

Higher Than the Angels

“Being made so much better than the angels, as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.”

—*Hebrews 1:4*

THROUGHOUT THE HISTORY of humanity there have been miscarriages of justice due to the unwisdom and prejudice of those whose business it is to judge and punish accused violators of the law.

In most cases these unfortunate experiences are little publicized, and soon forgotten by all except the individuals directly concerned. It was different, however, in the case of the man of Galilee who was hung upon a cross until he died—not because he had violated any law of his day, but because of religious prejudice and intolerance. Here, indeed, was a travesty of justice, but it was destined to mark a turning point in man’s history, and to introduce an entirely new concept of religion in the earth. At this season of the year, when many bring to remembrance the events of twenty centuries ago, we likewise call to mind their eternal import in the plan of God.

There were a few who did not lose faith in Jesus when the mob cried for his death. Among these was

Mary Magdalene. She went to the tomb of her beloved Master early in the morning after the Sabbath and found it empty. She notified Peter and John, who came to the tomb and confirmed her findings. They returned to their home, but Mary tarried. It was then that she saw two angels in white at the head and at the feet of where the body of Jesus had lain.—John 20:1-12

Mary was weeping bitterly, and in answer to questions put to her by these heaven-sent strangers, she explained that the body of her Lord had been taken away and that she did not know where to find it. Outside of the tomb another stranger approached her, and he also wanted to know the cause of her distress. She thought this man was the gardener, and supposing that he had been in the general vicinity most of the time since Jesus died, thought he could give her some information as to who had taken away the body, and where it had been taken, so she asked him about it.—vss. 14,15

This stranger, who appeared as a gardener, did indeed know what had become of Jesus' body, for he was the resurrected Lord himself! With the tone of voice and manner of speaking with which she was familiar, and which on many occasions no doubt had stirred her very soul, he now said to her, "Mary." (vs. 16) He did not look like Jesus, and he was not dressed as Jesus normally had been. However, it was the voice of Jesus, and Mary knew then that he was no longer dead. Mary was convinced that she had seen Jesus, but she understood also that now he was different.

Later, the risen Jesus joined two of his disciples who were walking toward Emmaus and conversed

with them. They did not recognize him until he offered thanks at the evening meal. Here again it was evidently the tone of his voice and his familiar way of expressing thanks and breaking bread that caused them to know that their guest was the Master. (Luke 24:13-32) On another occasion, he appeared in an upper room where his apostles were conferring. They had locked the doors for fear of the Jews, but Jesus came into the room just the same. This time he appeared in such a manner that they recognized him by sight.—John 20:19,20

Mary had seen a “gardener.” Two of the disciples had seen and conversed with a “stranger.” The apostles in the upper room saw the Master as he formerly appeared. Later, a group of them saw him on the lake shore, and thought he was a fisherman. Jesus was with them forty days after his resurrection, but they saw him only on a few brief occasions. (Acts 1:1-3; I Cor. 15:3-7) He was indeed different, to such a degree that they were perplexed and puzzled about just how they still could be his disciples.

ALL POWER GIVEN TO HIM

After Jesus was raised from the dead, he announced to his disciples that “all power in heaven and in earth” had been given to him. (Matt. 28:18) If we, by faith, accept this as a statement of fact, there is no obstacle to our believing that one who possessed such power could come and go as the wind, and reveal himself to human eyes in any manner he chose—as a gardener, a stranger, in a locked room, or by the lake shore. Jesus, in coming to earth to die for the sin-cursed race, humbled himself and was made human, a “little lower than the angels.” Now he had been

rewarded for his faithfulness, and was the exalted Jesus, a spirit being, having been made “so much better than the angels.”—Heb. 2:9; 1:4

Mankind honors its heroes and rewards those who risk death in order to save or benefit others. There is a righteous principle involved in this, one which had its origin with the Creator. He thus honored Jesus for his faithfulness. He rewarded his Son with glory, honor and immortality. He exalted him higher than the angels, and above every name that is named. (Phil. 2:9,10) He whose wisdom and power operated to create the universe now used that power to raise Jesus from the dead and give him a nature high above all other creations—the divine nature.

Mere man has been able to unloose an infinitely small fraction of the atomic and nuclear energy created by God but does it at the risk of committing international suicide. God, who created that energy, and therefore is vastly superior to it, laid hold upon the dead Jesus who, although dying for the sins of the world was, nevertheless, unjustly killed. God restored him to life, and exalted him to his own right hand, giving him “all power” in heaven and in earth. We are awe-inspired with the thought! Is it any wonder that divine intervention such as this should have such a profound effect upon the course of the world? Indeed, the direct use of divine power by the Creator to raise his Son to share his own immortal nature marked the beginning of a new age—the Christian age!

CHRISTIAN AGE NOT ALWAYS “CHRISTIAN”

We should not labor under any misapprehensions concerning the Christian age. Many things have

occurred during the time since Jesus' resurrection, and in the name of Christianity, which have not been Christian and are not taught in the Bible. It has not been Christian for one nation to go to war against another in the name of Christ. The Crusades were unholy and unchristian. The Holy Inquisition was not Christian, but was the product of inhuman religious intolerance, and among the most unholy of all the practices of the Dark Ages.

The persecution of millions among various ethnic groups and nationalities has not been Christian. Likewise, the fear-instilling teaching of eternal torment for the unconverted is wholly unchristian. All of these, as well as many other beliefs and practices, have been the result of unscriptural tradition and superstition handed down from one generation to another. That they were believed in and practiced in the name of Christ has confused the true principles of Christianity in the minds of millions.

It is this obscured conception of Christianity that has caused so many now to lose faith in the Bible. The enlightenment of our day is causing many thinking minds to realize that a religious system which has promoted such practices and beliefs is one that the world would be better off without. Thus, we should not be surprised if such a conclusion is reached by the unbiased, unprejudiced, thoughtful person. However, the hidden jewels of truth can be found in the Bible if the earnest truth-seeker will push aside the superstitions and traditions which have hidden them from view and seek them. In the light of present-day events these truths reflect beams of light from the God of heaven which

pierce the gloom and reveal the remaining steps to the human destiny of peace and everlasting life planned for mankind by the Creator.

HAS CHRISTIANITY FAILED?

To the extent that the moral and ethical teachings of Christ have been practiced, we have had a better world. Of this there can be no doubt. On the other hand, the failure of the nations, and of individuals comprising the nations, to practice Christian principles in all their dealings with one another, does not mean that Christianity has failed. For, strange though this may seem, Jesus did not commission his followers to convert the world to his way of life during this Christian age. To the extent that the world has been made better by the influence of his teachings in the lives of those who have been his true followers, it has thus far been a by-product of true Christian faith and work.

Jesus commissioned his followers to go into all the world and preach the “gospel of the kingdom,” and to do so “among all nations.” (Matt. 24:14; Luke 24:47) They were not to limit their field to one nation, but were to go to all. Those of any and all nationalities who believed and devoted themselves to the cause of Christ were to be accepted as his disciples. That every individual in all nations would become disciples was not expected. For the world in general who heard the message, it was to be merely in the nature of a “witness,” or testimony. Instead of all the world being converted by this effort, the Scriptures explain that its purpose has been merely to “take out” of the world “a people for his name.”—Acts 15:14-17

A great deal is said in the New Testament about the calling and development of this class, and much of it has been misunderstood. The promise is given that those who suffer and die with Jesus will live and reign with him. They are to share his glory, and to sit on his throne. Jesus promised to prepare a place for them, and to “come again” and receive them unto himself. (Rom. 8:17; II Tim. 2:11,12; John 14:2,3) All these marvelous promises mean that the hope of the true disciples of Christ during this Christian age is to share the divine nature and glory which the Father gave to Jesus as a reward for his faithfulness. Hence, the apostle speaks of it as a “heavenly calling.”—Heb. 3:1

The selection of these by God, based upon their acceptance of and loyalty to the Gospel as preached by Jesus’ disciples, has been the divine program for this age. It began at Pentecost. There the invisible power of God, the Holy Spirit, came upon the waiting disciples, enlightening their minds and giving them power of speech to declare the message of truth concerning the purposes of God. The response on that first day was tremendous, but the enthusiasm of the believers was commingled with persecution by the intolerant and prejudiced. The battle between light and darkness was on, and the struggle has continued until this day. Moreover, the truth and those who have believed in it have most often been on what appeared to be the losing side.

It was thus with Jesus, who, although the “light of the world,” was crucified. He told his disciples that they also were to be the “light of the world.” (John 8:12; Matt. 5:14) Although they have let it shine as brightly as possible, it has been but a

glimmer in the world of darkness and sin. The light-bearers have been ridiculed, ostracized, persecuted and even killed. Jesus foretold this, saying, “In the world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33) His followers have overcome, too, not by conquering the world, nor by ruling over it through the civil powers, but by overcoming its spirit of selfishness in their hearts and, like Jesus, laying down their lives in sacrifice that others might be blessed.

Indeed, it may have appeared that the true followers of the Gospel of Christ have always been, whether literally or figuratively, on the execution gallows. On the contrary, it has been an altar—God’s altar of sacrifice. His people have, like Jesus, been proving their love for his ways and principles by faithfulness in sacrifice. They have been demonstrating their unselfishness, their devotion to righteousness, and their harmony with the divine principles of justice and love. They have loved their enemies as God has enjoined through Jesus. They have, in short, qualified to be associated with the highly exalted Jesus in the future work of restoring humanity to life upon the earth.

MANKIND TO BE RESTORED

This, then, has been God’s work for his people during the Christian age. In it we see a further manifestation of divine wisdom and mercy. Paul speaks of Christians as “labourers together with God.” (I Cor. 3:9) Surely the Creator, with his infinite wisdom and power, does not need help, especially the very limited aid that could be given to him by imperfect, dying human beings. However, he has

arranged it that way, and there must be a reason for it. One of the titles applied to Jesus in his relationship to God and mankind is that of Mediator. (I Tim. 2:5) His footstep followers of the Christian age are designated as ministers of reconciliation. (II Cor. 5:18-20) They are to share in the future mediatorial work of Jesus, which will reconcile the estranged world to God. Thus, the fallen race will have representation among those who will assist the Lord in preparing the way for their return to favor with God and to life.

We said that the promises relating to the calling and selection of Jesus' disciples during the present age have been misunderstood. From these same promises the erroneous doctrine has been deduced that the Creator never intended that man should remain a human being, and that his human existence is but the first stage in his life; that death is but the portal into the next phase, which is to be spiritual, or heavenly. The thinking is that all who accept Christ as their Savior before they reach death as a human being, go to heaven. Those who do not, it is claimed, go to a place of eternal torment and there suffer for all eternity, with no possibility of release.

Due to this misunderstanding, the real destiny of the human race has been overlooked. Few have noticed the many promises of God to resurrect the dead to life on the earth and give each individual an opportunity to be reconciled back to God, that they might live on the earth forever. The Scriptures clearly state that God "formed the earth and made it; he hath established it, he created it not in vain, he formed it to be inhabited." "The earth hath he

given to the children of men.” (Isa. 45:18; Ps. 115:16) The divine program in selecting the called out class of the Christian age is that they, in heavenly glory with Christ, exalted high above angels and principalities and powers, should, together with him, be the source of life-giving blessings for all mankind. Thus, God’s ultimate design for the majority of mankind is that they live here on the earth—a home especially designed and created for them—and enjoy the eternal blessings of life specifically provided for them.

The little nucleus of disciples who followed Jesus from place to place throughout Judea properly marveled at the mighty miracles he performed. He had at his command the power of God’s Holy Spirit, which he could employ in many ways to benefit the people. The disciples gazed in awe at these things, and doubtless the more so when on one occasion Jesus said to them, “He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father.” —John 14:12

Back in the age before Christ came, God manifested his presence with his people Israel in connection with the Tabernacle and its services. On their Atonement Day, as recorded in Leviticus chapter 16, the blood of a bullock and a goat was taken into the Most Holy of the Tabernacle and sprinkled upon, and in front of, the mercy seat. The Most Holy was symbolic of the presence of God, and that the blood of Jesus actually did for the people what the blood of the bullock did representatively and pictorially. Paul says that the blood of “bulls and goats,” which were offered every year, could not actually take away

sins, but the offering of Jesus Christ, done only once, constituted a “sacrifice for sins for ever.”—Heb. 10:4,10-12

We are not to suppose that Jesus carried his human blood to heaven with him and sprinkled it upon a literal mercy seat. This illustration of the Scriptures is intended merely to convey to our finite minds the idea that the sacrifice of Jesus was well pleasing and acceptable to his Father, and that upon his return to the heavenly courts following the completion of his earthly ministry, the way was prepared for another phase of God’s plan for restoring a lost world.

THE DAY OF PENTECOST

It was on the day of Pentecost that Peter explained how Jesus had been raised from the dead and highly exalted, and, he added, “hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear,” referring to the miraculous manifestation of God’s power, the Holy Spirit, which came upon the waiting disciples at that time. (Acts 2:33) Here the people of God were brought into contact with his power in a manner in which it had never before operated. It illuminated their minds to understand something of the glorious hope which was set before them in the Gospel. It gave them strength and courage to endure the suffering inflicted upon them by enemies of God. It was a token of the power with which they would be endued when, with Jesus, they would later be performing those “greater works” which he had promised as a result of his going to the Father.

Later, Peter said of the true disciples of Jesus, “Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and

precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature.” (II Pet. 1:4) Jesus was exalted to the divine nature—the nature of God—and is now the “express image” of the Father. (Heb. 1:3) John further declares, “We shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.” (I John 3:2) All of this is quite beyond our comprehension. However, to the extent that we can grasp the thought, it is not surprising to realize that if a company of imperfect, dying human beings is to be exalted above all other creatures, and given the very nature of God and partake of his glory, we should not be surprised that it was essential first of all that Jesus should go to his Father, and, as Paul expresses it, “appear in the presence of God for us.”—Heb. 9:24

Jesus made it possible for God’s work of this age to begin, as it did, at Pentecost. That work has continued, mostly unnoticed and unknown to the world. Its implications are so far-reaching and its magnitude so great, that there is little wonder it should be misunderstood and misrepresented. The language and promises of the Bible have been lifted out of their settings and given erroneous and unreasonable meanings. Spurious works, in the name of Christ, have been undertaken and established through misunderstanding the divine program. Meanwhile, the whole human creation of God has groaned and travailed together in pain, waiting for “the manifestation of the sons of God”—that is, waiting unknowingly for the work of this age to be completed, when all those called to be sons of God and joint-heirs with Jesus shall be exalted to live and reign with him in the kingdom of blessing now near.—Rom. 8:19-22; Rev. 20:4,6

“THY KINGDOM COME ... IN EARTH”

When we use the word “kingdom” we are using a word which is very prominent in the Bible. Jesus taught his followers to pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.” (Matt. 6:10) Indeed, the Creator’s will is to be done “in earth,” and for this we greatly rejoice. The term “kingdom” implies rulership, or control. In this case, it signifies divine control over the affairs of men. Jesus will be the ruler in God’s kingdom. His faithful followers, who died sacrificially as he died, will be associated with him. These mighty rulers will be invisible to men, even as God is invisible. We are not to suppose, however, that this kingdom will be indefinite and vague—a rulership consisting merely of an ideology which can be accepted or rejected by the people as they prefer.

Christ’s kingdom will have its human representatives and teachers. The Scriptures tell us who they will be. For example, Peter said that David had not ascended into heaven. (Acts 2:34) Jesus also said that no man had ascended up to heaven. (John 3:13) On another occasion, Jesus said that among those born of women there was none greater than John the Baptist, yet the very least one in the kingdom of heaven was greater than John. (Matt. 11:11) These statements all refer to individuals who served God prior to the Christian era. They reveal that, unlike the servants of God during this age, these “Ancient Worthies” were not given a heavenly hope.

The psalmist speaks of these as the “fathers” in Israel, and the promise is that they shall be made “princes in all the earth.” (Ps. 45:16) Jesus refers to them—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the prophets—

and indicates that when his kingdom is ruling in the earth, these shall be the recognized representatives of it. (Luke 13:28) In this we see again that God's power will operate to raise the dead and install these well qualified men and women as the earthly representatives of the spiritual Christ.

God has promised to intervene in the dark and ominous conditions presently upon the world of mankind by means of the kingdom of Christ, for which so many have prayed for two thousand years. He has already used his power to exalt Jesus far above the angels, and the footstep followers of the Master are destined to share that glory with him. Divine power will soon be used again to restore the Ancient Worthies to fullness of life on earth, and these two companies, selected from among the fallen race, will work together—one in heaven and one on earth—for a thousand years to re-establish divine principles in the hearts of mankind. Thus, all the willing and obedient will attain the blessings of life and peace, and will dwell forever upon the earth, man's eternal home. ■

