

# Praise God . . . Always, II

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## The Joy of Christmas

Can you understand why Christmas is such a joyous season?

But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons (Galatians 4:4-5).

In our society, Christmas is held to be the birthday of Jesus of Nazareth; but much of the origin of this tradition is obscure. No one knows when Jesus of Nazareth was born. The date was taken from the pagan calendar, where it was celebrated as the birthday of the sun god. Since the birthday of Jesus of Nazareth was unknown, the church authorities adopted the pagan celebration and took December 25th as the birthday of Jesus Christ. Because of this celebration it was called "Christ Mass" which was shortened to Christmas.

The Bible does not emphasize the human birth of Jesus of Nazareth. It is mentioned in only two of the four Gospels. By way of contrast the cross of Calvary is reported in some detail in each Gospel. In the course of church history Christmas is not treated nearly as significantly as Easter.

The coming of the Son of God in the form of man is very important. We read, "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us . . . full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). So much can be learned from the account recorded in Luke chapter 1, verses 26 through 56.

And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary (Luke 1:26-27).

This is the way the account begins. God took the initiative. Whatever happened would be God's responsibility. Heaven and earth are both involved.

No possible translation of these words can obscure the fact that this person Mary was a true virgin.

And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be (Luke 1:28-29).

This encounter with the angel Gabriel was disturbing to Mary.

And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favor with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shall call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end (Luke 1:30-33).

Gabriel's message: Mary was to bear a child who would sit on the throne of David and rule forever. "Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man" (Luke 1:34)? Mary's response was very natural.

I remember when I was professor in a seminary presenting this event, one of my students asked me, "Can you really believe this account?" And I replied to him, "Why not?" And he said, "Well it is biologically impossible." I remember how I asked him, "Have you got room on your seat there? Can you move over just a little? I want Mary to come and sit beside you because that was her question. She asked Gabriel and he did not explain. Now you are asking me: will it be all right if I do not explain?" I think everybody

in that class got the point.

But actually Gabriel did have something to say to Mary.

And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. For with God nothing shall be impossible (Luke 1:35-37).

Mary's reply was actually an expression of yielded faith. "Go ahead," she said, "do it that way. Be it unto me according to thy word."

And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Judah; and entered into the house of Zechariah, and saluted Elisabeth. And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost (Luke 1:39-41).

Elisabeth spoke as she was led by the Spirit. When you read what she said you will see how she felt led. In reply Mary spoke as she was led by the Spirit; and her words were very impressive. Mary stayed with Elisabeth three months. This account of this event was written by a doctor, Luke, "the beloved physician." If anybody would have been aware of the natural problem implied in such an account it would have been a doctor. Luke wrote it exactly the way he had found it out.

This account of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth presents some very important aspects. This was God's idea. "In the fullness of time God sent forth his Son." Paul wrote in speaking of Christ Jesus,

Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross (Philippians 2:6-8).

All of that was in the Son of God's mind before He came here. It was in God's mind before He sent Him. Thus the Scripture brings out not only that this was God's idea, but that the Son of God was pre-existent. And this means that when Jesus of Nazareth was born, He was not a child of Adam. He was the child of God. The life that was in Him was the life of God.

The third thing that comes to mind is that this was an act of heaven. The presence and the participation of angels is most impressive. Of course we have at the time the announcement, Gabriel, the archangel, bringing this message personally to Mary. Then at the time of the birth the angels told the shepherds. Thus the angels surrounded the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Another thought that comes to our mind is that this child was born to die. In Hebrews chapter 2, verses 9-15, we find the Son of God took upon Him the nature of Abraham that He might share with us, the children of Adam in the matter of death, in order that He might also share with us the resurrection from the dead and open the way into the presence of God. This is the classic demonstration of the grace of God.

For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich (II Corinthians 8:9).

Paul points out this was the birth of the second man as in I Corinthians chapter 15, verse 47: "The first man is of the earth, earthy" made of the dust of the earth: builded into a body and God breathed into it the breath of life. That was the origin of Adam. "The second man is the Lord from heaven." The same Creator, God, prepared the body for Jesus of Nazareth. And finally we see that God sent His beloved Son to die that we, you and I as believers, might live. This is the inward, deeper, real significance of Christmas. Many people make it an occasion for their own pleasure and for family celebration and for community enterprise of one sort or another. But the real idea in the whole thing is that God sent forth His Son into the world to die that you and I, as we believe, might live.

## The Meaning of Epiphany

Can you understand the problem involved in the invisible God showing Himself to natural man?

While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal (II Corinthians 4:18).

Understanding the Gospel and the way of living in faith is complicated by the fact that whereas the human being is involved both in the things of earth and the things of heaven, the things of heaven are invisible, intangible, inaudible. They cannot be sensed by our natural faculties. This problem extends into the whole matter of worship.

Worship functions in contemplation. As we focus our attention upon the reality of God, while we cannot see God, we can see His works. "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork" (Psalm 19:1). This sight so profoundly impresses some that they are moved to worship the sun, moon and stars. And thus they fall into the error of worshipping and serving the creation more than the Creator.

And because "the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the meanwhile accusing or else excusing one another" (Romans 2:15), is actually real and operative, some are disposed to follow their inner thoughts. They are confident that they can figure things out and so we have men who

. . . became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools. And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like the corruptible man, and the birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things (Romans 1:21-23).

All this helps us to appreciate both the problems of God showing Himself to man, and of man getting a true concept of God so that he might contemplate in worship. God shows His handiwork in creation, just as He shows His sovereignty in providence, and His will in the course of history. But He has shown Himself as a Person in His Son, Jesus Christ, who could say, "He that hath seen me, hath seen the Father."

The early church tried to guide its members in their living by faith by celebrating certain significant aspects in the revelation given from God by specific observances. Thus they developed certain practices such as baptism and the Lord's Supper. They also designated certain seasons, days, in the year when certain events recorded in Scripture were especially remembered. The selection of such times, as for instance Christmas and Easter, as well as the form of the memorials, were not the action of anyone central control but were rather arrived at in the course of the years by common consent.

Because the members of the church were scattered throughout the vast Roman Empire and the methods of communication were so inadequate in those times, differences in procedure developed naturally throughout the church. The Roman Empire had set up two centers of control, the eastern in Constantinople and the western in Rome. And as a matter of fact for a length of time they had two emperors, one in the east and one in the west. The church followed this pattern so there came to be an Eastern Orthodox body and a Western Roman Catholic body. Each of these developed distinct procedures for celebrating the great fact that God had revealed Himself in the Person of Jesus of Nazareth.

The western church emphasized the birth of Jesus of Nazareth and established the custom of celebrating Christmas as "Christ Mass." The eastern church emphasized the revealing of the nature of God in several events recorded in the Scriptures about Jesus of Nazareth. With this in mind the eastern church established the Feast of the Epiphany. Three events were commonly commemorated in the Feast of the Epiphany. The reason for selecting these three and the relationship they have to each other is quite obscure. They seem to have been chosen as clearly showing that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. Sometimes other events in the life of Jesus Christ were also commemorated. In other words there were not only three. In some areas of the church and at certain times they celebrated four and they

even had more than that. But these three were universally observed, the coming of the Wise Men at the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, the baptism by John the Baptist, and the Wedding Feast at Cana of Galilee.

In the incident of the coming of the Wise Men the significant aspect seems to have been the star. What was it? How did it communicate its message to the Magi? How did those Wise Men of the east know about the Jews, or about their hope for a king on the throne of David? The fact that all this is such a mystery seems to have been understood as clear evidence that this event was the work of God who wanted all men to know that He had come to bring salvation. It is generally thought that those Wise Men were Gentiles. That seems to fit the general context and if they were the question arises, as I have just pointed out, "How did they know?" The very fact that this incident was inexplicable qualified it as an event that revealed the hand of God. Only God could do that.

In the baptism of Jesus of Nazareth, the noteworthy aspects were the voice from heaven: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased"; and the descent of the Holy Spirit in bodily form, descending like a dove and lighting upon Him. All else could be understood, but these two items were beyond human understanding. No attempt was ever made to explain how they happened, or what they meant beyond being clear indication that the living God was manifesting Himself in and through Jesus of Nazareth.

The third event was the Wedding at Cana of Galilee. This was notable because of the miracle of turning water into wine. Here again is an aspect that baffles human understanding. There was nothing exceptional about the wedding. There was nothing exceptional about them having a wedding feast. There was nothing exceptional about them serving wine. All of that would follow through naturally. But to turn water into wine, that was beyond human understanding. It is the very fact that this is beyond human experience that makes this third event acceptable to the Feast of the Epiphany.

God is beyond human understanding and can do the impossible. So taken together these three events recorded in Scripture in the account of the coming of Jesus of Nazareth were commemorated to bring to the mind of the worshipper the clear manifestation of the reality of the living God and His interest in the children of men. Throughout church history the emphasis upon the celebration of Christmas was largely promoted in the western branch of the church which we commonly call the Roman Catholic. These three events which were taken to show the reality of God manifesting Himself to mankind were considered together in what is commonly called the Feast of Epiphany, and were celebrated in the eastern, the Orthodox Catholic church.

The Roman Catholic church chose December 25th as the birthday of Jesus of Nazareth. They did not know when it was. No one knows when He was born, but this was a date on which the pagan community celebrated the birthday of the sun god. The Roman Catholic church took that date and made it the day when they would celebrate the birthday of Jesus of Nazareth. Interestingly enough the eastern church, though they did not specially emphasize the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, did celebrate these evidences of the coming of God, the manifestation of God to man, in these three events which were called the Feast of the Epiphany. They put that celebration on the first Sunday of the new year. That date was chosen because it was linked into the pagan calendar by the eastern church.

We can recognize for ourselves the great importance of the fact that Almighty God did come into the affairs of men and did show Himself in the Person of His Son. We understand He was born of a virgin and born as a Babe in Bethlehem in what we now celebrate as Christmas; but He also came to manifest the power of God, the almighty, inexplicable, invisible power of God as seen in the various miracles that occurred in the course of His life. Thinking of these things we worship Him who is Almighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

## The Practice of Lent

Do you know what a believer in Christ could do to strengthen his worship ?

In the worship of God the believer exercises his faith. The believer has never seen God, Who remains invisible, but he has seen the work of God in the natural creation, in providence, and in the affairs of men. He has read the Holy Scriptures which are able to make him wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. But faith is not a constant experience. It can be stronger and it can be weaker. The nurture of faith has been the desire and the intention of intelligent believers.

In the course of the experience of the church certain procedures have been developed into practices and customs which generate and strengthen faith. In the history of believing people certain days in the year have been set aside for the observance of certain memorial occasions. These observances have been listed in the calendar of the year as stated occasions when the believers devote their attention to certain procedures designed to stimulate and increase their faith. The revelation of the reality of God in the Person of Jesus Christ is featured by two major events, the incarnation and the resurrection. These have been marked in the calendar as Christmas and Easter. The church has developed the practices of preparing for each of these occasions respectively.

The church has developed the period of Advent before Christmas and the period of Lent before Easter. The practice of observing Lent is not found in Scripture. It was first noted in the history of the church about 130A.D. That is over a hundred years after the church was launched. Since there is no scriptural pattern for its observance, Lent is obviously the result of efforts of godly men attempting to guide the believers into procedures that would prepare them to observe the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in a worthy manner. There would be no single pattern as in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper which memorialize certain events in the earthly career of Jesus Christ. Extraneous customs could be expected and these have emerged in the course of the history of worship.

Since the death of Jesus Christ on Calvary 's cross is directly related to the sins of men, and since it is clear that the will of God about sins is that the believer should repent, the season of Lent was given over to the practice of repentance in various forms of penitence. It was natural to associate fasting with penitence. So the church patterned the observance of deliberate penitence in fasting in accord with the forty days of fasting which Jesus of Nazareth experienced at the time of His temptation in the wilderness.

The observance of Lent has been established as a period of forty days, not counting Sundays, before Easter. This period begins with special observance of Ash Wednesday, and is featured by deliberate self denial in one form or another which is designed to induce a worthy mood of repentance. I do not know how to interpret the fact that the forty days of fasting which Jesus of Nazareth experienced in the temptation in the wilderness had nothing to do with sins, of course, hut the days of fasting that we follow in the period of Lent do have to do with our sins. The only place where the connection is to be seen is in the forty days, and that it was fasting. In any case that is the apparent origin of Lent, as observed today.

Although Lent is to be observed by the whole company of believers, it is basically a personal individual affair. Now this is something we all need to understand. Actually the practice of Lent has been developed as a denominational matter or even a congregational matter. It has become a church calendar affair. Ministers choose topics which they feel are Lenten sermon topics. But actually the practice of repentance is distinctly a personal individual affair. The purpose of Lent is to induce a worthy frame of mind as the believer worships God.

We can look to Matthew 6 for guidance in the practice of nurturing faith. Three practices are noted in that chapter, namely, alms-giving, praying and fasting. Each of the three is essentially personal and private. Many practices in the history of the church have been developed and used for a time here or there during the period of Lent, but these three have been fairly constant: the giving of alms, praying and fasting.

"Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them" (Matthew 6:1). In the Old Testa-

ment alms-giving and righteousness are often synonymous. Sometimes the word is translated "alms-giving" and sometimes the word is translated "righteousness." I note in my Bible that the marginal alternate given for this very verse: "Take heed that ye do not your alms before men is "righteousness." This is very, very interesting, because it brings to our minds that giving to the poor is essential to being right or upright before God, that if we want to be right in the sight of God we will have to give to the poor.

Alms-giving requires self denial. I want that \$5 I have in my hand for myself. I must deny myself before I can give it to the needy. That may be why it is so very important to take note of it right there, that we might see how important it is to give to the poor. Paul said that he would not have known what sin was if he had not learned "Thou shalt not covet." Coveting has to do with wanting things and holding to things, and before I can let go of things, I am going to have to deny myself. The sin of Ananias and Sapphira, in the book of Acts, whom Peter challenged on the way they were pretending to give and not giving as they were pretending, can be pinpointed right here. This is so very, very important. I am dwelling on it here, and laboring the point, because I feel that it slips by so often. I shudder when I think of how long I was in the church when I thought that my giving in the Lord's name to the Lord's church was largely a matter of my good nature and my generosity. I felt as though that was something to my credit. I am afraid it was a long time before I realized I need to give so that I can be right in the sight of God.

The second practice that is mentioned here is prayer.

And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking (Matthew 6:5-7).

This does not mean a believer should never repeat his prayers. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus of Nazareth prayed at least three times that we know about, "saying the same words." It will be all right to repeat if the believer is in earnest, but he should not repeat because he thinks repeating means something.

Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him. After this manner therefore pray ye:

Our Father which art in heaven,  
Hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come.  
Thy will be done  
in earth, as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil:  
For thine is the kingdom, and the  
power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Matthew 6:8-15).

An important aspect in praying is the requirement of forgiveness. If I do not forgive others, I will not be heard. That is all there is to it.

Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint Thine head, and wash thy face; that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly (Matthew 6:16-18).

Fasting is to be unto the Father which is in secret. This practice is obscure amongst us today yet it

is very important. It may well refer to other interests and actions than eating food. It does involve the discipline of self in self denial. I am of the opinion that for many people fasting is carried out by the fact that there are some places where they will not go and some things that they will not do, far more than just some food they will not eat. The very fact that they deny themselves the privileges that other people take is included, I think, in this idea of fasting.

We should be careful that we do not fail to observe these guidelines at all times in the year. I am inclined to feel about this whole program of Lent as I do with reference to Christmas. Many times when Christmas is over we say to ourselves, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could have done that all the time?" The fact is you could have done it. And the fact is so far as this program of seeking to draw nigh unto God during the period of Lent is concerned, that could go on all year long, and it would be a blessing if we would do it.

## **The Significance of Holy Week**

Do you realize to see Jesus of Nazareth as He really was it is necessary to know what is recorded in Scripture?

Jesus of Nazareth said, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." And the church has learned to look at Jesus of Nazareth in worship practices and customs. Paul referred to Him who is the image of God. However the physical form and the features of His countenance are nowhere described in Scripture. What are recorded are the situations in which He lived and the events in which He took part. Probably the greatest event in His earthly career was His death on Calvary's cross and His resurrection three days later.

The last week of His life on earth seems to have been the most important in the light of the events which were recorded. In promoting the public worship of God the church emphasized that last week by commemorating it as "Holy Week." A worthy mood for worship at the annual occurrence of Good Friday and Easter Sunday could be induced by remembering what is recorded in the Scripture as the events of that week between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday. The worshipper is not left to his own imagination as to what Jesus of Nazareth did and said during that week.

Palm Sunday was the occasion of the triumphal entry when Jesus of Nazareth came to Jerusalem as the prophet had predicted. "Behold, thy King cometh, sitting on an ass's colt" (John 12:15). The fact that the colt did not resist Jesus of Nazareth sitting on him is a notable miracle. It was taken by the multitudes as evidence that this was truly the Son of David that cometh in the name of the Lord.

The next event recorded is the cleansing of the temple. We read:

And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves, and said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves (Matthew 21:12-13).

The popular idea of Jesus of Nazareth being only meek and mild certainly needs to be corrected. Here He manifested what the psalmist meant when he wrote, "The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up." Contemplating this event will fill the heart of the worshipper with awe as he gazes upon the attitude of God toward places of public worship.

The next event recorded is the amazing cursing of the barren fig tree. Jesus of Nazareth also taught a number of parables that emphasizes the idea that God looks for fruit in His people, and will judge such as are barren. In using such parables as the Ten Virgins, the Talents and the Sheep and the Goats, Jesus of Nazareth taught plainly that the day of judgment is coming and that in judgment God will destroy. Remembering this would induce a solemn mood of worship.

These are proper items of consideration when we are looking at Jesus of Nazareth who was the express image of God. When we are thinking about God, looking into His face, let us keep these things in

mind.

During the last week of His earthly career, a number of incidents occurred that are classic examples of different personal attitudes toward the Son of God. In Matthew 26, verses 6-13 we have the anointing by Mary which is the classic example of personal tribute to the Lord Jesus Christ. Now we are keeping in mind that what we are interested in is the development, the nurture, of worship on our part. Our worship will be aroused as we gaze upon the Person of Jesus of Nazareth that we might see God. Looking into the reality of God arouses in us a response that is a proper attitude of worship. As we look at these various incidents that occurred in the last week that Jesus of Nazareth was on the face of the earth, we should keep in mind those things that belong to a true concept of God.

In thinking about the anointing by Mary there are several things we should notice. The woman's act: she brought the best that she had to the Lord personally. She brought a box of ointment, precious ointment, very expensive. She brought it to anoint Him. The woman's rating: she was rated in two different ways. She was criticized as doing too much. This money she spent on that perfume could have been given to the poor. But Jesus of Nazareth also evaluated her, saying, "She hath wrought a good work upon me." We can see in this also the woman's secret: she loved Him. It was a simple event. This is the classic example to be repeated over the whole wide world of what personal tribute to the Lord Jesus Christ would look like.

Now later on in this same chapter we read the betrayal by Judas.

Then one of the twelve, called Judas Iscariot, went unto the chief priests, and said unto them, What will ye give me, and I will deliver him unto you? And they covenanted with him for thirty pieces of silver. And from that time he sought opportunity to betray him (Matthew 26:14-16).

This incident belongs in this Holy Week observance. We should keep in mind that someone who had been associated with Him closely as one of His apostles, who had done His bidding in the course of several years of time, could actually be led away by his own inner weakness in the love of money.

And while he yet spake, lo, Judas, one of the twelve, came, and with him a great multitude with swords and staves, from the chief priests and elders of the people. Now he that betrayed him gave them a sign, saying, Whomsoever I shall kiss, that same is he: hold him fast. And forthwith he came to Jesus, and said, Hail, master; and kissed him (Matthew 26:47-49).

In worshipping we should look into the reality of God. We need to look at the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ to see what God is really like. One of the ways in which we can see Him is to note how He was treated by others. In the same chapter 26 in verse 58 and again in verse 69-75 there is the well known incident of the denial by Peter, which is a solemn warning of the danger in following afar off. Peter followed but he followed "afar off," and he fell victim to a situation that caught him unawares.

Finally in this Holy Week there was another incident that also revealed something of personal conduct toward Jesus of Nazareth.

When the even was come, there came a rich man of Arimathea, named Joseph, who also himself was Jesus' disciple: he went to Pilate, and begged the body of Jesus. Then Pilate commanded the body to be delivered. And when Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock: and he rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulcher, and departed (Matthew 27:57-60).

I feel strongly that this is one of the most striking instances of tribute to Jesus of Nazareth. At a time when all forsook the Lord and fled, this man came forward to claim the body of his Lord, and gave Him a worthy burial.

It was during this last week that Jesus of Nazareth gave an example to His disciples as to how they should humbly serve each other as He washed their feet (John 13:1-17). Later He gave them guidance for living when He said, "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another" (John 13:34).



When I think about how Jesus Christ loved me, I have no question in my own mind that it was not because He liked me. It was not because there was anything about me that pleased Him. It was because He is a God of grace. It is the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ doing for me what I did not deserve. This is what the word "love" in the New Testament really, basically means. It is doing for people, giving to people, taking of one's own and sharing with others. That is what Christ told them to do. "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another." Believers should make it a practice that they care for each other and give to each other: "As I have loved you, that ye also love one another."

And so in the period of the Holy Week while we are thinking of these things and want really to draw nigh unto God, we do well to recall such incidents. There are more of them but I have chosen some, as incidents that are recorded of what happened to Him in the last week that He was here in this world. In it all as we see Mary of Bethany coming to anoint Him, and we see Joseph of Arimathea coming to claim His body, we can see what real genuine devotion to Him will look like. And when we recall Judas we can be warned that the human heart is a deceitful thing: an uncommitted person could easily in the very presence of the Lord be turned away from Him.

## **The Glory of Pentecost**

Can you understand how Pentecost is related to the idea of harvest?

The practices and customs observed in the public worship of God have been placed in the calendar of the church year as a series of celebrations. This enables believers to organize their observances to secure united group participation. The weakness of this practice is the tendency to neglect these specific phases of worship at other times in the year. Thus the consciousness of the coming of the Son of God to die for sinners that He might save whosoever believeth in Him, should not be limited to the month of December. Just so the coming of the Holy Spirit to dwell in the believer should be thought of, not only at Pentecost. Nevertheless the special emphasis in annual observances can serve to strengthen the affect of these truths in the life of the believer throughout the year.

Pentecost was observed by Israel in Old Testament times in relation to their harvest, as the second of two celebrations. At the beginning of the harvest, there was a celebration of the "first fruits," then fifty days later when the harvest was finished occurred the second celebration. This is similar to our harvest home celebrations which we enjoy. This was called Pentecost, being the completion of the fifty days of harvesting. This accounts for the form of the Scripture which reads, "And when the day of Pentecost was fully come:" this meant when the period, the fifty days of harvesting, was completed.

In the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, His own bodily resurrection, three days after His death on the cross, can be taken as the "first fruits" of His work. The coming of the Holy Spirit into the hearts of His disciples can be taken as the "harvest home," the completion of what He came to do.

The coming of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the disciples on the day of Pentecost marked the beginning of something new in the world, the church as the body of Christ. This was much more than a fellowship of believers which could be referred to as a community. This was a new creation of a communion," as a living organism in which Christ was the Head and the believers were members of His body and of one another. They were all, Christ and His believers, indwelt by the one Spirit who controlled their actions as led by the Head, Christ Himself. You can see how this is different from the community. A community would be a gathering together of a number of people by mutual agreement who would unite themselves in various corporate enterprises: each of them an individual but working together as a group. But the church is not like that.

The church has an inward relationship. There is one Spirit in all the members. The true church, whose members are known only to God, continues to this day as the Body of Christ. Some members are already in heaven; and they are known as the Church Triumphant. Some are still here in the flesh, scattered over

the whole world; and they are known as the Church Militant.

Some groups of believers have banded themselves together in organizations called churches. Some have been aware of their inner communion with all believers, and have tried to set up some form of organization, such as the World Council of Churches, which was to be designed to function as a central control of all outward activities of all believers. The basic weakness of this effort can be felt in two facts. First, not all members of these churches are truly born again. And second, not all truly born again believers are members of such organizations. The life of the body of Christ is generated and guided by the Holy Spirit of God, whom God sent to be in the hearts of the believers. The Holy Spirit leads the believers as members of Christ's body in the living will of the living God.

To help the individual believers the Holy Spirit endows certain members with gifts, which they are to exercise to the benefit of all members in the body. Paul discusses such gifts in I Corinthians in chapters 12, 13 and 14. These gifts may be seen as "divine enablements for service." They are known in the Greek language as "charisma." Emphasis upon the function of these gifts has resulted in some believers being labeled "charismatic."

A study of I Corinthians chapter 12 will reveal that Paul in one place names at least nine such gifts.

For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; to another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues (I Corinthians 12:8-10).

In that list there are nine various gifts. Then Paul writes, "But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will."

Toward the end of that chapter Paul lists the gifts differently in this fashion.

And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues (I Corinthians 12:28).

Here there are eight listed. Not all believers have these gifts. They are given to some that all may profit thereby. Such gifts are given to certain members for the benefit of others, but never for their own personal enjoyment. But the function of the Holy Spirit can produce better results in believers than gifts, as Paul writes, "And yet show I unto you a more excellent way."

Paul tells in another epistle what are the fruit of the Spirit.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law (Galatians 5:22- 23).

There are nine of these fruits. Not all members of the church have gifts. Probably no one has all the gifts which are given by the Holy Spirit; but all believers are to produce fruit, which is far more important. "Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit" (John 15:8). We should keep in mind that the gifts are never given for personal enjoyment. They are not for personal pleasure or for personal prestige or for personal aggrandizement in any way. The believer is not to make anything of his gifts. They are for service.

Gifts were given by the Holy Spirit apparently without any special reference to the spiritual quality of the people receiving them. I expect that one of the things the individuals would need to be is obedient, but how far they had grown in spiritual understanding is not involved. People can exercise faith sometimes with remarkable strength, who have a very little understanding of the Scriptures as a whole. There are other such examples.

Fruit is always the result of more understanding of Scripture. Gifts are given by the Holy Spirit to certain members of the body, that they might help other members of the body; but fruit appears in the

believers who have the Holy Spirit working in them. It is the Spirit working in them who produces these fruits. Gifts are exercised as believers obey the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and they function to lead others in the will of God. Fruit is the function of the Holy Spirit and occurs in the life of the believer to the glory of God.

We need to remember the fact that fruit is not the result of personal effort. Fruit that grows in your backyard in the orchard, the peach that grows on the peachtree, grows and develops naturally. Just so the love, the joy, the peace, the long-suffering, the gentleness, the goodness, the faith, the meekness, and the self control, the temperance, that you find in the faithful believer are not the result of his personal effort. They are the consequence of the Holy Spirit working in his heart.

## **The Hope of Advent**

Do you realize that the coming of Christ into this world and into the life of the believer is something else than the natural process?

The coming of the kingdom of God into this world was revealed to Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, in a dream which Daniel interpreted. The vision showed an image in the form of a man upon whose feet fell a stone "cut out without hands" which shattered the feet, and then the image, until it was like chaff which was driven away by the wind. But the stone grew until it filled the whole earth (Daniel 2:31-35). Daniel interpreted this dream for the king as a revelation of the future, the coming of the kingdom of God which would destroy all the kingdoms of men. Just as that stone fell on that image and shattered it, so the kingdom of God would intrude into this world, fall upon the kingdoms of this world, and shatter them. All this seems obscure to us but some of its truth is obvious.

The kingdom of God is not a product of earthly process, of human behavior. The stone fell on the image from the outside. Just so the coming of Jesus of Nazareth, as "the Word was made flesh," was not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor the will of man but of God (John 1:13). Even so the coming again of Christ in the open manifestation of Christ as King will not be the consequence of any natural process in human history. What Daniel saw was an intrusion into human affairs from the outside. Even so the coming of the kingdom of God in the Person of the Son of God, the King of Kings, both in the incarnation when Jesus of Nazareth was born and in the "parousia" when Jesus Christ returns in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory, as we read in Matthew 24:30, is not an event occurring in the historical process. It is an intrusion from above, from heaven itself.

The coming of the Son of God in the incarnation in the birth of Jesus of Nazareth had been predicted in the Old Testament. Even so when it came it was unexpected. There was no advance notice. "But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son" (Galatians 4:4). But His coming again has been definitely foretold in so many words in the New Testament. Not only did Jesus of Nazareth discuss His return with His disciples as in Matthew chapter 24, but He told several parables to emphasize the importance of the believer being always ready for this sure event. The faithful and wise servant will be awaiting expectantly the imminent return of his Lord (Matthew 24:42-51). The wise virgins will have oil in their lamps expecting the return of the Bridegroom at any time (Matthew 25:1-13).

Paul stressed the fact that the coming of the Lord in His return would be related to the resurrection of those who have fallen asleep in Him. This is revealed both in I Corinthians chapter 15, verses 51-58 and in I Thessalonians chapter 4, verses 13-18. Paul admonished believers, "Wherefore comfort one another with these words." But the total picture of the coming again of Christ Jesus is more profound than its significance for the individual believer.

It is true that Christ is coming to receive His own to Himself that they might be with Him forever to enjoy the blessedness of eternal life. But God is God of all the earth. He is the Maker, the Keeper, and the Judge of all men. Thus the coming of the Lord will be to judge all men everywhere. Paul clearly stated

that the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, taking vengeance on them that know not God and that obey not the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ (II Thessalonians 1:7-8).

The return of the Lord Jesus Christ will be a solemn occasion with great joy for believers, and real grief for unbelievers. The idea that when Christ comes all will be sweetness and light is simply not true. Any hopes built upon such a premise will be disappointed. Here again sound worship will include awe in the presence of God who knows all things, who will not tolerate sin and who will destroy sinners.

One of the blessed concepts that believers have cherished in all anticipation of the return of the Lord has been the "Blessed Hope." Just as the bride longs to see the face of the bridegroom, so believers long to see the face of their Savior and Lord. This is their confident expectation, "For we shall see Him as He is," which has been called the Blessed Hope. All contemplation of the reality of God must include this certain return of the Lord Jesus Christ who will come not as the Lamb of God but as the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. To think about God in worship must include thinking about Christ coming to judge.

This coming of the Lord in glory is sure and certain. There can be no question that this is the message of the New Testament. Jesus of Nazareth predicted again and again that He would be killed and would rise from the dead on the third day. He also taught parables to show that the Master would return to check the faithful service of His servants. We all know the marvelous record of His ascension into heaven. But at that ascension the disciples were given the very clear promise that the return of the Lord would be visible. "This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). His disciples saw Him go in bodily form, they will see Him come back in bodily form, as it is written.

Sometimes people think this is just one of the doctrines of the church, as if you could take it or leave it. But that is not true. You can take it, but you cannot leave it. It will come to you. The return of the Lord is imminent, and that word means there is no other major event in God's program that must happen before He comes. His coming may be at any time. When Jesus of Nazareth taught concerning the end of the world and His return, He made this unmistakably clear:

Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come. Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh (Matthew 24:42, 44).

When we are considering this whole concept of the advent, we have in mind that "advent" did refer to His coming the first time which we celebrated at the time of Christmas. That was the coming of the Lord in the form of the Babe at Bethlehem. Then He came as the Lamb of God. But He is coming again. And when He comes again He is coming as the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. He will not be coming as an innocent little babe. He will be coming as Almighty God. He will be coming as the King of Kings and the Lord of all.

The book of Revelation describes that coming. He will be coming in authority and power. And He will destroy those who are against Him. When He came the first time He yielded, He let everything happen the way in which men would. Even Satan himself could be active in putting Him to death. But God raised Him from the dead, so that the worst that Satan could do was overcome by the grace of God and the power of God. Now God will send Him again, but when He comes again it will not be to submit, it will be to dominate. Christ will come to rule. He will come to destroy. He will come to call His own to Himself.

And so we can say to ourselves the coming of the Lord is sure and certain. The coming of the Lord will be visible, and the return of the Lord is imminent. It could happen any time. And we can only humbly ask Almighty God to help us to be ready; for He Himself said, "Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come."