold of us, brethren!

JW Is the anointing something further than receiving the Spirit?

NJH Why do you say that? You are applying it to us?

JW Well, I was thinking it was possible to have the Spirit, but it may not be that the anointing is in evidence. The anointing is more a public thing, is it not? Is the Spirit put upon a person? You might receive the Spirit but the anointing is the evidence of the Spirit being upon a person, a person's movements in the power of the Spirit, do you think?

NJH There is a difference between the Spirit as God's gift and our receiving the Spirit, but I would think it would be normal, if you are in a state to receive the Spirit, that you would come out in that character, the anointed character. It is public as you point out; it is something that is seen. When the leper was anointed he would go back through the tribes; they would look at him, and there would be a shine about him. He was anointed, and he was making his way through the tribes; so it would be something that would be seen outwardly. But I think it would be normal that if a person had received the Spirit that he would come out in that character.

JW I think that would be normal, yes. I was just thinking the

Corinthians had the Spirit but there was not very much evidence of the anointing, was there?

NJH No, there was not. I know we have to accept we are in Corinthian conditions, but I do not like to accept that as normal. I think we might have Corinthian conditions where there is mixture and the mind of Christ is not laid hold of. The mind of Christ was there, but they did not use what was available.

JW I think we have to keep to what is normal, but these things are not necessarily automatic. I know that Paul referred to the Corinthians as the anointed vessel, the assembly; that was the divine thought for them.

NJH Well, they had the Spirit; the Scriptures are written particularly for those that have the Spirit.

PM Does Stephen show us what is normal? He was full of the Holy Spirit; there was nothing to hinder the Spirit, and it came out in the features of the anointing in the public expression.

NJH It seemed normal at the beginning; it says of some that they were full of the Holy Spirit. We should be exercised to be moving towards that; nothing of self, nothing of the flesh, occupation entirely with what we are having today, heaven, where Christ is.

PM Is it not so that the more place I give to the Holy Spirit inwardly the more there will be the expression of the anointing publicly?

NJH That is right exactly. It is full sway: He is not grieved.

RHB You said that when you receive the Spirit we are placed in Christ. Is it also true that, when we receive the Spirit, Christ is placed in us? I was thinking of the reference that Paul makes to the Corinthians. We have been speaking about the Corinthians; he says to examine themselves "that Jesus Christ is in you", 2 Cor 13: 5. I thought in this passage you read as to Stephen what comes out is the Spirit of Christ in him, not only looking into heaven but praying for the forgiveness of those who were murdering him.

NJH Yes; they "saw his face as a face of an angel", chap 6: 15. There was something heavenly there, something of heaven shining out, which is why the Spirit has come, to form that order of man in the saints. He must do it!

RHB It is a very profound thing that that Man in all His perfection, of whom you have been speaking, should come into the character of the believer. I just wonder whether the immensity of that has laid hold of my own soul.

NJH Exactly, and that is why I said that it was a powerful operation on behalf of God to show what was intended that the Spirit should come.

AM In the passage in Luke, and in this one, He is referred to as the Holy Spirit, truly contrary to all that we are as nature; but there is that formed in Stephen which He could relate to.

NJH That is good, because it is entirely opposite to the moral conditions around and, we have to admit, the moral conditions which are in ourselves. Through divine work we are transformed. The emphasis is on the Holy Spirit.

JRW I just wondered if you had more in mind as to the detail that comes out here; "having fixed his eyes on heaven, he saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God". He saw the heavens opened, and saw the Son of man standing at the right hand of God. Do you have any impression of the detail of what was there in heaven?

NJH Do you not think that was divine grace in testimony to the Jew; in the Son of man standing? At first he says, "the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God"; what confirmation of what is there! That dear man was about to lose his life here in the world, but he commits his spirit to the Lord: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit". I think what you say about the detail is interesting: He is the Son of man; He is available to all as the Son of man.

DAB Has it been said that he was standing ready to return?

NJH Yes; you mean if Israel received Him?

DAB Yes; He is not presented as sitting as later on. I am only thinking how available heaven is. It might be said that the people were in such a dark state, and yet the grace of heaven is manifested even in the posture that the Son of man has!

NJH Yes, good, in His readiness to act. Oh, the feeling of heaven! Oh, if only Israel would change! The guilt of the death of Christ upon them, the wonderful grace of God was towards the nation, God in grace follows the Jew through the Acts. Finally, the Lord is viewed as sitting,

and He is waiting now in this wonderful dispensation in which the assembly is formed.

JB I was just thinking of the detail, he “fixed his eyes on heaven”; there was the gnashing of teeth going on all around him, but he “fixed his eyes on heaven”. Would that help us now that we must have our eyes fixed on heaven?

NJH Yes. It is away from everything else according to Hebrews 12; you look unto Jesus and you look away from everything else, v 2 note *d*. I think generally we would accept that we need to fix our eyes and find that there is a whole order of things that God wants to reveal to us - Jesus where He is!

RMB When he describes what he saw he does not refer to the glory of God does he? What would you say about that?

NJH He says, “the right hand of God”. It is establishing the position that Jesus has now, because the world had not seen Him after the cross. His own saw Him after resurrection, but the world never did, Israel never did; but here God opens the heavens to give this testimony. It was a final testimony to the nation because they rejected a humbled Christ, and now they rejected an exalted Christ. They are very responsible; so He is at the right hand of God. He is in another scene where He is accepted, the Man has arrived, Christ where He is; that is wonderful to our hearts.

RMB When it speaks about what he saw, he saw two things, “the glory of God and Jesus”, but when He describes what he saw he refers only to the Son of man, because that was the new thing, was it not? The Jews would not be surprised to know that the glory of God was in heaven, but the new thing was that there was a Man there.

NJH Exactly, as Son of man He is available to all. What a Saviour!

RMB I thought the point that you made earlier as to the consequences of receiving the Holy Spirit is worth underlining particularly in connection with the question as to how we become heavenly practically, because it seems to me that it is a great moment of realisation when we understand that as a consequence of having received the Holy Spirit I am united to the Lord Jesus where He is; that is a tremendous matter is it not to lay hold of.

NJH Yes, because in the death of Christ new links are formed. In the

Jordan, our natural links are broken; now our link is with Christ where He is.

RMB You referred in your opening remarks to what is distinctive to this dispensation; that is completely new, is it not? To think that as a consequence of receiving the Holy Spirit I am united to the Man who is at the right hand of God ought to have a profound effect on my walk and ways.

NJH So the mystery, that is Christ above and the body here, was actually true at the beginning of the Acts, but the truth gradually came out. Saul of Tarsus got something into his soul at this point which became formed when Christ spoke to him directly in chapter 9, but I think we should see this whole order of things is now proceeding: the opening of heaven had a dispensational view.

QAP In John 5, the Lord Jesus says that He has been given authority to execute judgment because he is Son of man (verse 27); but I wondered if what Stephen says here as to the Son of man would have been a comfort to him. Paul elsewhere refers to the Lord as “the righteous Judge”, 2 Tim 4: 8. Stephen was in extreme suffering at this point, but he had a view of Christ that would have reassured him, do you think?

NJH Yes, exactly, and then Christ was the Man that has been appointed to rule the habitable world; He is already set according to the mind of God to take over the control and rule of the whole universe.

In chapter 10 Peter beholds the heaven opened. It says in verse 9, “Peter went up on the house to pray, about the sixth hour”; praying came in again. And then the heavens were opened, “he beholds the heaven opened, and a certain vessel descending, as a great sheet, bound by the four corners and let down to the earth”; it happened three times and it was taken up. He needed this view of the assembly. We have rich thoughts as to the body of Christ and the assembly. On Lord's day morning we were looking on the glory of Christ, the brilliant glory of Christ; and then as we were taken up with that we found that the assembly was in glory also with Christ, and that is a terrific thing to think of! Well, that is not exactly what we have here, but the sheet was still taken up to heaven; it was for Peter's help that he had this view, that cleansing had to take place. But on Lord's day morning you get a sense of the one that can be united to Christ in glory, and that is a very blessed thought, very wonderful.

AJMcK In this section, the note to the word “behold” says ‘view with attention’; can you open that up in the light of what we said about Stephen fixing his eyes? Help us please as to how we fix our attention on this.

NJH I am glad you mentioned that because it comes back to Hebrews 11 as the great faith chapter, and all the individuals that are there express faith. Then we come to “the leader and completer of faith”, that is, Jesus, and it says, “looking stedfastly”, (chap 12: 2); the note is ‘looking away from other things and fixing the eye exclusively on one’. It is worthwhile to have your vision exclusively on this Person. There is nobody greater in the universe. God has put rule in the most attractive Person in the universe! The Person that will rule the world to come can rule my life now, and He is so great that the more I look at Him the more I am changed: I absorb something of “the glory of the Lord”, 2 Corinthians 3: 18. Now Peter is viewing with attention this heavenly vessel.

JRW Sometimes it is good to consider things that are repeated in the Scripture; it is good to read about the way Paul repeats his account of his conversion. When Peter recounts this matter, he says first of all, “it came even to me”, Acts 11: 5. The blessing of what had happened had laid hold of him, and maybe that is something we should each take to ourselves as we are speaking over these things, that these things have come “even to me”; but then he says, “having fixed mine eyes, I considered”, v 6. So he contemplated what had come before him, and do you think there is blessing and formation in that?

NJH Yes, “having fixed mine eyes I considered”. I suppose Daniel was marked by that; the visions that came to him he considered. If you are reading scripture or ministry, if something strikes you God is working. Peter is considering; he fixes his eyes and could say, “I considered”.

PJA It says in verse 19, “But as Peter continued pondering over the vision, the Spirit said to him”. I just thought it linked on with what you were saying, the Spirit coming in.

NJH Yes, that confirms us. I say to the dear young people, the Spirit of God is working in the hearts of persons who are simply opening the Word, or reading the ministry; He will confirm it in your own soul.

DAB There is something very practical about this, is there not? The

Holy Spirit spoke to Peter about the diversity in the sheet. Diversity bothers us naturally; it creates a lot of friction and difficulty, quite apart from the sort of religious difficulty Peter had. But we need to ask the Holy Spirit to speak to us about these things so that we realise that “we being many are one loaf” (1 Cor 10: 17); our view should change.

NJH I think what you say is right; there was diversity, but there was nothing common in the sheet: it was all cleansed; that is the effect of the work of Christ. But hold to the thought that God has had to do with these persons, and that the sheet was caught up; it was not left down here for Peter to feed on down here. He was to feed on what was in the sheet: “Rise, Peter, slay and eat”. He could appropriate the saints as worked on by God, but they were still in the sheet. The sheet was drawn up the third time into heaven; nothing fell out. This was to help Peter as to the reception of the Gentiles.

RHB How do we appropriate the saints?

NJH Well, I would say, feed on their good points!

RHB The contents of this sheet were edible; that is the word, “Rise, Peter, slay and eat”. Nothing that God had cleansed would harm him; he could eat it with a good conscience but it would be profitable, would it not? It should exercise us to cultivate the company of heavenly persons.

NJH I would agree with that, but the things in this sheet do not seem like a normal diet. You may get some of these things if you go to some Asian countries, but we do not have this in our diet! But if you start to appropriate what is wrong in your brother you will find that he cannot appropriate what is in you; that is important. We should look for the good things that we can appropriate in one another and eventually we will be able to say, 'That is Christ'.

PJW And do you think I should be exercised to be palatable to my brethren?

NJH Yes, but these things are harmless. A person without the Spirit does not know what we are talking about when we say we are appropriating one another, but the love for the body of Christ means that there is something in the saints that you can appropriate, and it should be evident in us. We would each be exercised whether we are giving that; are we allowing that edible material, moral material in my soul for the saints to appropriate?

RHB There may be a tendency to feed on, and converse over, what is unprofitable, but there was something that God's people were not to eat. After God had touched Jacob's thigh, the children of Israel did not eat of the sinew that was over the thigh, Gen 32: 32. There are things in each of us that have necessitated the discipline of God in His ways with us, and they are inedible and unprofitable to feed upon in ourselves and in others, are they not?

NJH The permitted creatures of Leviticus 11: 21 were the insects that had legs that could leap; the people could eat those that could leap. So there is some evidence in the saint that has got power to leap. They could appropriate the man in Acts 3 because he was leaping; they recognised that there was something springing up in that man's soul that was not natural and something that they could appropriate. I think that is why the insects that could leap were clean to the Israelite. But there is such a variety; they are not normally in our diet, but to spiritual persons they are lovable: if you love Christ you must love the body of Christ.

MJC It says the man in Acts 3 was “walking, and leaping, and praising God” (verse 8), but the people saw him “walking and praising God”, verse 9. The leaping represents something that was not evident to the natural mind, is that right?

NJH Exactly, and he held on to Peter and John. You might say there were three persons with something springing up in their souls! We should look for the leaping in one another, and that is what we appropriate.

JW I was wondering if Paul really got this view in referring to the Corinthians. He speaks of what they were, but of what God had done (1 Cor 6: 11): He had cleansed them, and I wondered if that is what enabled him to serve the saints in the way he did, by getting that view?

NJH Yes; he had to start from the standpoint of persons that were free in their links, the house of Chloe (1 Cor 1: 11) and so on, who showed him things, but he worked from the standpoint that there was something approved in the place.

JW I was thinking how Paul speaks of what they had been and what they were; but also what they had become, and what God had done: He had cleansed them. I wondered if, having that viewpoint of the saints in Corinth, he was able to serve them effectively as he did, and I wondered

if we are to serve one another it is essential to have that view.

NJH Yes, "ye have been washed, but ye have been sanctified, but ye have been justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of God".

DJW So the Holy Spirit would only draw attention to the heavenly Man and draw attention to what is of that Man in the saints.

NJH Exactly, that is all that heaven feeds on. God no longer sees us in flesh: we are in Christ; that is what we are, Rom 8. We have got a new state; that is the wonder of it! It involves a new state in the believer, and God does not look at us any more in the flesh; therefore He is either looking at Christ personally, or what is formed in us by the indwelling Spirit.

DJW Therefore it comes back to the point of how much room I give the Holy Spirit.

NJH Yes; He needs full control.

We will just have a short word on Paul's experience in 2 Corinthians 12. He is caught up to the third heaven, to that extent, and it is into paradise. It is remarkable that the apostle had such an experience. He had had it fourteen years before; he had kept it that time. Yet it must have fashioned his thinking. He could not tell what he heard; he says that he heard unspeakable things said which is not allowed to man to utter, but it must have had an enormous effect on him that it was an elevation that had not been known. There was not a parallel to it: we cannot go beyond the third heaven, and the devil cannot get in there. Satan cannot get into the third heaven, but the saint can. He is a man in Christ; he is not saying 'Paul', or 'I' here. We would have to say that Paul was very special, both in his love for Christ and his moral experience here; but it is to the third heaven, reserved for the saints.

JRW Is this experience possible today?

NJH Ah, we would not be able for it! But we know something; we must know a little of it, but this actual fact of caught up to the third heaven, it was fourteen years he carried it. He did not say just two or three weeks ago; it was a special experience he had which was for himself: that is the point. I think this experience was for Paul himself. How could he lead us into the great heavenly truth of Ephesians if he

had not something in his own soul of this experience?

JRW Yes, what is open to us is to enter with boldness into the holy of holies by the new and living way, Heb 10: 19. Now I do not know how far that takes us in relation to where Paul went but that is something that is very blessed and open to every believer, is it not?

NJH I always think the holy of holies is moral perfection; that is how I view it; we can prove the immediate presence of God in it. But here it is the third heaven.

RHB Say something about the expression “a man in Christ” in that connection. What does that convey to you?

NJH Well, he says, “I know a man”; it is not ‘the’; it is “a man in Christ, fourteen years ago”. It is the experience he had. I think it is more than association with Christ. We touch that at the service of God: we are associated with Christ, but I think this third heaven involves elevation.

PM He goes on to say that he was caught up into paradise. Could you help us as to the distinction?

NJH Well, the third heaven involves elevation, and paradise is the delightful atmosphere that pervaded the whole matter. What do you think?

PM That is helpful. Our Lord Jesus fills every heaven, but I wondered if paradise would also link with the sphere of complacency with Christ.

NJH Yes, that is a good way to put it. It is given in the promise to the overcomer in Ephesus, Rev 2: 7. But I just think, “whether in the body or out of the body” was a special experience. I know the Spirit’s help is within, and we express ourselves; our bodies are used to express ourselves in the service to God, but “whether in the body or out of the body”: I am not sure that I know anything of that.

DAB It has been pointed out that Paul says nothing about what he saw. We are so easily looking for something to see, are we not? But it is simply what he heard, and I accept what you say about the distinctiveness of this experience, but in a sense if God speaks it has this character, does it? This is the character of heavenly speaking; it has that exclusive power to it.

NJH Exactly; yes, it always has. The apostle had that experience,

and he kept it for fourteen years, and then after the experience, “that I might not be exalted by the exceeding greatness of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn for the flesh”, to keep him from being exalted. So there is something very special about this I would think.

MJC This is a very mysterious reference really, because paradise is the part and portion of those who have departed to be with Christ, is it not? As he says “in the body or out of the body I know not”, it was something which was almost indescribable in its intensity and experience. I was thinking of the malefactor, “Today shalt thou be with me in paradise”, Luke 23: 43.

NJH Yes, that was a disembodied state, which Christ was only in for a short while. But it has been said, and I think it is based on this scripture, that love's communications continue to those that are with Christ; that must be paradise. They cannot enter into the worship of God: that will come. They will receive their body of glory, but up until then there are holy communications between Christ and His own as in paradise.

Maidstone

6th February 2016

Key to initials: -

P J Alexander, Twickenham; D Bailey, Maidstone; R H Brown, East Finchley; R M Brown, East Finchley; D A Burr, London; M J Cook, Folkestone; R J Flowerdew, Sunbury; N J Henry, Glasgow; J B Ikin, Manchester; A Martin, Buckhurst Hill; P Martin, Colchester; K J May, Maidstone; A J McKay, Witney; Q A Poore, Swanage; J R Walkinshaw, Maidstone; P J Walkinshaw, Strood; D J Wright, Havering; J Wright, Witney

THE VICTORY OF JESUS

John A Brown

Matthew 12: 18-21

John 19: 17-18 (to “crucified him”), 28-35

1 John 5: 1 (to “God”); 4-5

Romans 8: 34 (from “It is”) -37

At our recent meetings in this room on Thursday evenings, we have been speaking about a victory - Joshua's conquest of the land of Canaan. Chapters 6-12 of the book of Joshua are a very interesting narrative, telling of how Joshua and the children of Israel came into the land that God had promised them. There were battles to be fought and victories to be won; the people who were there already were to be dispossessed. But it struck me that in Joshua 13, there is a list of cities and territory that Joshua did not conquer, v 1-6. We learned much from the victories that we have been reading about and the way that God used them; indeed they were really Jehovah's victories. But, as always happens, the type falls short because after all of these victories, there was still a considerable amount of land that was still in the hands of the Canaanites and the Jebusites and other tribes. So the victory of the people of Israel under Joshua, although we learn much from it, was incomplete.

I have been thinking of the way in which Jesus came into this world, and the way in which He went to the cross. What a victory that was! It did not look like a victory, but in fact it was, and it is, a complete victory. In the gospel, God would present to sinners the results, the fruit of that victory. In going the way that He did, the Lord Jesus opened up the way into the presence of God as a Saviour God, made Him known as a God of love. Through faith and belief in that blessed One, God's beloved Son, and in repentance, all men can have part in that complete victory. It was not partial. We are so used to what is partial; even the best of men's endeavours will always result in what is only partial. But what Christ has done, the victory that Jesus has won, is a complete victory. How was that going to be won? Was it going to be won in a great display of power, with mighty acts that persons will be awed by? You may remember that in the invasion of Iraq, an attack called 'shock and awe' tried to use the power of munitions to overcome the country, but what happened? There was a victory, but it was not a complete victory, and the results are still causing trouble. Dear friend, the way in which God worked at the cross of Jesus secured a complete victory; not

one that the world would recognise as such, but a victory that was indeed complete.

I read in Matthew about Jesus, this blessed One in whom God has made Himself known to His creature. These words were spoken by God through the prophet, but they are very like the words that the Father Himself used when Jesus came, thirty years old, to the Jordan to be baptised. The Father's voice was heard from heaven and the gospel writers record what He said. It was very like these words which had been given hundreds of years before to Isaiah; "Behold my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, in whom my soul has found its delight". These few verses spoken through the prophet encapsulate the whole of the period of time when Jesus was on the earth, right from the time when He was born. Think of the Lord Jesus coming into this scene as a Babe! We have been speaking about the mighty acts of men. Mr Darby refers to the comparison, the contrast between how man would operate and how God has operated, in his hymn:-

Nor yet in triumph passing,
But human infancy! (Hymn 188)

There is nothing weaker or less powerful than a baby, and yet in that Infant there in the manger in Bethlehem, God had this One of whom He would be able to say prophetically, "Behold my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, in whom my soul has found its delight". God had before Him in the birth of Jesus all that He wanted in man. He grew up as a Boy, and there are many boys here in this room. He grew up as a young Man, and there are many young men in this room. Jesus was your age once. At thirty years old, this prophecy was effectuated; "I will put my Spirit upon him, and he shall shew forth judgment to the nations." The Spirit came upon Him at the Jordan when He was baptised.

We hardly know anything about the life of Jesus before then; it had been one of obscurity. It certainly was not remarked on by the historians of the world. Even all that Jesus accomplished in His public service passed without notice in the histories of the world of that time written by the Roman historians. There is a paragraph of about four lines by Josephus, one of the Jewish historians, which remarks almost as an aside that at this time there was a man called Jesus who did good deeds, was condemned by Pilate to be crucified, yet who was reported by His disciples to have appeared to them alive again after three days; it might be said, a footnote in history.

That is how God came into this world:

Nor yet in triumph passing,
But human infancy!

That blessed Man grew up in obscurity under the eye of God, and every footstep of His gave God delight.

I want to present to you in all its appealing character the way in which God has come near to us in the form of a blessed Man. There is nothing to repel in the way in which Jesus came in such lowliness. It was in God's purpose to do it that way. God came into the world in Christ, and He touched humanity at its lowest point as a Babe in a manger. Then as Jesus came to the Jordan, He submitted Himself for righteousness' sake to the baptism of John the baptist, and the Father, as it were, could not restrain Himself and said these blessed words "*Thou art my beloved Son, in thee I have found my delight*", Luke 3: 22. The Father had already found His delight in every day of these thirty years until that point. Then the prophet goes on to say, "He shall not strive or cry out, nor shall any one hear his voice in the streets". Jesus did teach, of course; we read in John 7 this afternoon about how He cried, "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink" (v 37), but He was not there to change this world. You think of all the words and the communications that are generated by an election campaign; Jesus did not approach people in that way. He came as a blessed, lowly Man. He spoke to people; He did good works; He cured people who were ill, blind and lame. "He shall not strive or cry out, nor shall any one hear his voice in the streets." It was that lowliness and that way of approaching persons that made Him so blessedly attractive to those whom He gathered round Himself.

Then "a bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench". People would say, 'Someone like that is never going to achieve anything'. Someone who does not project Himself, someone who goes on in that lowly and humble way: to the mind of man, that will never do anything. My impression was that this is completely contrary to nature, but it was God's purpose to come near to men in that way. He came in the form of a blessed lowly Man who was, and is, His Son. It says at the end of verse 20, "until he bring forth judgment unto victory; and on his name shall the nations hope". There is a future meaning to that verse; the Lord Jesus will be vindicated when He comes to this world again. But I want to speak about the way in which He did "bring forth judgment unto victory", and the basis of that was the cross. It was

a victory like no other victory. Publicly it was just another crucifixion. I suppose the Romans would be crucifying criminals all the time. It was what they did with those who had transgressed the law. These soldiers who took Jesus and crucified Him as we read in John 19 would have done it before. "And he went out, bearing his cross, to the place called place of a skull ... where they crucified him".

Think of all that Jesus had done in these three and a half years since His baptism, since the Father had spoken these wonderful words, "*Thou art my beloved Son, in thee I have found my delight*", Mark 1: 11. We know the gospel narratives well; He had done nothing but good, but He had been rejected by those to whom He came. The Jews could not understand Him. You can see that in the scripture we were reading this afternoon. The natural mind just could not understand Him. 'Who is He?' 'What is He saying?' "Some said, He is a good man; others said, No; but he deceives the crowd", John 7: 12. The natural mind did not know what to make of Jesus. Then through the jealousy and the hatred of the Jews, just the evening before this account in John 19, He had been taken by the Jews who had paid Judas to betray Him. Think of what Jesus suffered in Gethsemane as He anticipated what lay before Him, but He went through with it all. Blessed, lowly Saviour!

Dear friends, if there is anyone here who has not been personally attracted by the blessed lowliness and yet the greatness of Jesus, I trust that something of what I am saying will make an impression on your heart. This is not a creed; there is essential truth that we get from the Scriptures. There are truths about the Person of Christ which are precious to know and to hold, but the essence of the glad tidings is that God is presenting to you His Son as your Saviour. If you have not come to Him before now, God is giving you an opportunity to come in repentance and put your faith in Him, and come to it that you need this blessed One.

Men generally, at the time that we are speaking about, came to the conclusion that they did not need Him. They did not want Him; they cried out in rejection. It was an awful thing for Jesus to listen to these cries of rejection; "Take him away, take him away, crucify him", v 15. He had heard them say that, and now they do it: "where they crucified him". Oh, the immensity of what these words convey! The Lord of glory, the Creator of the universe, allowed Himself to be taken by wicked hands and nailed to that cross, and He hung there to be scorned and jeered at. He allowed it to happen. As He said before, He could have had twelve

legions of angels, Matt 26: 53. He says indeed in verse 36 of the previous chapter, "My kingdom is not of this world; if my kingdom were of this world, my servants had fought that I might not be delivered up to the Jews; but now my kingdom is not from hence". Dear friend, if you have never been attracted in the depth of your soul by the blessed lowliness and attractiveness of Christ, come to Him tonight. Maybe it will not be for the first time: it may be that you have already believed in Him, but there is something in the way in which God would present the Lord Jesus in the gospel that is designed to attract our hearts to Him.

So that we see the way in which God's love towards us was there in Jesus and in what He did and what He bore in His sufferings. John speaks of some of them here, and the other gospel writers speak of all that was upon Him, the way in which the Jews taunted Him and the soldiers mocked Him. But then there came these three hours of darkness when the Lord Jesus bore the whole weight of God's judgment against sin. He bore my sins then; I trust that you can say that He bore *your* sins. That darkness is not recorded in John's gospel but it happened just before where we began to read again in verse 28. He bore in these three hours all that stood between man and God, and during that time, He said only one thing, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?", Matt 27: 46. At the end of these three hours, He uttered that cry and He was not answered then. Jesus was forsaken by God, and in that time of forsaking He bore God's judgment against sin, He absolutely exhausted it. He bore my sins in His body on the tree, on that cross. I trust that you can say, dear friend, that He bore your sins, and that you have come to know who He is - not only Someone that gospel preachers who you have listened to all your life have spoken about, not only Someone who you hear other people speaking about, but Someone who you know yourself. In all His lowliness, Jesus would reach out to you tonight and appeal to you. You may already believe in Him, and I trust that everyone here does. If there is anyone here who has never been attracted to Christ before, then let Him draw you, as it says in that lovely verse. "with bands of a man, with cords of love", Hos 11: 4. These cords and bands would be used by God in the gospel, drawing persons to Christ as a Saviour, a Saviour for sinners.

And so it says here that Jesus knew "that all things were now finished". Matthew and Mark tell us of the hours of darkness and the forsaking. There was yet the shedding of His precious blood, and I read verse 34 because the way in which His blood was poured out is so important. He still had to be laid in the tomb by loving hands; we spoke

in the reading about Nicodemus and Joseph burying Him. Then there was to be His resurrection; I will speak of that later. But “Jesus, knowing that all things were now finished, that the scripture might be fulfilled ...”; He had borne all that stood between man and God; He had borne all that stood between me and God. Can you say that? Can you come into the presence of God and lift your heart to Him in thanksgiving that you are there as a forgiven sinner, and more than that, as a justified sinner, as someone on whom God can look and see Jesus? He does not see the sinner because my sins are gone. I trust that yours are gone through faith and belief in this blessed One, and through repentance. If that is so, then you can come into the presence of God on your own, without a cloud! I trust everyone here knows what it is to come into the presence of God on your knees individually, and to nestle in your own enjoyment of the love of God which is towards you personally; because Jesus has taken away all that stood between you and a holy, sin-hating God. This is what it cost Jesus. “When therefore Jesus had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished”. Mark speaks of a loud cry: “Jesus, having uttered a loud cry, expired”, Mark 15: 37. John says here, “having bowed his head, he delivered up his spirit”. I say reverently, that was all; and yet in that act, in giving Himself, in going into death, He won a victory that was absolutely complete.

I thought of David, and how, when he went into the valley against Goliath, Saul gave him his armour, but David said 'No, I cannot use this', and he put it off because he had not tried it. He took five smooth stones from the brook and with one of them he killed Goliath. He killed him with one stone from his sling. It was accurately aimed and brought that giant down, and then it says that he ran and he took Goliath's own sword, and he cut off Goliath's head with it; it says he “killed him completely”, 1 Sam 17: 49-51. That is a type of what Jesus did on the cross. There was no outward sign of struggle, because Jesus went into death in power. He did not go into death in weakness, although it may have seemed that way. We sang:

Through weakness and defeat
He won the meed and crown; (Hymn 24).

This is “the word of the cross” that Paul speaks of at the beginning of the first epistle to the Corinthians (chap 1: 18); the death of Jesus was foolishness to men. They might have asked, 'How will that work? What will that accomplish - another crucifixion among many? What does it mean?'. Oh dear friend, for those in the knowledge of who this blessed

One is, and of all that He has done, and all that He was to His God and Father, we know what was accomplished there as we read these words, “having bowed his head, he delivered up his spirit”. So the hymn we sang goes on:-

Trod all our foes beneath His feet,
In being trodden down.

He Satan's power laid low;
Made sin, sin's reign o'erthrew;
Bowed to the grave, destroyed it so,
And death by dying slew.

What a wonderful thing it is that the power of death is gone. I was thinking of the scripture in Joshua where the ark goes into the Jordan and the priests' feet entered into the water; it says that the Jordan turned back (Ps 114: 5), and “stood and rose up in a heap, very far, by Adam”, and that the waters “were completely cut off, Josh 3: 16. There was no partial stopping of the water; it was a complete thing, and that represents the completeness of the victory which the Lord Jesus accomplished in going into death.

I trust that what I am saying means something to you. I can tell you that it means something to me, and I know that it means something to many in this room, but I trust that what I have said about the Lord Jesus means something to you individually. It is not just to be what you hear other people speaking about, or your parents talking about, or even what you read in the Bible - although I would encourage you to read about Jesus in the Bible, but Christianity at its core is a relationship between the Son of God and you yourself. There is much more than that because it broadens out, but that is the essence of it. It is knowing the Lord Jesus as a living Man. He was in death, He was put in the grave, and He was there for three days and three nights; then He rose again. It is a living Saviour about whom I am speaking, and it is a living Man that those who know Jesus and love Him can speak to, a blessed living Saviour who lives for us now.

So in 1 John 5 it speaks of, “Every one that believes that Jesus is the Christ is begotten of God”. Is that not wonderful? It is not just that you are entered on a list of people who have believed in the Lord Jesus: it is far more than that. There are books; God keeps books, He keeps records, but, “Every one that believes that Jesus is the Christ is begotten of God”. Then, “Who is he that gets the victory over the world,

but he that believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”. That was why John wrote his gospel. A long time after the event, when he was an old man, he decided, with the Spirit's prompting no doubt, to write another gospel. There were already three gospels in circulation because Matthew had written his and Mark and Luke had written theirs, but John wrote another one; and he wrote it so “that believing ye might have life in his name”, John 20: 31. God presents to you the One in whom you can have life. It is a wonderful thing to know these streams of living water that we were speaking about this afternoon in John 7, “out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water”, v 38.

I would like to speak of what John writes about here, being born of God - that is an amazing thing to know. There is something in you that does not belong to this world or to nature; it has been put there by God. It is His work. It starts with new birth; it starts before you even believed in the Lord Jesus. You were sitting in gospel preachings thinking that there is something that you needed to attend to here, feeling your conscience aroused, but not knowing salvation. I can remember that; I used to sit as a boy in this room, and I have a memory of brothers standing here, and speaking in a way that aroused my conscience. That is the beginning of new birth, something just working there. But then to be born of God - what a wonderful thing it is to see that God has worked something in you in faith and in belief and in life, and it is His. It is something that has its origin with Him; it is by the Spirit. Verse 4 refers to “all that has been begotten of God” - that is in everyone who has had that experience of belief and of life - “gets the victory over the world; and this is the victory which has gotten the victory over the world, our faith”. So dear young person, if you go out tomorrow and you are faced with a challenge when the world would say to you, 'Come along this way, come with us', then think of this: “For all that has been begotten of God gets the victory over the world; and this is the victory which has gotten the victory over the world, our faith”. What a power believers have - a gift of God. If you believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and you know Him in the way that I have been speaking about I do not just mean knowing about Him because you might have heard other people talk about Him, but knowing *Him*, believing in *Him* - then you can have this victory which is our faith. The victory is given in the power of faith and of the Holy Spirit.

Then in Romans 8, Paul writes, “But in all these things we more than conquer through him that has loved us”. Jesus has loved us; He loved us on the cross: “the Son of God, who has loved me and given

himself for me", Gal 2: 20. That is personal, it is individual, and it is true for every believer that Jesus had you in His heart even as He bore the wrath of God that I deserved, that you deserved. "But in all these things we more than conquer through him that has loved us". Paul says, "It is Christ who has died, but rather has been also raised up; who is also at the right hand of God; who also intercedes for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?". These are marvellous words. They were written by the apostle Paul, but could you write them, and mean them, and know that they are true of you? There is nothing complicated about them. We believe that Christ has died and then been raised up; that is the foundation of faith, that you really believe that Jesus is alive. He is living, and it is a wonderful thing to know that He intercedes for us as He is there at the right hand of God. He loves us; His love is an active and present and operative matter, and He is interceding for us. "But in all these things we more than conquer through him that has loved us."

May that be true of every one of us! The enemy was defeated at the cross; he is a defeated foe, but he would seek to do all he can to deflect persons from a living personal relationship with the Son of God. May we all prove what it is to be freshly attracted to our Lord Jesus Christ, and to "more than conquer through him that has loved us", for His Name's sake.

Linlithgow

21st February 2016

THE CHRISTIAN CIRCLE

Stephen McLaren

Acts 14: 19-20

1 John 3: 13-16

I know that we spoke a bit on Lord's day about the verses that I have read again in Acts, but reading them impressed me very much, considering this situation that is described. It is a very serious situation, with the climax of feeling against Paul, and the enemy seeming to have got his way. It would appear that Satan had achieved his object; they supposed Paul to have died. If that had been true, then the testimony as borne witness to by Paul would have ceased at that point. What made the difference was that the disciples encircled him. And that action struck me as very significant. The others, the opposers, supposed him to have died, but as to those who loved him it says, "the disciples encircled him". Clearly it was an action that was motivated by intense love, love for the apostle, no doubt for what he had spoken to them of and the truth he had brought to them. They encircled him; there were those prepared to stand in that position. No doubt Paul himself had been physically struck by stones, the direct object of persecution and of attack, but there were those who were prepared to step up and, so to speak, to share that with him, and to enter, in some measure, into the sufferings which Paul himself was suffering; that must have been motivated by love. The result of that was that God intervened in His mercy and Paul was revived, and he rose up and entered into the city. So I suppose you could say that it was as though Paul was walking in the power of resurrection and life. It would appear he had died, but it was a most remarkable situation. It seems to me a lot revolved round the action of the disciples. I know that it was in the mercy of God that Paul was delivered from the situation and was spared; it was necessary that he should be spared. His actual death would take place some time later in the ways of God. It was not the time for him to be taken but nevertheless it was a very desperate situation here, and I have to ask myself what my reaction would have been. Would I be prepared to stand up here and encircle the beloved apostle, take my place along with others who were of the same mind?

It would have been quite something if we consider Paul's aspect of this, to become conscious as he rose up that these disciples whom he loved so much and served so well, were surrounding him, and it

would be quite a thing for him to take account of. No doubt Paul greatly valued that expression of love! How much of his ministry was about the truth of the assembly, and the expression of Christ's body here, the circle of affection in which love was shared; how blessed a matter it is that there is a circle where love for one another is expressed. How good it is and right that it should be so! The Christian circle is that, and it is very blessed to experience the flow of love that circulates in the Christian circle; a circle where there are those who know that flow of love and are prepared to sacrifice themselves and put themselves in a position of danger if anyone is subject to attack; "the disciples encircled him".

I have noticed in reading through this book the many times it speaks of the affection of the brethren. I think we noticed it in chapter 13, when we spoke of the evident affection that was there in verse 3, "Then, having fasted and prayed, and having laid their hands on them, they let them go". I think we commented on the impression that it gives that there was great reluctance to be separated. It was necessary that they should depart from them for a while, though it was obvious there was a condition there where there was affection for one another to such an extent that they expressed their love in that way; "having laid their hands on them, they let them go". There is another reference elsewhere further on (the passage is well known), at the end of chapter 20, after Paul had spoken to the elders of Ephesus, where it says of them, "they all wept sore; and falling upon the neck of Paul they ardently kissed him", v 37. And there is another occasion further on when Paul and his company were only with difficulty able to take their leave of those who had accompanied them, chap 21: 1. I just refer to that as an aside; I think it is evidence of normal relationships in the Christian circle, and what we might say is normal would be expected; and that is what led me to John's epistle.

John says, "Hereby we have known love, because *he* has laid down his life for us"; that is the Lord Jesus, of course. But then he adds, "and we ought for the brethren to lay down our lives". That is a consequence of the effect in our spirits and in our hearts of that great action of the Lord Jesus. It should produce in us the desire to be counted amongst those whom John speaks of: "we ought for the brethren to lay down our lives". That is a question; are we prepared to do that? In the Acts it was evident they were prepared to do that. Where we began reading he says, "We know that we have passed from

death to life, because we love the brethren". In that scripture we read in Acts, death was just round the corner, you might say. But as to Paul himself and those believers there, I think you could class them amongst those whom John speaks of as he does here: "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren". Conditions of life are known as there is love in circulation, in expression. I think we would understand that when John speaks of the brethren he is speaking of all who are Christ's. We know that in the present circumstances we may not be able to express love so freely, perhaps because of the circumstances that prevail at the present time, but still our disposition is one of love: we love the brethren!

I trust that the thoughts on this scripture are clear enough and the brethren will see the link between where we read on Lord's day and this passage in John's epistle. I trust too that we may enjoy this expression of love in circulation, and in the circle where Christ is supreme. I thought too of the situation where the Lord Jesus was made the Centre in John 12, in the house in Bethany. There was a circle of love there in the household, and it says, "where was the dead man Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from among the dead. There therefore they made him a supper", v 1-2. In the circle of affection of which I am speaking, it is clear that the Lord Jesus always has the prime central place in all our thoughts, and in all our hearts and affections, and then love is expressed towards one another too.

I trust that the Lord will bless these thoughts to us.

Word in a Ministry Meeting, Dundee

2nd February 2016