

Devotional Messages

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PREFACE

The author has responded to invitations to conduct services in various country chapels and these *Devotional Messages* are prepared from the notes for those sermons. Therefore it may be that lay preachers, whose work commitments prevent them devoting much time to the study of the Scriptures will find this book helpful when preparing for their engagements.

Also it is hoped that they will prove useful for those who are “shut in” for these *Messages* can be used as a basis for private devotions.

Our prayer is that the Lord will bless those who read these articles and meditate upon the Word of God.

George T. Foster

DEVOTIONAL MESSAGES

George Foster was born in Reading in 1905 and educated at Reading School where he was a “scholarship boy”. There he studied Science and Mathematics and on leaving school took Actuarial examinations and qualified as a Fellow of the Institute of Actuaries in 1931.

In 1945 George Foster became Actuary of The Mercantile and General Reinsurance Co. Ltd and rose to be Deputy General Manager. In a distinguished career he has given lectures and prepared papers, some of which have been published in Actuarial and Insurance journals. He retired in 1969 and moved to Minehead.

Throughout the whole of his life, his living and active faith in the Lord Jesus Christ has sustained, strengthened and guided him and this is abundantly evident from his *Devotional Messages* which were compiled from his notes of sermons he has given in a wide variety of country chapels.

George Foster’s previous publication in the field of Christianity was the booklet *Signpost*, written in conjunction with Stuart Allen and available from The Berean Publishing Trust.

DEVOTIONAL MESSAGE No. 1

LAZARUS COME FORTH

READINGS

John 11:1-6
John 11:17-46
John 4:43-54

PRAYER

- (1) Give thanks for material and spiritual blessings received.
- (2) Intercede for those in need.
- (3) Pray for those in authority.
- (4) Pray for the ministry of the Word.

He cried with a loud voice "Lazarus, come forth". John 11:43

Songs of praise the angels sang,
Heaven with Alleluias rang,
When creation was begun,
When God spake and it was done.

This verse describes the drama of the creation, how God spake and it was done. God said "Let there be light" and there was light. God's power is seen in the story of the creation. And in the story of the raising of Lazarus, we observe that our Lord spoke, and it was done. He called out "Lazarus, come forth" and he came out of the grave, bound in grave clothes, but alive.

Surely, only God can raise the dead. Jesus Christ has another name. *Emmanuel* which means *God with us* and in the Person of Jesus Christ, we see God manifest in the flesh. As John puts it in John 1:1, 3 and 14:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God".

"All things were made by Him".

"And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth".

So we can understand the raising of Lazarus from the dead if we believe that in Jesus Christ we see God manifest in the flesh.

We in these days live at a time when it is the fashion to disbelieve the Bible, to find some other explanation that would discount the truth of the Scriptures and to explain away the miracles as though they were normal occurrences and not the work of God, Who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all we ask or think. We should face up to this question: Do we believe that Christ worked miracles because He was God? Or do we look upon Christ only as a good man?

If Christ did not do these miracles, and if Christ Himself was not raised from the dead, then our faith is vain and we are yet in our sins. We are of all men the most miserable (1 Corinthians 15:16-19).

So let us consider again the wonderful things that Christ did, and ask ourselves "Do we believe?".

May I remind you of two passages of Scripture? First, we read in Isaiah 35:4-6:

“ . . . He will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing”.

With this Old Testament prophecy in mind, surely the Jews ought to have expected these things to happen, and we also, knowing that Jesus Christ was the Messiah, should not be surprised when we read that the blind, the deaf, the lame and the dumb were liberated from their infirmities.

Second, we should bear in mind the explanation that John gives in Chapter 20:30, 31 of his gospel:

“And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through His name”.

I should mention that in John's gospel, the Greek that is translated “signs” in this reference is also translated “miracles”. The miracles recorded in John's gospel are called signs, which were given so that we might believe on Jesus Christ, accept Him as the Son of God, and have eternal life as a gift from God.

In John's gospel there are eight signs. These signs are:

- (1) Turning water into wine at the Marriage feast (John 2:1-11).
- (2) The healing of the ruler's son (John 4:46-54).
- (3) The healing of the lame man (John 5:1-16).
- (4) The feeding of the 5,000 (John 6:1-14).
- (5) Christ walking on the sea (John 6:15-21).
- (6) The blind man receives his sight (John 9:1-38).
- (7) The raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-54).
- (8) The miraculous draught of fishes (John 21:1-14).

Let us look briefly at these signs.

In the first sign, there was no wine and in the last sign, there was no meat. The marriage in Cana took place on the third day and the miraculous draught of fishes took place the third time the Risen Christ appeared to His disciples. Christ showed His Divine power over the elements as He turned water into wine and His control of living things as He supervised the fishing by His disciples. He provides meat and drink. He shows His concern for the daily needs and proves His ability to make provision. God knows our needs

and He is able to provide for us. Let us maintain our faith in God and in Jesus Christ as the provider of things we need.

The ruler's son was at the point of death. Lazarus had been dead for 4 days before he was raised from the dead. In each case, there was a delay of two days before action was taken. Here is a lesson as we look at the second and seventh signs, that God does not hurry, but He knows the right time for action. In the Divine record, there is no doubt that these things did take place. Indeed, had there been any doubt, the Jews would have indicated it, but all the Jews could do was to report to the Pharisees who were plotting against Christ so that He could be put to death. But some Jews believed in Christ in consequence of the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

The healing of the lame man (third sign) took place at the pool of Bethesda. The blind man (sixth sign) was told to wash in the pool of Siloam. In both cases, there was no dispute about the facts, that the lame man was healed and the blind man received his sight. However, the blind man was cross-examined in an effort to disprove the facts, but he replied simply: "Whereas I was blind, now I see". There could be no answer to this testimony. But in both cases, the Jews raised objections that the healing was done on the Sabbath Day. And for that reason, the Jews renewed their campaign against Christ and plotted to kill Him.

The feeding of the 5,000 using a boy's lunch of five barley loaves and two small fishes, shows how the Lord could multiply the food and provide for so many. When our Lord walked on the sea, He called out "*It is I*" which literally was "*I am*". This is the Old Testament name for God. *I am that I am* (Exodus 3:14). It was God manifest in the flesh Who walked on the sea. In these, the fourth and fifth signs, being the central ones, we see the almighty power of God, Who made the heavens and the earth, and Who has complete control over the elements He has made.

These eight signs are a challenge to us. Do we hesitate to believe that they really happened? Are such signs, or miracles, impossible for God to do? If we believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, God made manifest in the flesh, surely He had the power to do these things!

After the feeding of the 5,000 and after Christ had walked on the sea, it is possible that others wished to have these powers for they asked our Lord this question; "What shall we do, that we might work the works of God?" Our Lord replied: "This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him Whom He has sent" (John 6:28, 29).

But the Jews as a whole would not believe. They accused Him of blasphemy, because He said God was His Father and He was the Son of God. Our Lord said:

“If I do not the works of My Father, believe Me not, But if I do, though you believe not Me, *Believe the works*: that ye may know, and believe, that the Father is in Me and I in Him” (John 10:37, 38).

Our Lord placed great emphasis on the works He did. He claimed that the signs or miracles were the proof that He was indeed Son of God. Christ said the same to His disciples (John 14:11). If our Lord told both His disciples and the Jews to believe the works, and so accept the proof that He was God manifest in the flesh, should not we do the same?

Our Lord desires that we have His gift of eternal life. But to receive this gift, we must believe on Him. And the works are the evidence that He is the One Whom the Father sent into this world, that we might be saved.

Lazarus come forth. Lazarus came forth — he obeyed. Christ calls to us today. Do we hear His voice? Shall we obey? Let us obey and believe.

DEVOTIONAL MESSAGE No. 2

NOT THE WORD OF MAN BUT THE WORD OF GOD

READINGS

Nehemiah 8:1-12

Luke 24:13-27

36-47

PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

We thank Thee for the Holy Scriptures which we can read in our own language.

Thou hast preserved them for many centuries and we thank Thee for safeguarding them. May we read them for our learning, for instruction in righteousness, as well as for reproof and correction.

As we read the Written Word, may we be directed to our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Living Word, for whose sake and in whose name we present our petition. Amen.

Not the word of men, but as it is in truth the Word of God.

(For this cause we thank God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe. 1 Thessalonians 2:13).

This is Bible Sunday. What view do we hold of the Bible? How often do we read it? Do we read odd passages occasionally or do we make a systematic study of the Bible as we would study any other book containing deep truths? And we might ask “Do we understand it?”.

What is the Bible? It is a library of books, bound in one volume. There are 66 books, of which 39 are in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. When we read about the Scriptures in the Bible, very often reference is being made to the Old Testament although we use the term “Scriptures” to include the New Testament.

The Old Testament was written on scrolls, more than one book being contained on one scroll, so that there may have been 22 scrolls (or possibly 24). When our Lord referred to the Old Testament in Luke 24, He spoke of the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. The Jews divided the O.T. into these three groups, Moses being the first five books, the Prophets consisting of 8 scrolls including one scroll which contained all the minor prophets, while the Psalms include all the poetic writings.

When we study the New Testament, we find that there are 27 books which include the four gospels, the book of the Acts and the Revelation. In addition there are 21 epistles which fall into three groups of seven each. Seven epistles were written by John, Peter, James and Jude. Paul wrote seven epistles relating to the period covered by the Acts, but after Israel rejected their Messiah for the second time, Paul wrote seven more epistles to deal with the new situation.

In A.D. 70 Israel were dispersed and the Temple destroyed. The Times of the Gentiles began and we are still in that period, although some believe that this dispensation is drawing to a close and that the return of Christ may take place soon.

I must confess my belief in the full inspiration of the Scriptures. Paul writing to Timothy (2 Tim. 3:16) declared that all Scripture is

given by inspiration of God (i.e. is God breathed) and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be thoroughly furnished unto all good works. And Peter says in 2 Peter 1:20 that the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man, but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. The word translated “moved” in another passage is translated “driven”, so the moving of the Holy Ghost was a movement of great power.

Then, Luke 24 records that when our Lord talked with the disciples, He opened their understanding that they might understand the Scriptures. If the disciples needed their eyes to be opened after having been instructed by the Lord for three years, surely we must feel the same. The story of Philip and the eunuch links with this. The eunuch was reading the book of Isaiah when Philip joined him and Philip asked “Understandest thou what thou readest?” (Acts 8:30). “How can I” replied the eunuch “except some one guides me?”. Philip began at that same Scripture and preached to him Jesus.

We also remember the prayer of Paul for the Ephesians that their eyes, the eyes of their understanding, might be enlightened that they might know the hope of their calling (Eph. 1:18).

We conclude that we can only understand the Scriptures as we receive the enlightenment by the Holy Spirit, although we must add that those who are called to be teachers of the Word of God can help us to understand the Scriptures and such men are used by the Holy Spirit to lead us into a greater knowledge of God’s truth.

We understand the Scriptures more easily if we take into account the times and seasons, the people to whom that message is directed, or as some have said, we need to read the address on the envelope. Our Lord gave an interesting example when He read from the book of Isaiah. Do you remember that Christ was in the Temple and He was given a scroll to read, but He only read a few verses and He stopped in the middle of a verse, and closed the book? (Luke 4:18, 19). Our Lord’s reading was:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He hath anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He hath sent Me to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord . . .”

and He closed the book and said “*This day is this Scripture fulfilled* in your ears”.

If He had finished the verse, He could not have said “This day is this Scripture fulfilled” because the rest of the verse was “and the day of vengeance of our God”. The day of vengeance or the day of judgment or the day of the Lord, was still future and a dreadful day it will be. But our Lord was careful to stop reading so that the times and seasons were kept in their place.

So to understand the Scriptures, we need to study God’s great redemptive plan and that study must surely include a study of God’s plan for Israel, through which nation it is God’s plan that all nations of the earth shall be blessed. As I understand the Scriptures, this will not happen until Christ returns in person, and then those nations which refuse to serve the Lord and worship Him, sending representatives to Jerusalem, will be punished by a lack of rain, or disciplined in other ways. No longer will Jesus be the Gentle Jesus meek and mild, He will rule with a rod of iron and we remember the words “Thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel”. We have only to read the book of the Revelation to realize how severe God’s judgments will be, and how Christ will become King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

But the Bible shows that God’s redemptive plan extends to a wider sphere. We read of Jerusalem on earth and also the heavenly Jerusalem. We read of the heavens and the heaven of heavens. We read of Christ’s presence on this earth and also of His manifestation in glory with the church which is the Body of Christ. We read that all things will be gathered together in Christ, both things which are in heaven and things which are on earth.

However, let us not forget that God’s redemption comes to each one of us as individuals. The Son of God loved me and gave Himself for me. In Christ, we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our sins. God so loved the world — yes — but whosoever believeth, that means me. It is a personal salvation. I suppose that we could summarise God’s great plan by saying that He loves each one of us so much, that He wants us to live with Him for ever. And He wants to live with us.

Living with Christ begins here and now. Christ’s words still come with power. “Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). And if we need help on our pilgrimage, the Scriptures point the way. “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path” (Psa. 119:105). The Bible gives us light for each day, if we spend time to read the Scriptures.

“Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not to thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths” (Prov. 3:5, 6).

Whatever problems we may have, if we lay them before the Lord in prayer, He will show us the right way. The more we read the Scriptures, the more light shall we receive. Paul told the Colossians (Col. 3:16) to “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom.” Indeed, if we lack wisdom let us ask God and He will give us the wisdom we need. So will He help us and guide us throughout the journey of life. God is concerned for our well being. Peter put it very simply (1 Pet. 5:7) “Casting all your care upon Him; for He careth for you”.

Each one of us is sometimes worried about a problem. Paul’s advice is:

“Do not be overanxious, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:6, 7).

What does the Bible mean to us?

- (1) The Bible is the Word of God and it leads us to Christ, Who is the Living Word’
- (2) The Bible gives us comfort in affliction.
- (3) The Bible, through the Holy Spirit, will guide us each day.
- (4) The Bible shows us that God has a great plan of redemption and it shows us that each one of us has a place in that plan.
- (5) And the Bible shows us how greatly God loves us.

The Bible is the *Word of God*

It is not the word of man. It is the Word of God that works effectively in us, who believe in Him.

DEVOTIONAL MESSAGE No. 3

HE SAVED OTHERS — HIMSELF HE CANNOT SAVE

READINGS

Matthew 27:19-50

John 3:14-21

PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

We bow in gratitude and humility before Thee as we remember how much our Lord Jesus Christ suffered for our sakes.

We think of the cruel nails and the crown of thorns. We remember the mocking and the scourging which He endured, and His death on the cross. But we believe it was for us that He hung and suffered there.

We thank Thee that we are saved by grace, rather than our own works. We rejoice that He saves to the uttermost those that come to Him in faith.

As Thy Word is preached and the Gospel is proclaimed, may many receive the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Hear us for the sake of our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

He saved others; Himself He cannot save. Matthew 27:42.

The text is taken from the words of those who mocked our Lord as He hung on the cross, but although this was said in derision, there is a profound truth in the statement. There is a saying that many a true word is spoken in jest and it is true that although Christ is the Saviour of men, He could not save Himself from death, if He was to become this Saviour. God is all powerful, and yet there are some things that even God cannot do. For example, God cannot lie (Titus 1:2) and He cannot deny Himself (2 Tim. 2:11-13). Here we have another example of something that even God could not do. As the Saviour, He could not save Himself, although He was Son of God.

First, let us remind ourselves of the death of Christ and see Him once more as He suffered for our sakes on the cross. At His trial, the High Priest used the strongest language. "I adjure Thee by the living God, that Thou tell us whether Thou be the Christ, the Son of God". To which our Lord replied "Thou has said" which is equivalent in our modern English to the reply "Yes, I am". Thus, He claimed to be the Christ, Son of God. He hung on the cross and over His head were the words written: "This is Jesus the King of the Jews". This was the accusation and the reason given for His execution.

But as they railed on Him, other accusations were made:

Those who passed by said "Thou that destroyest the Temple, and buildest it in three days, save Thyself. If Thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross".

The chief priests, scribes and elders said "He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He be the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him. He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now, if He will have Him: for He said, I am the Son of God".

The thieves also cast the same in His teeth.

There was darkness over the land for three hours and then our Lord cried "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" And He gave up the ghost which means that He died.

So the crowd, including the chief priests, questioned whether He was truly the King of the Jews; they did not believe that He was Son of God. If Christ had been able and willing to come down from the cross, they *might* have believed Him. But He did not do so. Had He the power to come down from the cross? Or was there some other reason why even He could not do so?

He saved others

The chief priests said that He saved others. Did they believe this? Or was this merely derision? What does this salvation involve?

When we speak of salvation, most of us are thinking about salvation from sin and its consequences. When Christ was born, His name was to be Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins (Matt. 1:21). When Christ spoke of the peril of offending little children, He added that “the Son of man is come to save that which was lost”. It was not the will of the Heavenly Father that one of those little ones should perish (Matt. 18:11, 14). Sin entered into this world when Adam and Eve sinned and unless God took appropriate action, mankind would be lost. Christ came to save us all. Is this what the chief priests believed? I doubt if this was their belief.

It is interesting to study the references to salvation in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke and to observe that the Greek word often translated salvation means soundness, or being made whole. For example, the woman with an issue of blood wanted to touch the hem of His garment for she said “If I can touch the hem of His garment, I shall be made whole” (Matt. 9:21). Literally, “I shall be saved”. Christ told her that her faith had made her whole. Literally, it reads “Thy faith hath saved thee”. Thus, this salvation was related to salvation from sickness of body.

When Christ and the disciples were in a ship, and there was danger of sinking, they cried “Lord save us, we perish” (Matt. 8:25). And the Lord rebuked the storm and the disciples were saved from peril. Peter tried to walk on the sea, but he took his eyes off His Lord and he cried, “Lord save me” (Matt. 14:30). He was saved and again this was salvation from peril. It is possible that the chief priests were thinking of salvation in a more limited sense. But it is true that our Lord was able to save in a wider sense.

Perhaps, the best illustration of Christ’s ability to save in the wider sense is given on the occasion of the healing of the sick of the palsy (Matt. 9:1-7). He was brought to our Lord on a bed, and as Jesus saw their faith, He said “Son, be of good cheer, thy sins are forgiven”. This astounded some of those present. And to prove that He could forgive sins, He then told the sick man to take up his bed and walk. So, whatever the chief priests may have thought when they said, “He saved others”, we know that His salvation included the forgiveness of sins as well as the healing of the body, and salvation from the perils of this life.

Himself he cannot save

Now we come to the problem why Christ did not save Himself. Let us remind ourselves of some of the things Christ said.

First, before He was betrayed, John's Gospel tells us that our Lord told His disciples of His forthcoming death, but He used language that they may not have fully understood. He began by saying that "The hour is come that the Son of Man should be glorified" (John 12:23-28). And after that, His soul was troubled. Christ uttered these words:

"What shall I say, Father save Me from this hour? But for this cause came I unto this hour".

Then He prayed "Father, glorify Thy Name". Could Christ pray to be saved from death? No. He came to give Himself a ransom for our sins. He could not turn back. He must go on to the bitter end.

Second, in Matthew 26:53, we read of the betrayal and how one of the disciples drew a sword to defend Him. But our Lord replied: "Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He shall give Me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then shall the Scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be?". Here again, we see that the Lord could not turn back, if our salvation was to be secured and the Scriptures fulfilled.

Thirdly, we remember that when Christ spoke of Himself as the door and as the Good Shepherd, He said that the Good Shepherd gives His life for His sheep. And He said that He had the power to lay down His life and to take it up again as we read in John 10:17-18.

Himself he cannot save? What is our answer? Could Christ have saved Himself? We conclude that Christ had the power to come down from the cross, had He wished to do so. But He could not complete His work on this earth if He used His power to save Himself. If He was to be faithful as our Saviour, He must remain on the cross. And for that reason He could not save Himself. He gave Himself, because He wanted to give Himself for our sakes and to bear our sins so that they may be forgiven. Here we see that Christ is faithful. We believe on the Lord Jesus Christ for our salvation, but our salvation depends on the *Faith of Christ*. Had He been unfaithful at this critical point, our salvation could not have been secured. We rejoice that He saves others, but He did not save Himself.

To conclude our meditation, let us think of the great revelation of salvation in its wider sense as shown in the later Scriptures. We must limit ourselves to a few but may we rejoice as we consider them.

“By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8, 9).

“Wherefore He is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him, seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25).

“Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

“. . . work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12, 13).

And lastly, let us take comfort from Galatians 2:20:

“. . . Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, Who loved me, and gave Himself for me”.

May the Lord help us so to live. Amen.

DEVOTIONAL MESSAGE No. 4

**LET THIS MIND BE IN YOU WHICH WAS ALSO IN
CHRIST JESUS**

READINGS

Philippians 2:1-11
Philippians 3:7-16

PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

We thank Thee for the examples of those whose lives are recorded in the Scriptures.

We remember the faith of Abraham and like him, may we accept and believe the Word of God.

We thank Thee for the example of Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles and ask that we may follow his example and learn from his ministry.

But most of all, we thank Thee for the example of our Lord, Jesus Christ. We ask that we may have the mind of Christ, and by Thy grace, may we be willing to do Thy will, and serve Thee acceptably all the days of our lives.

We present our prayer in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Head. Amen.

*Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.
Philippians 2:5*

As Christians, we all desire to follow our Lord and to reflect His likeness, so that those who come into contact with us may know that we belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. In this way, we can witness for our Lord and for our faith.

If our lives are to be raised to this standard, the first step is that our thinking shall be right. If our minds are reflections of the mind of the Lord Jesus Christ, then our actions should be like His and in accordance with His will.

However, we must admit that we are not always able to live up to this high standard and Paul himself wrote in his letter to the Romans of the war between the spirit and the flesh. He wrote:

“I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is my members” (Rom. 7:21-23).

But he thanks God that Jesus Christ our Lord will deliver us from this present body.

Our subject however is not the war that goes on in our lives, but rather to consider what Paul tells us about the mind of Christ and to consider other examples of those who tried to follow the Lord.

Men who have achieved much in their lives are usually those who concentrate their minds on their ambition. For example, the runner thinks only of how he can win the race. Before the race, he prepares by training and during the race, he does not look around to admire the scenery! He has the finishing post in mind and strives his utmost to get there first. His mind is active and his body is in subjection to his will.

The Christian race is rather like that. Our minds should be taken up with doing the will of Jesus Christ our Lord, and this should come before other interests. But of course we have to define what is the will of the Lord and that is a personal matter. We cannot generalise on such a question. What is the Lord's will for me may not be God's will for you. His plan for each one may be different and that is why we need the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Let us think about the example of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Before we meditate on the mind of Christ, let us first remember Who He was. He was God manifest in the flesh. The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. His name is Emmanuel, God with us. In Colossians 1:16 we read “By Him were all things created, that are in heaven in earth, visible and invisible . . .”. The mind of Christ was demonstrated when He came to dwell among us. There were seven stages in His experience which resulted from His willingness to do the Father’s will. These are set out in the reading in Philippians 2:1-11 but we can summarise them in the following sections:

- (1) He was in the form of God. He had the status of God.
- (2) He did not wish to hold on to the glory connected with His high position as God. He thought it not robbery, or a thing to be grasped at, to be equal with God.
- (3) He made Himself of no reputation. Literally, He emptied Himself. Although this is not explained fully, it is clear from what follows that He was willing to divest Himself of the attributes or characteristics of the God-head. (Today, man is insisting on his “rights” but Christ gave up His “rights” and took our sins on His back).
- (4) He took upon Himself the form, or status, of a servant or slave.
- (5) He was made in the likeness of men.
- (6) Being found in fashion as a man. He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death,
- (7) even the death of the cross. Thus He was willing to die as though He was a criminal.

Let us stop to realise that our Lord did all this for our sakes, because He loved us so much, and because He is our Saviour. Let us bow before Him with thanksgiving, in adoration and praise. What did our Lord see in us that He should do so much for us? How greatly must He have loved us and desired that one day, we should live with Him in the glory that shall be hereafter. This was the only way to ensure our salvation.

But His humiliation will be followed by His exaltation. This is described in seven steps:

- (1) God has highly exalted Him.
- (2) He has given Him the name above every name.
- (3) At the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow.
- (4) Things in heaven,
- (5) Things in earth,
- (6) Things under the earth
- (7) and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

The time has not yet come for His exaltation but we know from the book of the Revelation that one day, He will receive His rightful place and the song of praise is recorded in that book. "Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever. Amen" (Rev. 7:12).

Paul followed the Lord Jesus Christ faithfully and in Philippians 3 Paul records seven things he was willing to regard as loss in order that he might receive seven gains. Those gains begin with the words "That I may win Christ, and be found in Him". He was pressing forward in the Christian race and we will consider this attitude later.

But now, let us look at other references in this epistle to the mind which we should have. What should our thoughts be? The Greek word translated "mind" is associated with thinking. There are four examples which are worthy of our attention.

(1) Paul thought about the Philippians and his mind was concerned with their spiritual welfare.

The Philippians thought about Paul and they were concerned with his material needs.

Thus, in Philippians 1:6, we read that Paul was confident that He which had begun a good work in them would perform (or complete) it until the day of Jesus Christ. He said that he longed after them, they were in his heart, and he prayed that their love might abound and that they might have spiritual discrimination. In the last chapter, verse 10, Paul said that he rejoiced that their care (or thought) for him had flourished again, and the following verses make it clear that the Philippians had sent him a material gift to help Paul in his afflictions. Paul was glad, not only to receive the gift, but to have their fellowship in his time of trial. He calls their gift "an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable and well pleasing to God" (Phil. 4:18). How grateful he was for their loving gift!

So, Paul helped them in their spiritual affairs and the church helped him by sending a loving gift. What a fine example of the relationship between a church and the minister of the church!

(2) We find the expression "Be of the same mind" or of "one mind" in this epistle.

In chapter 2, verse 2, Paul writes “Be like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind”. We should be lowly in mind, esteeming others better than ourselves. Do all things without disputing. This was a warning that we should not be selfish or always expect to have our own way, especially in church affairs. And it seems that in chapter 4, verse 2, there were two people who had differed and were not at one with each other, not of the same mind. He says “I beseech Euodias, and beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord”. So even in this church which had sent a loving gift to Paul, there was some trouble that Paul tried to mend by asking these Christians to make up their differences and be at one, to be of one mind in the Lord.

(3) Then in chapter 3, verse 19, there is a warning that we should not allow our minds to be taken up too much with the things of earth. Those whose minds are completely taken up with earthly things are enemies of the cross of Christ. If we have the mind of Christ, our minds should be set on the things of Christ, set on things above (Col. 3:2) and not on the things of earth. We must all confess that there are times when our minds are taken up with earthly problems and this word of warning comes to each one of us, that our minds should be taken up with the will of the Lord and we should live in anticipation of that life which is to come. What is more important to us? It is to increase our worldly wealth or to please Jesus Christ our Lord? He gave His life for us. Are we willing to sacrifice for Him?

(4) Lastly we come to Paul’s desire to win Christ and to be found in Him. In your quiet moments, read Philippians chapter 3 again. There he explains his great desire to follow Christ and to win the prize. Then he exhorts:

“Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you. Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing” (Phil. 3:15, 16).

What an encouragement! As we endeavour to follow Christ, we have the promise that if we live according to the light God has given us, He will give us more light and knowledge so that we may become mature Christians.

So may the Lord help us to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Christ Jesus.

Let this mind be in us which was also in Christ Jesus.

DEVOTIONAL MESSAGE No. 5

THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY FAITH

READINGS

Romans 1:11-21

Hebrews 10:19-39 and 11:1

Hebrews 11:8-10 and 17-19

PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

As we enter Thy holy presence, we are conscious of our unworthiness. By nature, how far off we are from Thee! Our sins create a barrier which separates us from Thee. But we thank Thee that the barrier is removed and instead of being far off we are brought nigh to Thee through the shed blood of our Lord and Saviour.

We rejoice that we can enter Thy presence without fear, because we are justified freely by Thy grace.

Help us to live the life of faith.

We realise that if we are to live acceptably to Thee, we must be guided by Thy Holy Spirit, and must rely on the strength that only Thou canst give.

So we ask for Thy guidance, and for daily strength and wisdom, that we may glorify Thee day by day.

Hear us for the sake of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

The just shall live by faith. Hebrews 10:38

Our text occurs four times in the Scriptures. In the Old Testament, it occurs in Habakkuk 2:4 and it is quoted in Romans, Galatians and Hebrews. The doctrine of justification by faith is expounded in Romans, with emphasis on the fact that God is righteous and just in forgiving our sins. In Galatians, there is a reference to the faith of Abraham and an emphasis on faith. Hebrews emphasises the life of faith. So we could change the order of the words of our text to recognise these various aspects:

Romans says "By faith shall live *The Just*".

Galatians says "The just shall live by *Faith*".

Hebrews says "The just by faith shall *Live*".

Thus our text divides itself into these three sections.

First: The Just. Righteousness or justice is an attribute of God Himself. The first time we read of the just is in connection with Noah and the second occurrence of this word in the Old Testament is in Deuteronomy 32:3,4 which reads:

"Ascribe ye greatness unto God. He is the Rock, His work is perfect: for all His ways are judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and righteous is He".

Our God is a Just God. Who is like unto Him? As we think of our great, holy and righteous God, we ask if it is possible for a man to be just, for if so, he is like God and the Scriptures ask "Who is like unto Him?" We read that Noah was a just man and he walked with God. Was he an exception to the general rule? Or can we say that anyone who walks with God can be just? Perhaps walking with God is one test that can be applied and we may ask whether we are walking with God. What Paul does say in Romans about our position is quite clear.

Here are some quotations:

"There is none righteous, no not one" (Romans 3:10).

"All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

"By the deeds of the law, no flesh can be justified in His sight" (Romans 3:20).

How then can we be counted righteous, or just? The answer is found in the same context. Romans 3:22 tells us that the righteousness of God, which is by faith of Jesus Christ, is *unto* all

and *upon* all them that believe. We are justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. God declares His righteousness, that He may be just and the justifier of him who believes in Jesus Christ.

Our salvation therefore is by grace. By grace we are saved, through faith; and that not of ourselves, it is the gift of God, as we read in Ephesians 2:8,9. It is wonderful to realise that God has chosen us to be holy and without blame before Him in love (Eph. 1:4). Let us thank Him for His great love and for His grace.

We can never lose our salvation because it depends upon the *Faith of Jesus Christ*. God is *Just* in forgiving our sins, because the Lord Jesus Christ paid the penalty of our sins by bearing them in His own body on the cross. God has never said that our sins do not matter. But He has provided the means whereby we can be forgiven, while He remains just and righteous in forgiving us. Our part is to accept what He has done and believe that Christ died “for me”.

Second: Faith. What is faith?

Hebrews 11:1 says that faith is the substance of things hoped for; the evidence of things not seen. The word “substance” is difficult but it may help if we know that the Greek means substratum, or what lies under. It could be, and sometimes, translated “confidence”. The Greek word was used in olden days in a legal context to mean Title Deeds. Let us take a simple example.

Suppose a friend decides to give you a house in a distant town. You are handed the Title Deeds which are made out to you as owner. You are given the key of the house. You are therefore the owner of a house in which you have not entered; indeed, you have never seen the house. But you have the “substance” of the house because you hold the Title Deeds. One day, you may enter into possession of the house by living in it. God’s promises are like the house. By faith, we receive the promises but the full enjoyment and realisation of the promise is yet future.

Faith is the substance, or ground, of hope and the *proof* or evidence of things not seen.

Abraham is given as an example. Indeed, there are two references to Abraham in Hebrews chapter 11; see verses 8-10 and 17-19. Abraham believed God and his faith was counted as righteousness. Verse 17 says that by faith Abraham offered up

Isaac, although we know that in actual fact God prevented him from actually killing him. But Abraham believed that God was able to raise Isaac up from the dead “from whence also he received him in a figure”.

For faith believes what God has said
And trusts in Him that raised the dead.
For things that are not, yet shall be,
Faith laughs, and gains the victory.

Hebrews 11 gives a catalogue of those worthies who lived by faith. We find Noah in the list, and we have already mentioned him as being, according to the record in Genesis, a just man. Hebrews 11:7 says:

“By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith”.

We might say that Noah was fearful, but faithful.

Third: Shall Live. We now come to the life of faith.

In the verse from which our text is taken, there is a serious note of warning. “If any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him”.

Let us repeat that once we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour, our salvation can never be in doubt. But we can cause pain and grief to the One who is our Saviour.

Again, let us take a simple example. A parent loves the child who first comes into the family as an infant. The parent expects the child to grow up into a healthy adult in the course of time. But suppose the child fails to develop and grow in a normal fashion? Is not the parent grieved by the deformity of the child? God can be grieved if we do not grow up into strong and spiritually healthy Christians. If we draw back from the full acceptance of the responsibilities of the life of faith, then we become spiritually deformed and God cannot take pleasure in us.

One sign of such deformity is that we are not able to eat and digest food that is suitable for an adult. The following extract from Hebrews 5:11-14 explains this situation:

“ . . . for ye are dull of hearing. For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one should teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use, have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil”.

In other words, God wants us to grow up in the faith and in our knowledge of Him. And how can we grow?

We grow by taking exercise and by eating suitable food. Our spiritual food is the Word of God. Our exercise is putting into practice what we read in the Scriptures.

If we take regular spiritual food and try to live accordingly, we shall be living the life of faith, for we shall be trusting what God has said and living in the light of His Word.

So let us remember all those whose names are mentioned in Hebrews 11, who believed what God said to them and acted on God's instructions. May we be given grace and wisdom and strength, to live such a life.

In conclusion, let us refer again to part of the reading in Hebrews 10:

- (1) Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith. (We certainly need to pray and to walk with God).
- (2) Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering. (As we believe what God has said, we shall have confidence and this will help us to lead a consistent life of faith).
- (3) Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and good works. (Living the life of faith will help us to help others).

The *Just Shall Live by Faith*. So may we live, as the Lord enables us.

DEVOTIONAL MESSAGE No. 6

HE MUST INCREASE, BUT I MUST DECREASE

READINGS

John 1:6-8, 15-27

John 3:22-36

Ephesians 3:14-21

PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

We confess that in our hearts there is a love of self, and a desire to have our own way. How often, when we pray “Thy will be done” we are not completely sincere. Forgive us for our selfishness and help us to place ourselves unreservedly in Thy hands.

We commit ourselves to Thee and ask Thee to enable us to comply with Thy will.

Now unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.

He must increase, but I must decrease. John 3:30

Most of us like to have our own way. It is not easy to follow the wishes of others, unless they accord with our own ideas; but our Lord's example shows us that rather than to seek to have our own way, it is better to leave the choice to God. He said, "I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father who sent me" (John 5:30). He was willing to submit to the will of the Father and in Him we see the right attitude of mind.

Are we willing to humble ourselves, submitting our desires and manner of life to God? Can we truly say that we are willing to become less and less, so that Christ may be the first in importance? Or as the text puts it, are we willing that He shall increase while we decrease?

When we say that we are willing to give ourselves to God and serve Him, what do we mean? Are we holding back something? It is not easy to give ourselves completely to God without reservation.

Let us first look at the context and consider the ministry of John. Then let us look at the life of Christ on this earth and His example of humility. Then we will consider the humility of Christ as an example for us to follow. Lastly, to obtain a balanced view, we might ask whether the reverse might be equally true, and that in some ways we should increase rather than decrease. If this is so, how does this affect the truth of our text, or does this complete our understanding of it.

John was sent by God to preach and to witness. He was the forerunner of Christ, and he announced the coming of the Messiah. He was the voice of one crying in the wilderness "Make straight the way of the Lord" (John 1:23). John said that he was not the Christ but there was One who would come after him who was preferred before him, and John was unworthy to unloose the latchet of His shoes (see John 1:27). When John saw Jesus approaching, he cried "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

Later, there was a discussion between John's disciples and the Jews concerning purifying and they came to John to ask for his advice. They began by saying that Christ was baptising those who came to Him but before they were able to formulate a question, John immediately expressed his joy that Christ had come. He spoke

of Christ as the bridegroom and himself as the friend of the bridegroom who rejoices when he hears the bridegroom's voice. Then comes our text "He must increase, but I must decrease". It was John's responsibility to prepare the way of the Lord, to announce that He was coming, and to point to Him as Saviour and Messiah. So John introduced Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God. But after he had introduced Him, it was right that he should step back and lessen in importance so that Christ could take the prominent place. Christ is the Saviour and He came as the Messiah. He was the Lamb of God and the Son of God. He must therefore have the first place. As we read in Col. 1:19, He must have the Pre-eminence.

But while John was willing to step down, it is true to say that John lost nothing in character by so doing. Matthew 11:11 records that our Lord spoke of John in glowing terms. "Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women were there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist".

Now let us turn to our Lord's earthly life. While it is true that Christ must increase as He began His ministry on the earth and revealed Himself as the Messiah and the Son of God, we read in Phil. 2:5-8 that Christ was truly humble. Being in the form of God, Christ thought it not robbery (or something to be grasped at) to be equal with God. He made Himself of no reputation, taking upon Himself the form of a servant and was made in the likeness of men. Being found in fashion as a man, he humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

So then, we have to remember that while in His ministry, it was right for Christ to increase and to take the first place, and for John to lessen in importance; there is the other aspect that Christ was prepared to humble Himself to the extremity of dying the death of a criminal and He did this for our sakes.

How does all this affect us? If we are followers of Christ, should we not have the mind that was in Christ Jesus? Should we not show the same spirit of humility as did our Lord? If we have this humbleness of mind, we shall be willing to lessen in importance so that Christ may increase in our lives and personal witness. We need to be submissive to the will of God. We need to be humble as before God and also in our relationship with others. Shall we see how the Scriptures bring out these points?

“Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7).

“Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He shall lift you up” (James 4:10).

“Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God” (Eph. 5:21).

“Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves” (Phil. 2:3).

“Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering, forbearing one another . . .” (Col. 3:12).

“God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble” (James 4:6).

So then, we should be truly humble before God and before men. It should be our desire to place ourselves at God’s disposal so that our wills conform to His will. In the garden Christ prayed “not my will, but Thine, be done” (Luke 22:42). As we lessen in self esteem, in pride, and self will, so we desire that Christ’s will shall be operative in our lives. So He increases as we are enabled to pray “Not my will, but Thine be done”.

There is a paradox as we think of Christ, Who should and does increase, while on earth He humbled Himself, even unto death on the cross. Is there not a similar paradox as we think of ourselves? We should decrease or lessen: but can we at the same time increase? Indeed, should it not be our aim to increase? To increase means to grow, and it is surely essential that Christians should grow up from spiritual babyhood to spiritual manhood. As we grow in grace, we lessen in pride and self esteem. Our humility should not be like the humility of Uriah Heap whose humility was a mockery. Spiritual growth means increase in the knowledge of God and increase in spiritual strength. Peter wrote about growth in the following passages:

“As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby” (1 Peter 2:2).

“But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).

In writing to the Hebrews, Paul expressed his concern that they had failed to grow. They ought to be teaching others but they were still in need of instruction and teaching. He continues in Hebrews 5:13,14 “For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil”.

Paul spoke about growth when he wrote his letter to the Ephesians (see Ephesians 2:21 and 4:15).

Ephesians 4:15 reads:

“But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into Him in all things, which is the Head, even Christ”.

If we are members of the Body of Christ, the whole Body should grow and develop, each member supplying the needs of the others, being joints of supply, while the whole Body is controlled by the Head, even Christ. Each member needs to grow, or increase, in order that it may fulfil its proper function in the Body. But it only operates according to instructions received from the Head. So, in the Body of Christ, we grow, and we increase, and as we grow, we obey according to our ability the will of the Head, Christ Jesus.

On the one hand, we are followers of Christ; however it is also true that Christ should dwell in our hearts by faith (Eph. 3:17). If this is so, we shall become more and more like Christ as He dwells in us. We should be filled with all the fulness of God (Eph. 3:19). Our growth therefore depends upon the indwelling of Christ by faith. If Christ “takes over” our lives, then it is Christ who controls us. We have decreased so that Christ can have the first place in our lives. This is the paradox. We grow, we increase — we grow in grace as Christ “takes over”, but this involves the lessening, or the decrease of ourselves, the lessening of our pride, and self will, or the “old man”, or the “flesh”, until we live as God would have us to live. Surely, this is the meaning of our text to each one of us today. It means that we pray “Not my will, but Thine be done”.

He must increase, but I must decrease.

DEVOTIONAL MESSAGE No. 7

THEY PRESENTED HIM GIFTS; GOLD, FRANKINCENSE, MYRRH

READINGS

Matthew 1:18-2:15

John 1:1-14

PRAYER

1. Let us give thanks for all the gifts we have received, for health and strength, for daily food and clothing, for our families and friends, and for so many other gifts.
2. But even more let us give thanks for spiritual gifts, received through Christ, for the means of grace and the hope of glory. We give thanks for our salvation and ask for help that we may serve the Lord faithfully.
3. Let us give thanks for the Scriptures and pray that as we read and study them, we may grow in grace and in our knowledge of our Lord. Pray for all who faithfully preach the Word of God.
4. Let us intercede for others, especially those in any kind of need. Pray that many may hear the Word and turn with faith to our Saviour Jesus Christ.

They presented unto Him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. Matthew 2:11

The wise men offered gifts to the Infant born in Bethlehem, whose name was Jesus. Joseph and the mother of Jesus were poor. The Infant was born in a stable and there was need for provision of the daily requirements of life. Moreover, ahead was the long journey into Egypt. The gifts, including gold, were of immense value to ensure that daily needs could be supplied.

At Christmas, we make gifts to our near ones and our friends. At Anniversaries, birthdays, wedding days and at the time when children are born, we still make our gifts and convey our good wishes for the occasion. "What shall we give?" is a question we so often ask. Shall we look for something useful, something beautiful, something that will be liked and appreciated? Sometimes we "say it with flowers" for they are beautiful and lovely.

But to the person who receives the gifts, there is the matter of saying "thank you". Some do not find it easy to express thanks in a gracious manner, especially if the present is sometimes not exactly suitable. How can we say "Thank you for such a welcome gift" when we know very well that we just don't like it! But if the gift is obviously very useful and just what we need, it is so much easier to express our thanks warmly.

And we can be sure that Joseph and Mary welcomed the presents that were made to the young child Jesus. The wise men had seen the star in the East, they knew He was the One born to be King of the Jews and they came to worship Him. So they brought their presents to Him who was born to be King, gold, and frankincense and myrrh.

We too, at Christmas, remember that God gave us at this time his richest Gift, His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. Do we accept this Gift? Is the Gift of God acceptable to us? Our Lord also gave Himself for our sakes in His death on the cross. How do we react to this gift? Do we accept the gift of everlasting life?

As we read the latter part of the first chapter of Matthew and continue into the second chapter, we note various titles given to the young child:

“Thou shalt call His name Jesus: for He shall save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

“They shall call His name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us” (Matthew 1:23).

“Where is He that is born King of the Jews?” (Matthew 2:2).

And as there are three names, so there are three gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. These gifts reflect the names and titles of our Lord.

Gold is a gift suitable for a king, or one who will rule. We remember that in Old Testament times, when Pharaoh appointed Joseph to be ruler over the people in Egypt, Pharaoh put a ring on Joseph’s hand, and a chain of gold about his neck (Genesis 41:42). And the people heard the cry “Bow the knee” as Joseph rode in his chariot.

Frankincense is linked with the name Emmanuel; for in the Old Testament times, frankincense was used when offerings were made to God. And in the book of Revelation, we read that the angel with the golden censer offered much incense with the prayers of the saints, which ascended up to God. So incense is linked with the worship of God and typifies our prayer to God. Yes! at Christmas, we need to remind ourselves that it was God who was made manifest in the flesh.

Myrrh reminds us of Jesus Christ the Saviour, who was to die for our sakes. Mark 15:23 records how they gave our Lord wine to drink, which was mingled with myrrh, although our Lord refused to drink it. But at His burial we read in John 19:39 that Nichodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about 100 pound weight, for the burial according to the manner of the Jews. So myrrh reminds us of the death and burial of our Lord who is our Saviour. All this He did for our sakes. And He rose again and conquered death, so that we in our turn may share His glory.

We have noticed that a gift may be offered which is not readily acceptable. The most wonderful Gift was indeed rejected by the Jews as we read in the Gospels. In the Gospel of John, we read of the signs or miracles which were proof that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. These signs were given (John says in John 20:31), so that we may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, we might have life through His name.

Here are some extracts from John’s Gospel:

“My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me, and to finish His work” (John 4:34).

“I have finished the work which Thou gavest me to do” (John 17:4).

“What shall we do, that we might work the works of God?”

“This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent” (John 6:28,29).

Our Lord said that He was doing the work of His Father. The Father worked with the Son and through Him. The Jews boasted that they were the children of Abraham but our Lord replied that if they were Abraham’s children, they should do the works of Abraham. Christ said that the Jews did the works of their father, but their works were evil because their father was the Devil. The Jews wished to kill our Lord, they threatened to stone Him. So our Lord appealed to them, either to believe on Him because the Father dwelt in Him, or if they could not accept that, to believe because of the works that He did. But the Jews still rejected Him.

When our Lord was speaking to His disciples, He summarised the situation in these words:

“If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloke for their sin”.

“He that hateth me hateth my Father also. If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not had sin: but now have they both seen and hated both Me and my Father. But this cometh to pass, that the word might be fulfilled that is written in their law; ‘They hated me without cause’” (John 15:22-25).

So, the Son of God was rejected. This wonderful Gift, which rejoices our hearts at Christmas, even the coming of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, was not an acceptable gift to many who saw and heard the Lord Jesus Christ.

How many reject the Lord Jesus Christ today? Here is a Gift which surpasses our knowledge and thought. Surely we accept the Gift that is offered at Christmas? We believe that God gave His Son so that we may have eternal life. We rejoice on Christmas Day that this is the birthday of Jesus Christ and our hearts are filled with joy and gladness for through Christ, we have a more abundant life, and the hope that we shall share with Him the life yet to come.

The wise men brought their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. What gifts shall we offer at Christmastide? In the name of Christ, we may give our gifts to those in need. We may give gifts to the family, to our friends and with those gifts, we can send our

greetings and express our Christian love and good will. Furthermore, we may make an offering to the work of God.

We remember that Paul wrote very lovingly of those in the churches of Macedonia. They were poor, but they made a great effort to provide a gift, even beyond their means for it was a sacrificial gift. But what pleased Paul so much was the fact that, first, they gave themselves to the Lord, and then to Paul. So we ask ourselves just now, “Do we accept Him as our Saviour and Lord and then offer ourselves to the Lord, asking Him to accept us and use us in His service?” Is there any greater joy and happiness than a life devoted to the service of Him whom we love?

We love Him, because he first loved us.

The wise men presented gifts to Him, gold and frankincense and myrrh. We offer Him our gifts too, but our chief gift will be a life of willing service. We give ourselves unto the Lord.

DEVOTIONAL MESSAGE No. 8

THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM

READINGS

1 Kings 3:5-14
Proverbs 8:1-17 and 9:9-10

PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

We praise Thee that the Lord Jesus Christ is the true light, which lightest every man that comes into the world. We thank Thee that whosoever believes in Him will not abide in darkness.

Grant to us that we may receive light from Thee, and that we may learn the wisdom that Thou alone canst give.

May we receive enlightenment through the Holy Spirit and we ask Thee to reveal to us a knowledge of Thy divine will and purpose for us.

Deliver us from error. Help us to grow in grace and wisdom, and in our knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, in whose name we present our prayer. Amen.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Proverbs 9:10

Our text reminds us that our search for wisdom should begin with the fear of the Lord. The word fear does not mean terror or trembling. We need not be afraid of God if our sins are forgiven. Fear, in our text, means reverence. We bow before God and acknowledge that He alone is God, whom we should delight to serve. The search for wisdom begins as we make this acknowledgement.

As we think of the education of children, it is good to remember that we can help them to start their search for wisdom and understanding by teaching them the Word of God as found in the Holy Scriptures. Paul reminded Timothy of the benefit he received through his Godly parents who taught him so well. Let us refer to 2 Timothy 3:3-17:

“But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; And that from a child thou hast known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works”.

We see that the Scriptures not only make us wise unto salvation, they act as a corrective if we go astray, if we sin they reprove us, they lead us along the way of righteousness. And further, they prepare us so that we can lead a fruitful life of good works to the honour and glory of our God and Saviour.

“Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path”
(Psalm 119:105).

There are times when we are not sure of the right way. We are pilgrims of the night and sometimes the darkness is great. We need a torch to enable us to find the path. As we read and study the Word of God, we find that light is shed on the pilgrim pathway, and so we can go forward.

Whatever our place may be in society, we need wisdom. As we meet others in our daily life, we need discretion. Those in authority have an even greater need of wisdom. The example of Solomon as he took up the task of Kingship is a classic and we have read in I Kings 3:5-14 the story of the dream of Solomon. The Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream and said “Ask what I shall give thee”.

Solomon replied that he remembered how his father David had walked before the Lord in truth and righteousness and now he followed his father as King. But he felt inadequate for the heavy responsibility of kingship. He was as a little child. He was in charge of a great nation. He needed understanding so that he could judge fairly and discern between good and evil. This humility pleased the Lord and God gave him a wise and understanding heart. So much so, we now speak of the wisdom of Solomon.

We are not troubled with so great a responsibility as Solomon, but each one of us has his or her problems in daily life and we may well emulate Solomon and ask God for the gift of wisdom.

James says:

“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord” (James 1:5-7).

But there is a word of warning. All wisdom is not true wisdom. This may worry us as we think of the great advances made in science today. We may be concerned that our children may be misled in the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom that is not true wisdom. We live in what is known as the technological age. We cannot escape it and our children must be involved in it. Man is so clever, that he can reach the moon, and do many other astounding things. We are living in days of great advance in medical science although every day many people are killed on the roads. Are we using our scientific knowledge in the best way for humanity? Or is the result of advance in knowledge a greater disbelief of the Scriptures and a departure from God?

How necessary is it to distinguish between the wisdom of this world and the wisdom of God!

“For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this world? Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe” (1 Cor. 1:19-21).

“We preach Christ crucified . . . Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:23-24).

The Scriptures show us so clearly that the knowledge of this present day and age can be so misleading, and in the pursuit of so-called learning, we may stray far from God, and from true wisdom and understanding.

Few people today accept as truth the early chapters of the book of Genesis. The account of the fall of man is discounted or just not believed. The account of the creation is regarded as a fable. But when we think of the difference between true wisdom and the wisdom of this world, we are reminded of what took place in the Garden of Eden.

Let us remind ourselves of some of the statements in the book of Genesis.

- (1) Adam was put into the garden to take care of it and he could eat of any tree, except one. God said "but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Gen. 2:17).
The serpent cast doubt on the Word of God and said "Yea, hath God said?".
- (2) The woman replied to the serpent to the effect that they should not eat of the fruit of that tree, but she did not quote God's Word accurately. She added to the Word of God, Satan retorts by contradicting the Word of God, saying "Ye shall not surely die" (Gen. 3:4).
- (3) Eve saw that the fruit was good for food, it was pleasant to the eyes and a tree to be desired to make one wise . . . so she did eat.
And Adam did the same.
- (4) Then, the eyes of both Adam and Eve were opened. They had become wise and knew both good and evil. So man knew the wisdom that God had wished to withhold from them at that particular time.
Here is the beginning of the wisdom of this world.

By way of contrast, we read of another example of eyes being opened. After our Lord had died and was buried, He rose again but the disciples were slow to realise what had happened. Two disciples walked from Jerusalem to Emmaus and they were joined by a stranger who was in fact the risen Lord. As they talked, beginning with Moses and the prophets, He expounded unto them the Scriptures as they related to Himself. And He opened their understanding that they might understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45).

Paul prayed as he wrote his letter to the Ephesians that the Father of Glory might give them the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, that the eyes of their understanding might be enlightened in order that they might know:

- (a) what is the hope of His calling
- (b) what the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints
- (c) what is the exceeding greatness of His power to those who believe, according to the working of His mighty power, which He wrought in Christ when He was raised from the dead (Eph. 1:17-20).

In reading the epistle to the Ephesians, we should bear in mind the fact that Israel had rejected their Messiah. In consequence, the promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Israel) relating to the setting up of the Kingdom were postponed. Jerusalem fell, the Temple was destroyed, and Israel scattered. In this new situation, Paul received a revelation from God concerning the mystery (or secret) which concerns the Church which is the Body of Christ (see Ephesians chapter 3). The prayer to which we have referred asks that we may have the wisdom and understanding to discern and appreciate the truth revealed to Paul and which he was making known to the Ephesians.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. It is good to begin the search for wisdom. In the brief references which have been quoted, it is clear that there is much knowledge and wisdom that God would have us to acquire. Instead of worldly wisdom, there are deep spiritual truths concerning the redemptive purpose of God which are made known in the Scriptures if our eyes are opened by the Holy Spirit. As our eyes are opened, we become enlightened and we can receive more understanding of those great blessings that are in store for those who believe what God has promised. The Scriptures are written for our learning and as we read and study the Word of God, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, we get to know the mind of Christ and what He has prepared for those who love Him.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

“Christ . . . is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30).

“He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord” (1 Cor. 1:31). Amen.

DEVOTIONAL MESSAGE No. 9

LABOURERS TOGETHER WITH GOD

READINGS

John 4:31-38
1 Corinthians 3:1-15

PRAYER

- (1) Give thanks for material and spiritual blessings received.
- (2) Give thanks that we are saved by grace, not by our own works, lest we should boast (Eph. 2:8,9).
- (3) Pray that as a result of our salvation by grace, we may honour the Lord Jesus Christ by being labourers together with God, doing those good works which God has before ordained that we should walk in them.
- (4) Pray for the ministry of the Word of God.

For we are labourers together with God. 1 Corinthians 3:9

Our Lord spent much of His time on earth in villages and in the country, although of course He visited the larger towns and cities and attended the feasts at the Temple in Jerusalem. It has been said that those who live in the larger towns miss so much if there is no contact with the country. If one has the time to engage in gardening, even if the garden is only a small one, many spiritual lessons can be learned. There is a song which states that one is nearer to God's heart in a garden than anywhere else on earth. There is some truth in that song.

The flowers speak to us of the providence of God. Our Lord said "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not neither do they spin" (Matt. 6:28). If God takes care of wild flowers, will He not also take care of us?

The parable of the sower is another example used by Christ to explain deeper truths concerning the way people react to the message of the Gospel. Some would respond like seed sown in good ground, whereas others would not bear fruit for the various reasons He explained.

In the vegetable garden, we work on the soil and sow the seed, but it is God Who works through nature and He provides the crop. If we did not do our part, there would be no harvest. So even in this sphere, we are workers together with God. We work and so does God.

Again, when we gather flowers from the garden and arrange them artistically, we make our contribution and in a sense we may say that we are working together with God as we exhibit His handywork.

As our Lord looked at the fields, He remarked that they were white, all ready for the harvest. He used the fields to show what the people in His day were like; they were ready for the harvest. But there were few labourers. "Pray ye the Lord of the Harvest", said the Lord (Matt. 9:38) "that He will send forth labourers into His harvest". There was work to be done for the Lord among the people. He needed co-workers so that the harvest of men could be gathered and the faith proclaimed to the saving of men's lives.

So then, whether we think of nature, or of the spiritual needs of men, God wants us to work with Him. He wants us to be labourers together with Him; He wishes us to be co-workers with Himself.

This principle of working together with God applies over a wide area. Let us consider how this principle can operate.

- (1) We can work together with others and especially our leaders.
- (2) We can be labourers together with God.
- (3) In our daily lives, events work together for our good.
- (4) God works with us.

(1) *Let us think of co-operation with others.*

Paul in his letters often mentions those who worked with him. He calls Timothy his fellow-labourer and Titus his partner and fellow-helper. At Corinth, Paul met Aquila who was like Paul, a tentmaker. Aquila and his wife Priscilla worked with Paul in his ministry as well as sharing in the same craft as tentmakers. He must have been very close to this family as in Paul's letter to Timothy, he writes "Salute Prisca and Aquila" using a more familiar and homely abbreviation of Priscilla's name. And in his letter to the Philippians, he asks that help should be given to those women who laboured with him in the gospel.

So, as we read these letters, we find many references to those who laboured together with Paul and surely this is written to encourage us to work together for the sake of the gospel, that others may learn of Christ through our lives and witness.

We may not preach sermons in words, but our deeds, our very lives, are, or should be, a witness and show that we seek to serve the Lord Jesus Christ. May we be given grace so to live, that we may glorify God in our lives and point the way to Him Whom we love and delight to serve.

(2) *We are co-workers with God.*

There had been some differences between the members of the church at Corinth and some professed to be followers of Paul and others of Apollos. Paul says that this shows a wrong spirit. Who is Paul? Who is Apollos? Are they not both ministers of the gospel? One plants and another waters, but it is God that gives the increase. So then, we should not be divided but should unite together, each doing his or her part in the work, so that God can bless all efforts made for the extension and completion of His work.

Paul goes on to explain more fully that his function was to be a wise master builder. He laid the foundation and that foundation was Christ. He preached Christ faithfully at all times. Now he emphasized that each one of us must build our lives on Christ who is the only sure foundation.

But the building that we are erecting in our daily living, using the similes of building, may be of gold, silver, or precious stones, or on the other hand, may be of wood, or hay or stubble. The time of testing will come when the building is tried by fire. The poor structure will be burned, whereas the good structure remains intact. So, if we build from a spiritual aspect with good materials, when we meet our Lord and our work is tested, we shall receive a reward. Our work must be living a life of faith, working in line with the will of the Lord. But if our lives do not conform with the will of the Lord, we shall suffer loss. Yet we shall be saved, because we build on the sure foundation which is Christ. Our salvation does not come into question. We are saved if we believe and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ Who is our Saviour. But when we meet our Lord, surely we shall wish Him to say "Well done, thou good and faithful servant". Faithful service is essential if we are to receive a reward. This service is cooperation with God, being labourers together with Him.

How can we labour with God? This is a personal matter between each of us and our Lord and Master. Our prayer is "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" God will show each one what is the service He wishes us to give and to share with Him. It may not be a spectacular work. It may be living quietly with God day by day, communicating with Him in prayer. Let us not underestimate the importance of prayer for that is a service of vital importance. Let us pray without ceasing and ask for guidance every day.

(3) *All things work together for our good.*

There is another thought which we may share. It is that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them that are the called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28). God has a plan that He is working out and we have a share in that plan. For those who love God He works in their lives, and events that take place all fit into His marvellous plan. When we are passing through trial, it is sometimes hard to believe that our experiences are a part of His plan. But trials are a part of our training and by the grace of God, we develop into stronger Christians and our faith is deepened.

(4) *God works with us.*

In Mark's gospel, we read that after our Lord had ascended into heaven, the disciples went forth, preaching everywhere, the Lord working with them. There are two sides to a coin, and there are two sides to every question. When we think of labouring together with God, again there are two aspects. On the one hand, we work

together with God and on the other hand, God is working together with us. Let us always remember that as we seek to serve our Lord, and to do our part in such service, God is working in us and through us all the time. It is His will to bless others, using us as His instrument and as a channel of blessing. Whether we realize it or not, God is working always as we look to Him for guidance and help. Just as in nature, growth is gradual, and some time must elapse between sowing the seed and reaping the harvest, so in spiritual matters. We sow the seed as we serve the Lord but the results of our work may not be evident at once. We may have to wait for years for the harvest, or perhaps we may never see the result of our work for God. The servant of the Lord is called to be faithful rather than successful. So we leave the results to Him. But when we meet the Lord, is it not possible that we shall be surprised when we learn how God has been working in our lives? Then we shall understand and see how all things work together for good, and how our service to the Lord fits in with His plan.

We are labourers together with God. As we continue to be co-workers with Him, we share in fellowship and service with others, especially those whom God has called to be our leaders or ministers. We serve Him in our daily lives. The events of our daily lives work together for our good, while the Lord works in us and through us, and with us.

Let us also remember that if our fellowship with others is restricted for any reason, and there are many who find themselves in such a situation, we are a part of a much larger community. Let us remember the spiritual unity that exists for all who are members of the Church which is His Body. Each member of the Body needs the other members and all are directed by the Head. So let us pray to our Lord and Master, our Saviour and our Head, receiving instruction and guidance and help, so that we may continue to be labourers together with Him.

We are building day by day. Let us pray that we may erect a building which will stand the test of fire. Let us be faithful and labour with Him until our earthly task is done. And may we rejoice to hear the words, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant".

For we are labourers together with God. Amen.

DEVOTIONAL MESSAGE No. 10

THAT THEY MAY BE ONE, EVEN AS WE ARE ONE

READINGS

John 17:9-24
Ephesians 4:1-16

PRAYER

- (1) Thank God for the fellowship we enjoy with those of like precious faith. Pray for those who are “shut in” and who may be lonely.
- (2) Pray for a deeper realization of our Unity with Christ and with the Father.
- (3) Pray that we may be enabled to preserve the Unity of the Spirit in our relationship with others.
- (4) Pray for those in authority and for all leaders of men, that they may receive wisdom and guidance, and that we may live in peace.

That they may be one, even as we are one. John 17:22.

As the earthly ministry of our Lord drew to a close, He knew that the time was coming when He would depart from this world and go to His Father, and He prepared His disciples for the big change that would take place. So He said, "Let not your heart be troubled; ye believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions . . . I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:1-3). And later, our Lord prayed for His disciples in the wonderful prayer recorded in John 17. In that prayer, He not only prayed for His disciples, but for those who later would believe on Him. So we are included in that prayer.

He prayed that those who followed Him should be kept from the evil of this world, and for their sanctification. As the Father and the Son are one, so our Lord prayed that we may be united to Christ and to the Father. There is to be a unity of all who belong to Christ. The unity of the Father and the Son is extended to include us all if we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is not intended to cover the problems of Church Unity or the organisation of the visible church. Let us think more about the organism, rather than the organisation. The organism of the church extends beyond denominational barriers. The organism is a close relationship with Christ Himself and is based on our unity with Christ.

There are three aspects which may be considered:

- (1) The Unity of Christ with the Father.
- (2) Our Unity with Christ.
- (3) The Unity of those who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

These aspects of unity are doctrinal in character and we could go further to consider the practical outworking of our doctrinal position. Our manner of life should show that we are in fact united and if the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts, this should be evident in our relationships, not only as between Christians, but in our attitudes to those whom we meet day by day.

(1) *The Unity of Christ with His Father.*

In this chapter (John 17) our Lord frequently referred to this unity. In His earthly ministry He told those who listened to Him that He and His Father were one.

In John 10:30,31 it is recorded that Christ said: "I and My Father are one". Then the Jews took up stones again to stone Him. Why did this claim produce such violent opposition from the Jews? Surely, it was because the Jews realized that Christ claimed to be God made manifest in the flesh; to the Jews this was blasphemy. Unity with the Father means that Christ is God. To be our Saviour, the Word, who was God, was made flesh and dwelt among us, and He was full of grace and truth. As many as receive Him, are given the right to become the sons of God, even those who believe on His Name.

(2) *Our Unity with Christ.*

This is a big subject because the Scriptures tell us that we are reckoned by faith to have been united with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. And this unity goes even further than that.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul uses the figure of baptism to show that we are identified with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. Chapter 6:3-6 reads:

"Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into His death? Therefore we are buried with Him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

For if we have been planted together in the likeness of His death, we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection: knowing this, that our old man is crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin".

And in verses 8 and 11:

"Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him".

"Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord".

So, we see that by faith, we are united with Christ in His death and burial. That is the end of our sin and of our old nature. With Christ, we are reckoned by faith to rise to a new life in Christ. We are led by the Spirit of God. We are justified by faith and we have peace with God. This new life is a life of faith, but there is still a conflict between the old nature and the new nature.

The old nature is called the Old Man and the new nature the New Man. The struggle between the two will continue in us throughout

our earthly lives, but if we live by faith, and in the Spirit, we shall live with Christ and grow in grace. We read of this struggle in Romans 7. In verse 24 Paul cries out “O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” And the answer comes “Through Jesus Christ, our Lord”.

In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, he wrote about the Church which is the Body of Christ and of the revelation God made known to him. Here, he goes a stage further as he describes the position of the members of the Body of Christ. Briefly, those members were (Eph. 2:5-6):

- (a) quickened, or made alive, together with Christ.
- (b) raised up together with Him.
- (c) made to sit together with Christ in heavenly places.

and in his letter to the Colossians, he says that if we are risen with Christ, we should seek those things that are above where Christ sits at the right hand of God (Col. 3:1). In verse 4 he adds “When Christ, Who is our life, shall be made manifest, then shall ye also be made manifest with Him in glory”.

So Paul describes further steps in our unity with Christ. We are, by faith, with Christ as He sits at the right hand of God, and when the time comes for the manifestation of Christ in glory, the members of His Body will be manifested with Him. What a glorious hope! What a wonderful expectation!

(3) *The Unity of those who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Our Lord prayed that we may be one. He did not expand on this theme but went on to speak of the glory that awaited Him, the glory that was His and which He had given to those who were united with Him.

Paul speaks in Ephesians 2 in some detail of the unity that is ours. He uses the figure of a building, we being built into a temple, Christ Himself being the chief corner stone. This temple is to be a habitation of God. He reverts to the figure of a body. Christ is the Head of the Church which is His Body and each member is fitly joined together and is a joint of supply to other members. So we are linked together and help to feed or supply what is needed to others, so that we may come into a Unity of the Faith and a greater knowledge of the Son of God.

So while it is true that we are united, the one to the other, it is also true that our unity is a living and progressive reality, for our unity should result in growth, attaining a unity of faith and a closer relationship with each other and the Lord Jesus Christ as Head. The objective could be expressed as spiritual maturity.

In concluding, we ask what are the practical results of these great truths? Paul wrote to the Ephesians (4:1) that they should walk worthy of the vocation to which they had been called. Straight away he adds that our walk should be with all lowliness and meekness with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love. Then he proceeds with the words “Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”.

We strive to attain the Unity of the Faith and we try to keep the Unity of the Spirit. But keeping the Unity of the Spirit is not so easy for personal differences and misunderstandings can cause divisions, even among Christians. So Paul says, *endeavour* to keep this unity. We must do all we can to preserve the peace as between the members of the Body of Christ. To keep the unity, we must put off the old man and put on the new man. We need to be renewed in the spirit of our minds. We may summarise by saying, as Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:32 “Be ye kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake has forgiven you”. In this spirit, we shall make good progress as we endeavour to keep the Unity of the Spirit.

Let us praise God for our union with Christ. Let us be glad that we are united with each other and are a part of that living organism, the Body of Christ. May we pray that our lives may be worthy of the vocation to which we have been called. We give thanks that our Lord prayed.

That they may be one, even as we are one.

DEVOTIONAL MESSAGE No. 11

THE EXCEEDING RICHES OF HIS GRACE

READINGS

**Ephesians Chapter 1.
Ephesians 2 and 3:1-5**

PRAYER

- (1) Thank God for the preservation of the Holy Scriptures.**
- (2) Pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we read the Scriptures, and for enlightened eyes and hearts, that we may receive its message.**
- (3) Thank God for His grace, made known to us through Jesus Christ our Saviour. Thank Him for the riches of His grace and for His forgiving love. And for the exceeding riches of His grace and His kindness towards us in revealing His wonderful purposes.**
- (4) Pray for the lonely, the bereaved and all those in need. Ask that we may be shown how we can help and serve such needy folk.**

The exceeding riches of His grace. Ephesians 2:7.

At the end of a service, when the benediction is pronounced, the last verse of Paul's letter to the Corinthians is often used. "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all". When we hear the words, "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ" what does the word grace convey to us?

A song, based on an old hymn, has become very popular and has been heard by thousands. You will remember the words:

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found
Was blind, but now I see.

Again, we ask, what does the word grace convey to those who have heard this song? What are their thoughts about the contents of the song? In these days, it is rare to hear that we are sinners in the sight of God, but yet, crowds have heard the words that grace has "saved a wretch like me". How many of our young people would admit that they feel wretched? Perhaps, deep down in their hearts, there is a strong feeling of dissatisfaction, a lack of that true and lasting peace that comes to those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour.

Again, in the business world, there is an expression, "ex gratia". When the writer started in the City in an insurance office, he sometimes read letters saying that a claim could not be admitted because under the terms of the policy, the insurance company was not liable. But as the company recognized that hardship could result if the claim was not paid, an "ex gratia" payment would be made. The company would exercise grace in paying an amount to the claimant.

So grace is a word that we often hear but it is not easy to define it. When a gift is made by a gracious person, the person is kind, affectionate, and a pleasing person. The word *charis* in Greek occurs 150 times in the New Testament and is usually translated "grace", but sometimes is translated "thanks" or "thanksgiving". When the word is used in connection with the recipient of a gift, it is used to express the idea that the recipient is thankful for the gift received.

Grace used to be defined as unmerited favour. Something is received to which the recipient is not entitled. It is a free gift. This definition agrees with Ephesians 2:8, "By grace are ye saved, through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God". Further, Paul says that this salvation is not of works, lest any man should boast. But God has ordained that we should follow His will by doing good works, not to secure our salvation, but as a result of the work of grace in our hearts. It is the fruit of the grace of God. We have to distinguish between cause and effect. Our good works are not the cause of our salvation but the effect of being saved by grace.

The word grace occurs 12 times in the epistle to the Ephesians. At the beginning and the end of this letter, there is the salutation "Grace be with you" and the benediction "Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity".

Then we learn that we have been adopted as children according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace (See 1:5,6). We are accepted in the Beloved.

We have the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace (1:7). So we learn that we are accepted into the family of God and we enjoy the forgiveness of our sins as a result of the riches of His grace.

This experience of receiving the benefit of the riches of His grace, brings peace of mind and a sense of nearness to God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

In chapter 3, Paul tells us of his special ministry and how he received a revelation from God. He was given the task of making known the dispensation of the grace of God. Although he was less than the least of all saints, to him was the duty of declaring the unsearchable riches of Christ, and he received grace to enable him to carry out this task. Again, he says that he was made a minister by the grace of God and it was by the working of the power of God in him that he was enabled to conduct his ministry. We see how grace abounded in his ministry.

So, Paul realized that he was unworthy, in himself, to undertake so great a ministry, for he had persecuted the church of God. But God had appeared to him on the Damascus road, and he was converted. God spoke to him, he saw the light, and God gave him this special revelation, and this special ministry concerning the

grace of God. His ministry is especially valuable to us today, and it was to Paul that God revealed that we are members of the church which is His Body, of which Christ is the Head. This truth had been hidden, but now is revealed. Let us rejoice that we are members of the church which is the Body of Christ.

We rejoice that we have the grace of God in our hearts. We rejoice that through the riches of His grace, our sins are forgiven. But our text speaks of the exceeding riches of His grace. Why the “exceeding” riches of His grace? Let us read Ephesians 2:4-7:

“But God, who is rich in mercy, for His great love wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ (by grace ye are saved) and hath raised us up together and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus; that in the ages to come He might shew the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us through Christ Jesus”.

We see that we are quickened with Christ (i.e. made alive), we are raised with Him and the promise is that we shall sit together with Him in the heavenly places.

We have further light if we look at Colossians 3:1-4. “If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God”. Thus verse 1 shows us that being blessed in heavenly places means that our sphere of blessing is at the right hand of God, where Christ Himself is sitting.

“When Christ, Who is our life shall appear (or be made manifest), then shall ye also appear (or be made manifest) with Him in glory” (verse 4).

It is clear that the exceeding riches of His grace concerns this wonderful hope and expectation that we shall be with Christ, as He sits at the right hand of God, and we shall be made manifest with Him when our Lord is manifested. We share not only in His resurrection, but also in His position in the heavenly places and in His manifestation in glory. No wonder that Paul refers to the exceeding riches of His grace! This hope is so stupendous that it is difficult to grasp. To be associated with Christ in this way is a hope beyond our wildest dreams. Yet, it is a promise that is clearly set out and described and all we can do is to accept the promise and bow before God in thanksgiving.

Perhaps some will say that this is so different from what we have believed and what we repeat when we say “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”. This does not contradict anything that our

Lord taught because it is quite clear from the Scriptures that there will be great blessing on the earth when the earthly Kingdom comes. Christ will come again and take up His position as King. Christ will rule on this earth and the earth will be blessed. But the revelation made to Paul shows that the earth is not the only sphere of blessing. It is Paul's task to tell of blessings in heaven itself. God's purpose is not restricted to the earth. His plan of redemption is so much wider and comprehensive. With the economic problems of the day, we have concentrated our thinking on the problems of this earth. Let us accept the fact that while this earth will indeed be greatly blessed, there are blessings in store for those who are the members of the Body of Christ in heaven where Christ sits at the right hand of God.

Let us live, as Paul wrote to Titus, "looking for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13). Let us live, realising that the great power made known when Christ was raised from the dead is a resurrection power that can work in our hearts and lives. We share, by faith, in the resurrection of Christ and that mighty power should be working in us. This is surely a part of the exceeding riches of His grace.

Let us therefore thank God for His grace, let us remember the glory of His grace, the riches of His grace by which we have forgiveness, and bow before Him in gratitude for the exceeding riches of His grace. May we bless Him for those promises which in such great generosity He has revealed to us through Paul's ministry, concerning sharing with Christ in the heavenly home. This wonderful grace is with us day by day. May we grow in our knowledge of Christ. Let us commune with God in prayer living with Him daily, until the time comes to enter the holiest in the light.

Let us thank God for the exceeding riches of His grace.

DEVOTIONAL MESSAGE No. 12

OUR CITIZENSHIP IS IN HEAVEN

READINGS

Genesis 11:31 – 12:9

Hebrews 11:8-13

Philippians 3:7-21

PRAYER

- (1) Give thanks for God's redemptive plan and for the place He has reserved for us in that plan.
- (2) Pray that we may concentrate our minds on things above, rather than on things on the earth.
- (3) Pray that we may be enabled to live as citizens of heaven so that others may see that we belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. May we serve Him faithfully.
- (4) Thank the Lord for opportunities of service. Ask Him to make us more fully aware of opportunities of witnessing for Him.

For our citizenship is in heaven (R.V.) Philippians 3:20.

We are living in an age when material things occupy the thoughts and ambitions of most people. Our minds have been concentrated on the increase in the cost of living, and economic problems. The current rate of inflation is alarming with the prospect of shortages or even famine. Hard times seem to await us. These conditions affect us all and indeed it seems to be a world wide situation. No wonder that we all wonder what the future holds.

As Christians, should we not be more concerned about spiritual matters rather than material things? It may be opportune at this time to ask ourselves whether our minds are set on things above, rather than things on earth.

If we are worried about material things, we remember that our Lord mentioned such questions. "What shall we eat?" "What shall we drink?" "Wherewithal shall we be clothed?" To these questions He replied that our Heavenly Father knows our needs. He said "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33).

Paul is reminding us that our home is in heaven. What was Paul's attitude to life? Paul was a Jew by birth and in Philippians chapter 3, he outlines the advantages that accrued to him, but he was willing to put them aside in order that he might "win Christ", and be found in Him. He pressed towards a goal as one who runs a race. He was not concerned with the material side of life. Indeed, he warns us that if we are chiefly concerned with earthly things, we are enemies of the cross of Christ and we shall suffer loss. But because we are citizens of heaven, we should be looking for the appearance of Christ our Saviour. Our hope is in Him.

In our endeavour to obtain a balanced point of view, we should bear in mind that we are travelling through this world and our destination is the world to come. We are strangers and pilgrims, passing through a strange land, seeking our real home.

It is natural to regard this earth as a permanent place, for all around us seems so real. Things above do not seem so real and spiritual things are hard to grasp. Is this earth real and lasting? Or are spiritual things truly real and permanent? Perhaps the answer is that this earth is real but not lasting whereas things above are both

real and lasting. But whatever views we may have, let us see what the Scriptures have to say. For example, let us refer to 2 Corinthians 4:17,18:

“For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things that are not seen: for the things that are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal”.

And chapter 5 commences:

“For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens”.

So we understand that the things which we see and which look so permanent, are temporary, but those spiritual things which we seek, are eternal. Our bodies are like tents or tabernacles, in which we live for a time, but one day we shall leave this tent behind, and go to a home in heaven prepared by God Himself, and this is a permanent dwelling.

To emphasize what we have said, and to show that this earth is only a temporary structure, we might look at some other Scriptures.

Speaking of the Lord God:

“Who coverest Thyself with light as with a garment: who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain ” (Psa. 104:2).

“It is He that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers; that stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in” (Isa. 40:22).

Speaking of earth and heaven:

“They shall perish; but Thou remainest; and they all shall wax old as doth a garment; and as a vesture Thou shalt fold them up, and they shall be changed: but Thou art the same, and Thy years shall not fail” (Heb. 1:11, 12).

So we see that the Scriptures describe the earth as a temporary structure, like a tent that is folded up when no longer needed. The book of The Revelation speaks of a new heaven and a new earth, when the former things will have passed away. When concerned about daily problems of this life let us acknowledge that God

knows the way we take, just as God provided for Israel when they wandered in the wilderness. However much change we see, let us remember that God is with us and He never changes. He remains and is faithful.

Abraham is an example for us. He was promised an earthly inheritance, and he walked through the promised land. He knew that his seed would become a great nation who one day would inherit the promised land. Yet, because of his faith, he received the promise of a place in a heavenly City. He was called out from the earthly city of Ur and went out not knowing whither he went, sojourning in the land of promise, dwelling in tents. But he looked for a City whose builder and maker was God. He died in faith, not receiving the promise, but confessed that those with him were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. Abraham believed God and trusted in Him. We too may go through this present life as strangers and pilgrims, not receiving the promise, but having the faith that we shall one day be citizens in Heaven itself.

Our text is taken from one of the letters that Paul wrote while in prison. In these prison epistles, it is revealed that those who are members of the church which is the Body of Christ have the hope of sharing the holiest in the light, sharing with Christ Himself as He sits on the right hand of God in heavenly places. As we bring our meditation to a close, let us share three thoughts:

- (1) Let us praise God that He has so graciously granted us an inheritance in heaven. We can join with Paul when he wrote to the Ephesians (1:3):

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ”.

- (2) Let us remember that we are citizens of heaven, and may we earnestly desire, and look forward to our heavenly inheritance. May our minds be occupied with this heavenly treasure, rather than the things of earth. Colossians 3:1-4 includes the following thoughts:

“If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God”.

“Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth”.

- (3) Let our manner of life reflect our heavenly hope. We should hold the things of earth with a loose hand, and not be over anxious about earthly things. Pray about our earthly

problems and leave them with the Lord, and if we do this, we can enjoy the peace of God that passes understanding. This does not mean that we shall be so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good! But it does mean that we have a more balanced outlook. Because we have received such grace from God, we shall be gracious to all men. As Christ was meek and lowly, so we should be patient and show the spirit of Christ to others. We should show a loving spirit and endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Living as citizens of heaven may not be easy. But if grace reigns in our hearts, there will surely be a reflection of Christ in our characters, for Christ will live in our hearts by faith. So this heavenly hope will have a practical effect on our daily lives. If we live looking for our blessed hope, for the appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ, others will observe that this does make a big difference to our manner of life and so we shall be witnesses for Christ.

Our citizenship is in heaven.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus.
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace. Amen.

DEVOTIONAL MESSAGE No. 13

I WILL LIFT UP MINE EYES UNTO THE HILLS

READINGS

Psalm 121

Isaiah 2:1-4

Acts 1:6-12

Zechariah 14:2-4,16

PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

We thank Thee for all the evidence of Thy mighty power, for the beauty of the earth, for the wonders of the sky, for the love of family and friends, and especially for Thy great love which Thou hast shown to us through the sacrifice of the Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

As we bow before Thee, help us to unload our burdens and cares. Help us to cast them upon the Lord, knowing that He will sustain us. May we have the assurance that Thou art our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble. May we not be afraid.

Every day, as we look at the hills, the flowers, the trees and all the wonders of Thy creation, may we be assured that He Who created all these things is our Redeemer, our Helper and Friend.

These things we ask in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Saviour, Amen.

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills. Psalm 121:1

Do the hills speak to us? If so, what is their message? If we live near the hills, we appreciate their shape and contours, their ever changing colours, sometimes green but if there is heather, the beautiful purple; sometimes the tops of the hills are hidden as the clouds roll over them, but afterwards, they come into sight again and the sun lights up the lovely picture. Our spirits are uplifted. Surely they have a message for us.

Let us ask two questions:

- (1) What do the hills say in the light of the Psalms?
- (2) What do the hills say in the light of the association of our Lord Jesus Christ with the hills of His day?

The Psalmist asks "From whence cometh my help?" and he replies, "My help cometh from the Lord, Who made heaven and earth". The Lord is our helper, our keeper, and our preserver. He is with us in every circumstance of life, in our going out and coming in.

In the Old Testament, there are many names for God. One is *Jehovah*, for our God is the One Who was and is and is to come. Also there are extended names showing the nature of our God Who loves us and provides for us. We will only mention three of these extended names.

Jehovah Jireh. The Lord will see or provide.

Jehovah Shalom. The Lord our peace.

Jehovah Zidkenu. The Lord our righteousness.

As we look at the hills, we remember that God, the Creator, made those hills, for He made heaven and earth. And then as we think of the Creator, we think of God and His attributes. We think of the One Who is our helper, our keeper and preserver, and then of the One Who sees us and helps in every circumstance; further, as we read the Psalms, we notice various figures of speech. For example, the hills are said to react to the goodness of God. They rejoice, they leap and they skip.

Let us look at a few psalms.

Psalm 65 tells us that God crowns the year with His goodness and He provides the harvest. The little hills rejoice on every side. The valleys, covered with corn, shout for joy and sing!

Psalm 72 speaks of God's righteous judgments and His defence of the poor. Verse 3 reads "The Mountains shall bring peace to the people and the little hills, by righteousness". So in these two psalms, the three extended names of Jehovah are reflected.

Jehovah Jireh. God is the Lord of the harvest. He sees and provides.

Jehovah Shalom. The Lord is our peace, and the mountains remind us of His peace.

Jehovah Zidkenu. The Lord our righteousness. The little hills testify of this.

Then, if we look at Psalm 68, we are reminded of God's desire to dwell with His people. Psalm 68:16 reads "Why leap ye, ye high hills? this is the hill which God desireth to dwell in; yea, the Lord will dwell in it for ever". In our reading of Isaiah 2, there is the prophecy that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains and be exalted above the hills. We shall see later that the hills are connected with the presence of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ. And in this wonderful figure of speech, the high hills leap for joy.

There is another psalm, that we cannot omit for it is such a jolly psalm. We will read the New English Bible, Psalm 114:3-5:

"The sea looked, and ran away
Jordan turned back.
The mountains skipped like rams,
The hills like young sheep.
What was it, sea? Why did you run?
Jordan, why did you turn back?
Why mountains, did you skip like rams?
and you hills, like young sheep?"

Israel could rejoice as they remembered how God rescued them from bondage in Egypt, and in a figure, the mountains and hills joined with them in rejoicing. Our God is able to do abundantly beyond all we ask or think. In the spring, we see evidence of His resurrection power. Let us rejoice and believe in the mighty power of God, and pray that we may experience something of that resurrection power day by day. As we rejoice in God's mighty power, the hills rejoice with us.

Have we thought of the association of our Lord Jesus Christ with the hills of His day? There were the hills of Galilee and the hills

near Jerusalem which are mentioned in the Gospels. When in need of rest or relaxation, our Lord resorted often to the hills. There, He would pray to His Father and receive both physical rest and spiritual refreshment.

We read in John 8:1 that after ministry in the Temple, every man went to his own home but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. How true are the words "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head" (Luke 9:58).

Our Lord sometimes ministered from the mountains. We remember the sermon on the mount and the beatitudes. From a mountain, our Lord sent His disciples to preach and heal and cast out devils, having first ordained them (Mark 3:13-15). Our Lord had regard for both the physical and spiritual needs of those to whom He ministered. Multitudes came to Him and He fed 4,000 (Matthew 15:38) and on another occasion, he fed 5,000 (Matthew 14:21) as they sat on the mountain with Him.

The transfiguration took place on a mountain (Matthew 17:1-8). Peter, James and John were allowed to have a glimpse of His glory. The Lord Jesus had told the disciples that He must suffer, die and then rise from the dead. Is there not a connection between the hills, the suffering of our Lord and His glory? Before He went to the cross, He prayed (John 17) "Glorify Thy Son, that Thy Son may glorify Thee: . . . I have glorified Thee on the earth . . . glorify Thou Me with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was". The disciples had a glimpse of that glory. Now Jesus Christ must go to the cross and suffer and die. But in that death and suffering, He glorified His Heavenly Father.

But it was to the Mount of Olives that our Lord resorted so often and in that locality, He met His friends and dined with them. At Bethany, He had supper with Lazarus, Martha and Mary, and He had a meal with Simon the Leper.

The triumphant procession which we remember on Palm Sunday started from the Mount of Olives. After the last supper, our Lord took the disciples to the Mount of Olives and to Gethsemane, where He endured that dreadful agony. Afterwards, angels were sent to strengthen Him so that He might be enabled to proceed to the cross and die for our sakes.

It was from the Mount of Olives that our Lord ascended into heaven (Acts 1:10-12) and it is to the Mount of Olives that our Lord will return in great power and glory. Christ sits on the right hand of God. There He intercedes for us. But have we thought that the members of the Body of Christ have a place with Christ at God's right hand? Ephesians 3:6 speaks of our being seated together in heavenly places in Christ. What a wonderful prospect! No wonder Paul writes of the exceeding riches of His grace (Eph. 3:7).

Have the hills a message for us?

They say, "Remember thy Creator". The God Who is the Creator is our helper, our keeper and preserver. He is our peace and His righteousness is ours by faith.

In Christ we have so many blessings. In Him, we have rest and peace. The hills remind us of this. As our Lord went to the hills for peace of mind and spiritual refreshment, so may we. As our Lord prayed to His Father, so may we.

The hills remind us of the redemptive work of Christ, and of His ascension into heaven. And we know that He will return in great power and glory. Shall we share that glory with Him?

Let us look at the hills. As the Psalmist said, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills". Where does our help come from? Our help comes from the Lord. Let us take courage and live by faith in Him and in His precious promises.

DEVOTIONAL MESSAGE No. 14

OUT OF WEAKNESS WERE MADE STRONG

READINGS

Isaiah 40:18-31

Hebrews 11:32-40

PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

We come to Thee, knowing that we are unworthy and weak, having no hope apart from Thee. But we thank Thee that through the offering and sacrifice made by our Saviour, Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven, we have redemption through His blood, and we are accepted in the Beloved One. We place our trust in Him. Grant to us the strength we need to serve Thee faithfully, so that it may be said of us, that out of weakness, we have been made strong.

We remember that mighty power shown when our Lord rose from the dead. We ask that the resurrection power of Christ may energize us, so that we may be strong and enabled to do Thy Will. Help us to remember that without Thee, we can do nothing, but we can do all things through Christ Who enables us.

We ask these things in the name of our Risen Lord, Amen.

Out of weakness were made strong (Heb. 11:34)

When our Lord suffered agony in the garden of Gethsemane, He asked His disciples for their fellowship in prayer. "Watch and pray". But the disciples were tired and fell asleep. The weakness of body was too great and they failed to support Him Who asked them to watch and pray. Our Lord fully understood their situation and merely said "The spirit truly is ready, but the flesh is weak" (Mark 14:38).

However keen we may be to follow and serve the Lord, we may be conscious of weakness and when we recognize our weakness, it is right that we should seek help, grace and strength to endure. So we should turn to the Lord in prayer. Let us remember that it is in the Lord Jehovah that we find everlasting strength (Isa. 26:4). Paul experienced weakness and wrote "When I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Cor. 12:10).

Have you a favourite passage of Scripture? Do you turn to it when you are in special need of comfort, strength or guidance? Some chapters stand out like beacons in the darkness. Many find help in reading Psalm 23 and have the assurance that the Good Shepherd is guiding and leading them, and protecting them from harm and danger. 1 Corinthians 13 is a wonderful chapter ending with the thoughts: "And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love". And the next verse, starts "Follow after love . . ."

Our text is taken from a well known chapter dealing with faith. The Old Testament worthies are listed and their examples show how they lived by faith and not by sight.

There is little in this chapter to indicate that they were weak; rather we see them as those strong in faith. So it comes as a surprise when after reading a summary of their achievements, especially the Old Testament warriors, we find this phrase "Out of weakness were made strong". See how it seems to intrude into the list of great and wonderful works:

Who through faith, subdued kingdoms,
wrought righteousness, obtained promises,
stopped the mouths of lions,
quenched the violence of fire,
escaped the edge of the sword,
out of weakness were made strong,

waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens.

Noah, having been warned of God, exhibited his faith by preparing an ark, which was the means of the salvation of his family. Can we imagine the reaction of the people to Noah as he worked on the ark? The sun shone out of a blue sky; there was no sign of rain. How the people would laugh and ridicule him! How did this affect Noah and how did his wife and family feel? Was there any danger that Noah might weaken? It needed so much courage to carry on the work. It had to be done “in the open”.

Hebrews 11:7 when describing the events concerning Noah includes the phrase “moved by fear”. Noah was warned by God of things “not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark . . .” Was Noah afraid? He well might have been, but there is another interpretation, which is that he was moved by a Godly or reverential fear. But whether the motivation was a natural fear of the impending disaster, or the acknowledgement of God’s wisdom, it is certain that Noah believed God, and that his faith in God remained constant. So he and his family were saved.

Our Lord foretold that as it was in the days of Noah before the flood, and as it was in the days of Lot before Sodom was destroyed by fire, so shall it be in the days before our Lord returns. (Luke 17:26-30). We need to take account of our Lord’s words.

Abraham left the security of City life for the more hazardous life of the wanderer in the country or wilderness. His destination was unknown and his route uncharted. He had no road map to consult, and he did not know exactly where he was going. All he knew was that God had reserved an inheritance for him and his seed. He wandered through the land that God had promised to give to him, but as a pilgrim and as a stranger, as though he proceeded through a strange country. When he lived in a city, he lived in comfort; after he received God’s call, he lived in a tent and had no permanent dwelling place, relying on God for his daily needs. But Abraham believed God and his faith was counted to him for righteousness. He was called the friend of God.

Abraham will receive a reward for his faithfulness; God promised him an earthly inheritance, but he will receive a place in the Heavenly City, the New Jerusalem (Heb. 11:16). Such is the reward of God to one who had such faith in Him.

Can we picture Abraham as he journeyed day by day? What temptations and trials did he have? Were both Abraham and Noah always strong in faith or was there ever the temptation to give up?

The Scriptures only show us the picture of these saints as being strong in faith, and they are certainly examples for us today.

It is said that the successful business man must be physically fit and mentally alert. He must have a strong body and a sound mind. Are these also the requirements of the faithful Christian? To what extent can spiritual growth be slowed down by infirmity of body or mind? It would indeed be ideal if the Christian is strong in body, mind and spirit but how often is there some infirmity which acts as a drag on daily life?

Is there the danger that the man who is strong in body and mind may feel self-sufficient? To rely on our own strength leads to disaster. Spiritual growth may be impeded. If there is some impairment in health, we are forced to rely more and more on God for daily help and support. Our need draws us nearer to God.

Paul had the experience of much suffering and adversity. At one time, he speaks of a thorn in the flesh which worried him, and three times he prayed that the Lord would remove it. We are not told what that thorn was. It could have been some trouble with his eyes, possibly resulting from the bright light he saw on the road to Damascus, and this caused both discomfort and probably an unpleasant personal appearance as he carried out his ministry. The Lord did not remove that thorn, but assured him "My grace is sufficient for thee", and if we look at 2 Corinthians 12:9, we see that this assurance is followed by the words "for My strength is made perfect in weakness", and so Paul says, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities that the power of Christ may rest upon me". Paul took pleasure in his infirmities and declares, "When I am weak, then am I strong".

All of us are conscious of our need of strength to do the will of the Lord but those who are engaged in the work of the ministry must have a special need. Writing to Timothy, Paul emphasizes the enabling power of God. Paul did not appoint himself to be a minister, it was God Who called him to this service. "And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, Who hath enabled me, for that He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry . . ." (1 Tim. 1:12).

So it was the enabling power of God which enabled him to maintain his ministry and he was also strengthened at the time when all men forsook him. He writes in 2 Timothy 4:16,17 that although all men forsook him, the Lord stood by him and strengthened him, so that all the Gentiles might hear.

Let us be encouraged by the Word of God if at any time we feel weak.

Ephesians 6:10. Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.

2 Timothy 2:1. Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:13. I can do all things through Christ Who strengthens me.

Those Old Testament worthies trusted in God. Their faith was strong. Let us follow their example, and the example of Paul. May we receive the power and strength that is freely available through Jesus Christ our Lord, so that it may be said of us, "Out of weakness were made strong".

DEVOTIONAL MESSAGE No. 15

THINK ON THESE THINGS

READINGS

Psalm 32
Romans 4

PRAYER

Eternal light, eternal light
How pure the soul must be
When placed within Thy searching sight
It shrinks not, but with calm delight
Can live, and look on Thee.

Heavenly Father,

We thank Thee for Thy great love to us, and for the love of Thy dear Son, Who died that we may live. We thank Thee for Thy work of redemption, and for making us fit to enter into Thy holy presence without fear. We know that sin separates from Thee but because Thou has forgiven our sins, that barrier is removed and we are accepted in the Beloved One.

Grant us to believe all those truths which Thou would have us to know and learn. Instruct us and may the Holy Spirit lead us into a greater knowledge of Thy truth. Open our eyes that we may see wonderful things in Thy Word. May we grow in grace and in our knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, in Whose name we present our petitions. Amen.

Think on these things. Philippians 4:8

At the end of the financial year, the Chief Accountant of a large business organisation makes up the accounts. In effect, he counts the income and the expenses, he prepares a statement of profit or loss, and he counts the assets and liabilities. We may do the same in a much more modest fashion at the end of the year to ascertain our own financial situation. We count what we have received and we count what we have spent.

Our text reads, “Think on these things”. Why do we emphasize counting? The Greek word translated “think” occurs about 40 times in the New Testament and is translated think or account or count, and sometimes reckon or impute. We could render our text “Consider these things” or “Take account of these things”.

Paul is asking us not only to think about the things he mentions, but to evaluate them. Let us consider the things that are true. Let us make an assessment of them. Enter them in the balance sheet as an asset. Then the things that are honest, just, pure, lovely and those things that are of good report also need to be evaluated. These are assets placed in our care that must be used. So in the balance sheet we have the two sides of the account. On the one side, we place the assets we have received and on the other side, the use that we have made of them; and the two sides should balance. This could be called spiritual accounting.

As this word occurs so many times in the New Testament, we begin to realise that God does much spiritual arithmetic. We can only consider a few examples but so much could be said about it. All the time we meditate on these words, we should be asking, “How does God do His reckoning?”.

A child evaluates things so differently from an adult. An adult would be delighted to receive a bag of gold, but what would a child do with such a gift? What would you give a child as a birthday present? Paul wrote “When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I counted or thought (or reckoned) as a child, but when I became a man, I put away childish things” (1 Cor. 13:11).

The same principle applies as we develop from being babes in Christ to manhood or spiritual maturity. The mature Christian learns to value things material and things spiritual. And as he grows in grace, he realizes more and more his utter dependence on God.

So Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 3:4,5: “And such trust have we through Christ to Godward: not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves: but our sufficiency is of God”: Our spiritual arithmetic enables us to place a proper valuation on our own ability. What do we think, or reckon, ourselves to be? Our personal ability may be small but we have vast resources available to us from God Who empowers us. Let us “write down” ourselves in our spiritual balance sheet but add the vast asset we have in the sufficiency of God.

Even our Lord is mentioned in Scripture as having been counted or reckoned. In Luke 22:37, a quotation from Isaiah is made. “And He was reckoned (or numbered, or counted) among the transgressors”. He took the burden of our sins and bore them on the cross of shame. He was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities, and so He was numbered with the transgressors. We believe He did all this for us, so that by faith we may receive justification and a full salvation. We are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, as we read in Romans 3:24. In verse 28 we read “Therefore, we conclude (or reckon) that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law”. Our salvation is by grace, without works. That is how God does His calculations, or reckoning.

In Romans 4, there are 11 references to God’s reckoning. Romans 4:3 “Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness”. In verse 5, this is applied to those Who do not attempt to work for their salvation, but believe on Him who justifies the ungodly. (Salvation is not of works, but by faith). So then, we rest on the finished work of Christ for the forgiveness of our sins and we are justified by faith. It would take too long to mention all the references in Romans 4 but let us observe that several times, we find the word “impute” which is the same word in the Greek as think or count. For example, Romans 4:8 “Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin”.

Next, we observe that our new life in Christ is set out in terms of counting or reckoning. There is a clear statement in Romans 6:11: “Likewise, *reckon* ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God, through Jesus Christ our Lord”. We still live in the flesh, in these bodies subject to sin and shame and failure. But by faith, we live in the spirit and not in the flesh. As a result of our faith in the finished work of Christ, we consider or count or reckon ourselves to be dead so far as sin is concerned, but alive unto God.

In practice, there is still that dreadful conflict between the flesh and the spirit, but as we live by God's power, in His strength, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can regard our sinful nature as inoperative. The Spirit of God quickens us, makes us alive, and we enjoy a new life in Christ. It is as this new life flourishes, that we begin to show our faith by our works.

Another aspect of the Christian life is acceptance of suffering, knowing that there is a glory awaiting us which will more than offset our suffering. Romans 7 and 8 say much about this but in particular, let us read Romans 8:18. "For I *reckon* that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us".

However great our sufferings may be, we are assured that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Paul writes about the killed and the conquerors. We may be counted or accounted as sheep for the slaughter, but we can be conquerors. See how confidently he writes in Romans 8:35-38:

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword? As it is written, For Thy sake, we are killed all the day long, we are *accounted* as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord".

So often, Paul wrote about counting in the spiritual sense. Read the third chapter of Philippians. There he lists out those assets which at one time he considered to be valuable, but he wrote them off as rubbish. Then he sets out those assets he desired to acquire. He wanted to gain Christ, and all the spiritual assets associated with Him. While he did not "count" himself to have reached the goal to which he was pressing, he was making every effort to reach it, having in mind the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus (See Phil. 3, 13, 14).

We have much food for thought, as we consider the spiritual assets that ought to appear in our own spiritual balance sheets. Should we not spend a little time in preparing our balance sheet, and do some spiritual accounting? What are the things we should prize? What are the assets we hold that ought to be written off?

Those things that are true and honest and just and pure and lovely and of good report, these things we should retain and safeguard. As Paul wrote in the verse following our text (Phil. 4:9) we should keep and treasure those things which we can learn and receive from his life and example. If we follow his advice, the God of peace will be with us.

May we learn to consider, to count, or reckon, and prize those valuable assets which God has offered to us. Our spiritual life will grow, and we shall have that peace that the world cannot give. We shall have the peace of God in our heart, and the God of peace will be with us. May the Lord help us to

“Think on these things”.

DEVOTIONAL MESSAGE No. 16

WHY SHOULD THE WORK CEASE?

READINGS

Nehemiah 6
1 Corinthians 13

PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

We thank Thee for all the blessing Thou hast bestowed upon us, for health and strength, for food and clothing, for the love of family and friends. We praise Thee for all the spiritual blessings we receive through Jesus Christ our Lord and for the manifestation of His great love.

We remember those who are in need, who may be in ill health, or in some kind of distress of body or mind. Grant to them Thy help and grace and comfort them in their afflictions. Help us to show our love to Thee in our service to Thee and to our fellows. May we remember that Jesus Christ when on the earth did not seek His own will, but the will of His Father. So help us to learn what is Thy will and to seek to do Thy will and to be obedient to Thee. Grant to us the strength and wisdom we need to serve Thee faithfully. We thank Thee for the privilege of being workers together with Thee and we ask that we may be enabled to put first the discharge of the duties and responsibilities that Thou hast laid upon us. So be with us and guide us always, because we ask this in the name and for the sake of our Master, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Why should the work cease? Nehemiah 6:3

There is a children's hymn which commences:

There's a work for Jesus
Ready at your hand.
'Tis a task the Master
Just for you has planned.
Haste to do His bidding,
Yield Him service true;
There's a work for Jesus
None but you can do.

Surely it is a fact that every Christian has a work to do for the Lord for we are workers together with Him. He achieves His purposes by using us and it is a wonderful privilege to serve the Lord Who loves us. However, there are times when we may be disheartened or discouraged and it is good to encourage one another at such times.

The story of Nehemiah is thrilling for he was called by God to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem which had been broken down, and to restore the gates that had been burned by fire. Nehemiah was the king's cupbearer and when serving the king, he was expected to be cheerful. One day, he was burdened about Jerusalem and the King noticed that he was sad. The king asked him why he was sad, and after a momentary prayer, he explained the cause of his sorrow; the outcome was that the king sent him to rebuild the wall, and provided wood to help him in the work.

But there was opposition. Sanballat and Tobiah were grieved when they heard the news and they determined to stop the work. After a start had been made, Sanballat became angry and mocked the Jews. He called them feeble and made rude remarks. Then Tobiah ridiculed them. He said that if a fox walked on the walls, they would collapse! Despite all the insulting remarks, the work still continued. The opposition increased, and there was more anger. Sanballat and Tobiah conspired with others to fight the Jews, so that the work could be halted. To protect the work, Nehemiah had to organize armed guards. Some of the Jews became discouraged so Nehemiah arranged for one half of his helpers to stand guard and be ready for any assault, so that the maintenance of the work would be safeguarded. A trumpeter stood by Nehemiah to give the alarm should an attack take place.

It was a war of nerves. Some of the workers became worried and there was trouble among them. The men had to find food for their families and as they were not earning money, they had to borrow to provide for their needs, which included taxes as well as food. Some poorer Jews had to mortgage all they had and borrow from other Jews who became rich by charging high rates of interest on the loans. So those in trouble came to Nehemiah and told him that life was intolerable. This caused Nehemiah to stop his work and hold a meeting with the nobles and rulers of the Jews and he rebuked them for imposing such hard conditions. He persuaded them to restore the lands, their vineyards, and other possessions so that the workers could live without anxiety. Afterwards Nehemiah prayed to the Lord:

“Think upon me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people” (Neh. 5:19).

The story continues in chapter 6 and opposition and schemes to cause the work to cease worried Nehemiah. Sanballat and Tobiah tried to slow down the progress of the rebuilding of the wall. They suggested a conference in the plain of ONO. While talks were held, the work would be stopped. So Nehemiah declined the offer. He said, “I am doing a great work so that I cannot come down; why should the work cease, while I leave it and come down to you?”. So in effect he said “O! No!” to the invitation.

This was followed by a flurry of rumours. A fraudulent letter was written accusing Nehemiah of rebellion, so that he and the others might become afraid. Although some were discouraged, Nehemiah remained firm. Then a false messenger was sent. Despite all these efforts by the opposition, the work was maintained and the wall was completed.

So Nehemiah was mocked, ridiculed, threatened, and he had problems with his own people. Enemies sought to talk with him, false rumours were circulated, and a false letter produced. All these things could have weakened or even stopped the work, but Nehemiah fought on against all opposition, and succeeded in his enterprise.

Those who endeavour to work faithfully for the Lord often meet opposition. In these days, some do not believe that Satan exists, but the faithful worker for God realizes that Satan is still active today. As we try to be faithful to the trust that God has placed in our hands, let us be prepared for the attack of the enemy. When it takes

place, let us press on while looking to the Lord for help and guidance. Did you notice that Nehemiah had 7 attacks to overcome and six of these arose from his enemies while one arose from within his own helpers? We may be discouraged and it is possible for those who help us to contribute, perhaps not intentionally, to our problems. Nehemiah prayed constantly to God, and his example is worth following. God was with him and gave him strength to overcome and to finish the work.

We have many resources and possessions. As we read the Scriptures, there are many precious promises to encourage us. Have we accepted and enjoyed those possessions?

Israel were given the promised land. The book of Joshua tells the story of the conquest of the land, but at one time, there were seven tribes that had not entered into possession of their part of the land of promise. In Joshua 18:3 we read:

“And Joshua said unto the children of Israel How long are ye slack to go to possess the land, which the Lord God of your fathers hath given you?”.

Joshua had to remind these tribes that they should possess their share of the promised land, and then they did take possession. This is an example to us, to enter into the possession of those precious promises that God has given us in His Word. Let us read the Scriptures and ask God to fulfil in our lives those things which He has given to us, and which until now we have not enjoyed. One is the realization of His presence with us and His enabling power to carry on the work that He has entrusted to our care.

It is possible that even we might be slack, but let us remember that God is always faithful. He is never slack concerning His promises and He will support us daily. He remains faithful at all times.

There are so many Scriptures which tell us of God's faithfulness. For example, let us read Deuteronomy 31:8: “And the Lord, He it is that doth go before thee; He will be with thee, He will not fail thee, neither forsake thee: fear not, neither be dismayed”. The word translated “fail” means to be slack. God will never be slack concerning the fulfilment of His promises, and in taking care of us. He is always with us, so we need never be discouraged. Let us carry on the work He has given us and may we never be dismayed, whatever the circumstances may be.

One final word. As we seek to serve the Lord, let us be motivated by our love for the Lord. The love of God has been shed abroad in our hearts. We love Him because He first loved us and He died for our sakes. We love Him in return for all that He has done for us. So our life of service springs from our love for God and for the Lord Jesus Christ, and also from our love for our fellowmen. Let us remember the words of 1 Corinthians 13:8 "Love never faileth". Of the three Christian graces, love is the greatest (1 Cor. 13:13). So let us be motivated by love, a love that never fails.

Why should the work cease? Shall we weaken in our endeavours? Shall we listen to those who may mock us or seek other ways of discouraging us? No. The Lord is with us. He will help and sustain us and give us the courage we need; and the strength to do His will. Why should the work cease?

Let us then go forth in His strength and be faithful, doing His will.

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