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## **THE CHRISTIAN'S NEW YEAR**

*"So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom" Psal.90:12*

"Christians, in numbering their days, do not do so with a doleful or disconsolate sentiment, although they do so with sobriety. They count the days as they go as so many blessings, so many privileges, so many opportunities to *'show forth the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvellous light'*, to render assistance to others in the pilgrim journey, and to develop in themselves more and more of the character pleasing in the sight of God - to become more and more a copy of God's dear Son." (Manna-5 January)

The above text and quotation are a most appropriate exhortation and encouragement for Christians in their daily walk in the pilgrim way. The Psalmist's words indicate an earnest desire to so "weigh out" or "appoint" his days, so that his heart, his intentions, his being may be fully applied to and guided by the wisdom that comes from above.

What could be more fitting for every child of God, as another new year is entered upon, than to take this same attitude and continually seek for the guidance of the Lord in ordering our days that our hearts may be so applied unto wisdom, the divine wisdom, that we may be vessels *"unto honour, sanctified and meet for the Master's use, and prepared unto every good work."* 2 Timothy 2:21.

This matter of "numbering our days" is earnestly stressed by the apostle Paul when he declares - *"See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil."* Ephesians 5:15,16. If the days were evil in Paul's time, what can be said of this present time? Truly since Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden there has been a reign of evil over the earth, but at certain periods conditions have been even more terrible than others- for instance, in the days of Noah, when God saw the necessity to send the great flood, because *"the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."* Genesis 6:5.

Our Lord used these very "days of Noah" to describe the conditions on the earth at the close of "this present evil world", the period which the Lord's people generally agree has been reached and which is also to be the end of the Gospel Age - "the days of the Son of Man". This being so, there would seem no doubt that we are living at the time of which Paul writes to Timothy - *"In the last days, perilous times shall come for men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived."* 2 Timothy 3:1-13

Surely, then, there is a great need today for "redeeming the time, because the days are evil". There are no doubt numerous ways in which the time may be redeemed, and it is for all the Lord's people to review their lives and determine in what ways some improvement in their own development and service for other brethren may be possible. "So teach us to number our days" should be the earnest prayer of every consecrated child of God, and, if at first the applying of the heart unto wisdom does not bring forth great fruitage, the course must be persevered in, so that by the Lord's grace further progress in the peaceable fruits of righteousness will be made by each true branch in the Vine.

The past year has again been a momentous one in many respects and events have confirmed the faith of God's people that we are living in the very days spoken of by the prophet Nahum as *"the day of His preparation"*, when the various elements of both the symbolic heavens and earth are being prepared for the greatest time of trouble the world has seen. Paul described this same period in 1 Thess. 5, indicating that earth's troubles would come in spasms, as has been the case particularly in recent decades, until finally prolonged

travail results in a new order of things for humanity as a whole.

As a personal message of encouragement to the saints, Paid adds - "*But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief*". 1 Thess. 5:4. How favoured, indeed, are God's children of this present time, for while they live in perilous times, with subtle temptations and dangers all around, yet they can look beyond the present conditions to the blessings that God has in store not just for them but for all mankind. Meanwhile they have the assurance that - "*If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him freely give us all things?*" Romans 8:31,32

Faith may firmly trust Him, come what may, not just for the coming year, but to journey's end for every child of God. May 1996 be a year of blessing and growth in grace for each one of us. Amen.

"As we review the leading of Divine providence during the year that is past, let God's goodness and mercy stimulate our faith and confidence in Him as respects the new incoming year. A proper retrospect on the part of the children of God will enable us not only to render thanks for the past, but to look up and lift up our heads, realising that our deliverance is nearer than when we first believed, and that He that began a good work in us is both able and willing to complete it, if we will but continue to submit our wills, our lives, our all, to His wisdom and loving care." (Manna-30 December)

## The Apostle Paul and "His" Gospel

"According to my gospel." - 2 Timothy 2:8

If any one word could be used to describe Paul's influence in the Church, it would be the word "progress," and we shall not do wrong if we think of him as the "Apostle of Progress." Indeed our Lord himself indicated this at the time of his selection to the Apostolic office, when he said: "He is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel." - Acts 9:15.

To him was allotted not only the stupendous task of freeing the Church of Christ from the Jewish wrapping which had served as its cradle, but of extending the witness to the uttermost parts of the earth. Through his preaching men turned not only from Moses to Christ, but from Pagan idolatry to the worship of the one true God. As another has said: "He was the travelled ambassador of Christ, who snatched Christianity from the hands of a local faction and turned it into a universal faith, whose powerful word shook all the gods from Cyprus to Gibraltar, who turned the tide of history and thought."

### THE MAN HIMSELF

It is to his Epistles we must turn if we would really know Paul. While we might, from other sources, especially the Book of Acts, have learned what he *did* and *suffered*, yet apart from his Epistles we should have very little idea of what he *was*. But in them we meet the man himself.

This is most important, for, as is well known, while abstract truth, discussed from an academic standpoint, might result in very exact theology, it is only what has been termed "truth through personality," that is to say, truth which has become part of the very life of the one presenting it, that gets very far in the remoulding of other people's lives. One whose life is not in harmony with his teachings, even though his theology might be excellent, is apt to remind us of sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal; so also will another who, speaking beyond his depth, talks parrot-fashion of things of which he little knows the meaning. But when one has had written into his own life and experience the truths the Apostle brings to our attention in his letters, he suggests to us the spirit and power of God.

Thus it is that while truth which is written with pen and ink merely, may mean much, truth which is written in the lives of men and women, means much more. Once it was that God wrote his law on tables of *stone*; in a day not far distant, if we understand the signs of the times correctly, the writing is to be done in the *hearts* of the people, with gloriously different results (Exod. 32:15, 16; 34:1; 2 Cor. 3:3; Heb. 8:10; 10:16). Jesus himself not only preached important truths, *He personified truth*. "I am the way, the truth, and the life." - John 14:6.

So, in lesser measure, was it with the Apostle Paul. When he appeared before men, he narrated the *outward* facts of his conversion. He told them of the light which he had seen, above the brightness of the noonday sun; he mentioned the voice which he had heard speaking with him: "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" (Acts 9:4; 22:7; 26:14). But in his letters we find his *inner* life laid bare - lived over again for us, and brought before our mind's eye in a word-picture. We have in them not merely instructions on how to live the Christ-life; we have what is of still more value to us - a cross section of that life as he lived it.

It is not possible, of course, but if without violating confidence, we could "listen-in" to the private prayers

of one who walks close to the Lord, it would mean infinitely more to us than any discourse such as one might give us on the subject, "How to pray." But in his Epistles we may actually "listen-in" to the heart struggles of the Apostle, as he grapples for himself with the problems that for ages had baffled mankind. Here we see this great seeker after righteousness discovering through personal experience how God could be just and yet the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus (Rom. 3:26). We are given an opportunity to see how the Apostle became a New Creature (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15), and how that New Creature grew. Here we have his thought processes and may see, not alone the happy conclusions he reached, but what is of equal importance, how he reached them.

For example: when he bears Israel witness, as he does, that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge (Rom. 10:2), the mere statement of this fact might leave us measurably unmoved. When we realize, however, that he is speaking of the zeal he himself used to have, we begin to understand his earnestness, and his words take on a new significance.

When he discusses the believer's baptism, and likens it to a burial of the old life now to be reckoned dead (Rom. 6:4), we find ourselves admitting that the picture is well drawn, and the doctrine sound; but as the thought comes to us that the writer is one who has given proof after proof that he himself had died, and that his life since then had been hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3); that he himself had been crucified with Christ, and that what life he lived henceforth was as though Christ lived in his stead (Gal. 2:20) – when *this* thought comes home to us, we find ourselves occupied more with him than with his argument, masterly though it be.

His words, *backed by his life*, catch fire in our hearts, causing us to long to share his rich experiences of fellowship with the Master, and to determine that by God's grace we will so do, cost what it may. We find in his epistles the proof, not only that he was in the truth, but what was of far greater importance, *the truth was in him*, and it is *this*, which makes his letters pulsate with the throb of life.

## **"HIS" GOSPEL**

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, a divinely commissioned Apostle, was, he tells us, separated unto the Gospel (Rom. 1:1). With him the Gospel was not incidental to other matters more important. It was not even one important thing among others that held place in his life. No! it was *the* business of his life, to which all else was incidental, to which all else was subservient – was *held* subservient. And in *this*, in the complete, whole-hearted abandonment to the Gospel, which, from his conversion and call he devoted his life, his strength lay.

To see the Gospel in all the fullness that Paul preached it one must read, and not only read but study, the Epistle to the Romans. Here we must content ourselves with very brief observations on the twofold work of Christ his Gospel unfolds, namely, first, Christ's work *for* us, or the ground of our justification; and, second, Christ's work *in* us, or our sanctification by His spirit.

## **CHRIST'S WORK FOR US**

From first to last the Gospel of Paul has to do with a Person. The sum and substance of "his" Gospel is Jesus. The one purpose of his preaching, never at any time lost sight of, even in the midst of his most involved doctrinal discussions, is to put the individual hearer and believer of his message in personal and vital touch with his own risen and living Lord.

How shall he do this most effectively? *His own experience tells him*. He who had spent the years prior to his conversion seeking to establish his own righteousness, well knows that the first essential to salvation is a righteousness which may be possible for man to secure as a *gift*, for to merit it *he has found from his own experience*, is an impossibility. Ah! no wonder he is not ashamed of the Gospel, for therein is revealed a righteousness which may be procured by faith, a righteousness which has its origin and which is, therefore, entirely acceptable, with God.—Romans 1:17.

*Any sincere seeker after righteousness—all who hunger and thirst after it – will undoubtedly be intensely interested in his message, and since the offer (of this righteousness as a free gift to all who will accept it) is made possible, by the redemptive work of Christ, small wonder that he says: "I delivered unto you first of all that which [in my own personal experience] I also received first of all, how that Christ died for our sins."—1 Cor. 15:3.*

## **CHRIST'S WORK IN US**

But if by His death on Calvary's cross our Lord performed a work *for* us, which constitutes the basis of our righteousness or justification, He is today, in His risen and glorified condition, carrying on by His spirit, a no less important work *in* us. "For", says the Apostle, "if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the *death* of His son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by His life"—His resurrection life, of course. – Romans 5:10.

It is a blessed experience to have the peace with God which comes from being justified by faith in the precious blood of Christ (Rom. 5:1), but a true lover of righteousness could never be satisfied with an imputed righteousness only. His ardent desire is to be saved, not only from the guilt and punishment of sin, but from its power. The words of the Psalmist express the sentiment of the true believer's heart: "I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness" (Ps. 17:15). And he will not be *satisfied* until then.

By faith in Christ's work *for* us, righteousness is *imputed*, or reckoned to us; and when, by His spirit, Christ dwells in our hearts by faith, righteousness begins to be, praise be to God, *imparted* to us. Christ *in* us, therefore, that is to say, the Christ-spirit or the Christ-mind in us, is indeed, as the Apostle says, the hope of glory.—Eph. 3:17; Col 1:27.

Though, therefore, our outward man perish, the inward man is renewed. "When?" does one ask. "*Daily*", replies the Apostle. "Give us *day by day*," we pray, "not our temporal food only, but the Living Bread from heaven" (Luke 11:3). "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross *daily*, and follow me," said our Lord (Luke 9:23). In harmony therewith the Apostle writes: "Though, therefore, our outward man perish, the inward man is renewed, *day by day*" (2 Cor. 4:16). Under the gracious influence of the spirit of Christ, that blessed promise of the Father, we are to be no longer conformed to the spirit of this Age, but are to be, gradually, *day by day* transformed by the renewing of our minds. —Acts 1:4; 2:33, Romans 12:2.

Concerning Christ's work *for* us, the all-sufficient ground of our acceptance with God, our Lord cried from the cross, "It is finished" (John 19:30). In regard to Christ's work *in* us, the Apostle writes; "Being confident of this very thing, that He who hath begun a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ"—Phil. 1:6.

### **A FAITHFUL MINISTER**

Such, briefly told, is the Gospel according to Paul. Let us now turn to some of the lessons his life has for us. Out of many we will mention only two.

First – his faithfulness. He who taught others, "It is required in stewards that a man be found faithful" (1 Cor. 4:2), had learned this lesson well himself. Oh! surely if his practice kept pace with his preaching anywhere it did so here. He was entrusted by God and by Jesus with the Gospel, and he guarded it, dear brethren, for you and for me. He kept watch over it as of a sacred treasure, as the keeper of a holy fire, which must never be allowed to die out.

His faithfulness is easily seen in his fearless defence of the truth before the Jews, before Festus and Agrippa and numerous others in high places (Acts 24:25; 25:9; 26:28), but to our mind it is still better demonstrated when he withstood *Peter* to the face (Gal. 2:11); when, lest the glorious Gospel which had been committed to his trust should be jeopardized, he separated from such a friend as *Barnabas* had proved himself to be (Acts 15:36-40; Gal. 2:13). Our Lord had said: "I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake" (Acts 9:16), and of all the things he suffered none could have cost him more. To defend the truth against its enemies! – that was easy – but what agony must it have been to his heart of gold when his loyalty to Christ compelled him to take issue with his friends!

### **A BELOVED BROTHER**

Then too, he was a beloved brother, as well as a faithful minister. Such a combination of qualities is rare (Eph. 6:21). We wonder if all realize fully just how difficult it is to attain this combination of character quality and development. It is so easy to be beloved; – to be lovable, easygoing, gentle, agreeable, *at the expense of faithfulness*. On the other hand, to be faithful is little more than an attainment of the flesh, when faithful adherence to and defence of the truth of the Gospel is maintained in a rough, uncouth, unloving, contentious spirit of strife. It is possible for a brother to be a very faithful minister; he may be able to pick out our faults to a "T", but we would hardly call him a beloved brother, would we? But if the Apostle John was one who taught us to love in truth (1 John 3:18), it is not less certain that it was the Apostle Paul who taught us to speak the truth in love.—Eph. 4:15.

In concluding these brief remarks on our beloved Brother Paul (2 Pet. 3:15), perhaps we cannot do better than refer to a picture in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*:

You will remember that early in his journey to the Celestial City, Christian was taken into the Interpreter's house, and there shown a number of things which were designed to be of value to him along the way. One of the things Christian was shown was the picture of a man. "And this" says Bunyan, "was the fashion of it: It had eyes lifted up to heaven; the best of books was in its hand; the law of truth was written on its lips; the world was behind its back; it stood as if it pleaded with men; and a crown of gold did hang over its head."

Then said Christian: "What meaneth this?" The Interpreter replied: "The man whose picture this is, is one of a thousand. He can say in the words of the Apostle: 'Though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet

have ye not many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the Gospel.’ – 1 Cor. 4:15.

In another place, the Apostle, in defending himself against false teachers, urges the brethren to remember, not merely what he had taught them, but how he had conducted himself in their midst, and says: “In our relations to you we showed ourselves as gentle as a mother is when she tenderly nurses her own children. Seeing that we were thus drawn affectionately towards you, it would have been a joy to us to have imparted to you not only God’s good news, but to have given our very lives also, because you had become very dear to us.” – 1 Thess. 2:7,8, *Weymouth*.

Thank God for Paul, and for all those noble men and women who, though commissioned to a lesser place in the ministry, have shared his fatherly and motherly spirit – for those who have resolutely refused to permit their names to be added to the already too long list of mere instructors, or would-be instructors, in Christ, but have earnestly coveted a place amongst the few– the “not many” fathers and mothers in spiritual Israel.

And may we be blessed with a sufficient measure of the Holy Spirit to be able to recognize any of those who, by the good favour of God, may chance to be labouring in our midst today, and, viewing attentively the result of their conduct, as the Apostle, in the *Diaglott* translation of Hebrews 13:7 suggests, imitate their faith and their lives. Thus may it be, for Jesus sake. Amen. (from the Herald)

## The Early Christian Fathers

*(A historical note of interest)*

Knowledge of history enables one to understand the present in the light of the past while at the same time obtaining some measure of guidance in relation to the future. Knowledge of sacred history is no exception to this general rule; it provides valuable lessons for the present and the future and enables us better to appreciate the circumstances of those who trod the same “narrow way” when conditions in the world were vastly different from those which now obtain.

We can gain much information to our profit by study of the so-called “early Christian Fathers” who lived in the opening centuries of the Gospel Age, in times of severe persecution at the hands of Pagan Rome, culminating in the ten years 303-313 A.D. under Diocletian. Coins were struck to record the fact that the “Christian superstition” was utterly exterminated. In the light of these facts, we can easily recognise their witness as characterised by severe sufferings for Christ in times when **religion**, as the term is to-day understood in Western Europe, was not tolerated; that is to say, the nations were not even nominally Christian.

It might perhaps be asked how those early Christians, among whom the Christian Fathers stood out prominently, could endure such sufferings. The answer is, of course, that according to our needs so is strength given, and quite apart from this there is no doubt that the race was physically stronger than it is to-day, after a further two thousand years of accumulated sin and death. This, however, does not in any way minimise their faithful witness for Christ, but it is well to remember that if the “feet members” are called upon to suffer physically ere they are changed, the promise that “as thy days thy strength shall be” will surely be fulfilled.

Their **intense zeal** for Christ calls forth our admiration. Many who lived in the first century had actually seen the Lord when on earth, while some of those who lived later would be the children of those who walked with Jesus Christ when on earth. The mystery of iniquity already worked in those days, but it had not come into power. Indeed, it did not rise properly until 539 A.D. The truth, in consequence, was comparatively pure, for this was prior to the “Pergamos” period, when the world entered the church and self-seeking men began to pervert the Gospel to their own ends, withal introducing vestments, incense, and other features to attract the natural mind in to the church services.

The errors with which we are familiar to-day were not established. Eternal torment, for instance, gained its hold at a later date, coupled with the immortality of the soul, so essential to the former error. Christians knew the truth of the Apostle’s words when he said that not many mighty men were called, but the poor of this world to confound the wise. (1 Cor. 1.26-27).

In those early times there was intense love for the Bible, which was accepted as the inspired Word of God. Higher Criticism and evolution were unknown. So real was their love for the Word that it permeated their writings. The story is told that many years ago, a party of scholarly men attended a meeting in the course of which the question was asked–“if the New Testament had been entirely destroyed and every copy of it lost by the end of the third century, could it have been collected again from the writings of the early Fathers of the second and third centuries?” Two months later, one of the company called on Sir David Dalrymple who had been present and who, pointing to a table covered with books, said. “Look at these books. You remember the question about the New Testament and the Fathers? That question aroused my curiosity, and as I possessed all the existing works of the Fathers of the second and third centuries, I commenced to search, and up to this

time I have found the entire New Testament, except eleven verses.” Naturally, only a few of their writings, comparatively speaking, have reached us, and this demonstrates even still more forcibly how often they drank at the fountain of all Truth. In the books of Origen alone (born 185 A.D.) it is said that two-thirds of the New Testament are contained.

Remember, of course, that books were not easily obtained as has been the case since the art of printing was discovered. Books were then written by hand (as were the Scriptures themselves) on papyrus or on parchment. This fact alone should help us to appreciate more dearly the sacred Word of God in this day when we are so favoured with the Scriptures in our own tongue and when we have countless translations to which we may easily refer with concordances to help us locate any particular verse that we may require.

By way of illustration and in order that we may learn valuable lessons, we briefly refer to six of the early Fathers—Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Papias—who were Apostolic Fathers— and Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria who lived a century or so later.

**Clement of Rome.** It is usually thought that Clement of Rome is the one referred to by the Apostle Paul in Phil. 4:3. He wrote an Epistle to the Corinthians which is bound up with the New Testament volume of the Alexandrian Manuscript (Codex A). In it are copious references to passages in the New Testament and the general tenor bears a striking resemblance to Holy Writ. This, incidentally, is a very valuable chain of evidence in relation to the authenticity of the Scriptures for it proves that the New Testament as we know it was in existence at that time.

**Polycarp.** His name is probably one of the best known of the Christian Fathers and he was Bishop of Smyrna which was not very far from Ephesus. He was born in A.D. 70 and martyred at the age of 86 in the year A.D. 156. His witness before the Roman Pro-Consul who tried to persuade him to recant is well known “Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any wrong: how can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?” Only one of his letters remains, but it throws much light upon his character and pious outlook. He was a disciple of John and had had the advantage of early Christian training like Timothy who had from a child known the Holy Scriptures which are able to make wise unto salvation.

Here is an extract from his letter (to the Philippians) “Polycarp and the presbyters that are with him, to the church of God at Philippi : Mercy unto you, and peace, from God Almighty, and the Lord Jesus Christ, our Saviour, be multiplied . . . Wherefore girding up the loins of your mind, serve the Lord with fear, and in truth; laying aside all empty and vain speech, and the error of many, believing in Him that raised up our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, and hath given Him glory . . . But He that raised up Christ from the dead shall also raise up us in like manner, if we do His will, and walk according to his commandments, and love those things which He loved; abstaining from all unrighteousness, inordinate affection, from evil speaking, false witness, not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing, or striking for striking, or cursing for cursing; but remembering what the Lord has taught us, saying, “Judge not, and ye shall not be judged; forgive, and ye shall be forgiven.”

**Papias.** He was another saint of the early period of the Gospel church, who knew at least two of the Lord’s disciples and also the daughters of the Apostle Philip. We do not know so much about him as of the others because his works are only found by extracts from those of others—the actual writings being either hidden or destroyed. It is evident, however, that he was well versed in the Scriptures and boldly took his stand on the Lord’s side.

**Tertullian.** This Christian came of heathen parents in the days of Pagan Rome; his father was a centurion, that is, the commander of a hundred men. He was brought up and educated along orthodox lines and was skilled in law and history.

Like the Apostle Paul, he was not converted until of mature years; he was probably forty years old when this vital step was taken and he was not “disobedient unto the heavenly vision.” It cannot be over-emphasised that he and those like him were intensely earnest or they would never have espoused the cause of Christianity, for it entailed so much suffering and loss of reputation. He wrote much, often in Latin, and those writings reveal his deeply spiritual outlook, for he brought his great scholarship to bear upon the mine of Christian truth which is available to those who are guided by the Holy Spirit. Incidentally, it appears that Tertullian was the first to introduce the phrase “New Testament.”

**Irenaeus.** This Father was a disciple of both Papias and Polycarp and was born about A.D. 130 in Asia Minor. We associate him particularly with his Christian work at Lyons where he held office in the church during the fierce Pagan persecutions of Christians, especially under Marcus Aurelius towards the end of the second century. Pothinus was imprisoned and died in A.D. 177 and Irenaeus succeeded him as Bishop of the church at Lyons. Once again, our insight into his character is obtained mainly from his own writings which are fully in harmony with the calling of this Age.

**Clement of Alexandria.** Alexandria was a very famous city in the world of that time being next in impor-

tance after Rome as regards wealth and after Athens as regards literature and science. Tradition has it that Mark preached the Gospel in Egypt and founded the church in Alexandria. It possessed a University and a famous library. Clement lived in these surroundings and was a scholarly man who contributed his due share to the cultural life of the city, being president of a noted school of thought. He embraced Christianity in adulthood and his conversion, without doubt had a marked influence on many, just as Paul's testimony a century or so before when in front of King Agrippa was so convincing that "almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." His writings are full of references to the Scriptures and his life was brought fully in conformity thereto. (from B.S.M.)

## The True Riches

*"The blessing of the Lord, it maketh rich, and He addeth no sorrow with it." (Proverbs 10:22)*

*"Hath not God chosen the poor of this world, rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom." (James 2:5)*

The Bible declares that there are not many rich, not many wise, not many learned, who enjoy God's special favour, but chiefly the poor of this world, who are rich in faith. But whoever concludes from this that God is prejudiced against the rich, or that all the rich are iniquitous and have gained their wealth through fraud, errs grievously. What it does teach is that God is no respecter of persons. Whether one be rich or poor, learned or ignorant, God's estimation is from the standpoint of the heart. There are both good and bad rich, just as there are both good and bad poor.

### ABRAHAM'S RICHES

Abraham, though the youngest son of the family, at the death of his father, Terah, doubtless inherited all that remained of his possessions, including the share of Sarah, his wife, who was his half-sister. The chronology of the narrative agrees with this; but some have erred in the study of it. Abraham is mentioned first amongst his brethren because of his greater prominence, and not because he was the elder.

Added to Abraham's rich inheritance was the blessing of the Lord upon him. After he had accepted the Divine call and left his homeland to become a wandering shepherd and herdsman in Canaan, his flocks and herds increased greatly. He was, under God's blessing, very rich. Others also of God's servants in the past were greatly blessed with riches—for instance, Job. We are not, however, to apply the lesson in this way at the present time. The blessing of the Lord very rarely makes wealthy His saintly people during this Gospel Age. Jesus and the Apostles and the specially saintly all down through the Age and to-day are generally poor in this world's goods.

### SPIRITUAL RICHES

It may be asked, Why this change in God's dealings? The reply of the Scriptures is that in the past, up to the time of Christ, God's blessings were to men as men; but since the time of Christ, God's saints are "New Creatures in Christ." The terms of discipleship are that they exchange all earthly favours, riches and blessings, and sacrifice their claims to these in order that they may become heirs of God and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ, their Lord, to the Heavenly inheritance – and share in the Messianic Kingdom and its glory, honour and immortality.

God dealt with Abraham as a friend and gave him earthly blessings and promised him earthly blessing in the future life. Jesus' followers God accepts not as friends, but as His children. His promises to these are not earthly, but Heavenly, spiritual privileges and hopes in the present life, and spiritual glory and immortality – far above angels – in the life to come. God's favour to this "House of Sons," of whom Jesus is the Head (Hebrews 3:6), is manifested often in the trials, difficulties, chastisements and earthly losses and afflictions which they experience, all of which are designed to work out for them "a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." The beauty and harmony of the Bible can be understood only by those who thus "rightly divide the Word of Truth" and differentiate between the blessings and promises to the Ancient Worthies as distinct from those which appertain to the followers of Jesus.

### HEIRS OF RICHES

Lot was a man of nearly Abraham's age, his nephew, the son of his brother, Haran. They were friends and companions. God did not call Lot, nor any other of Abraham's relatives, but merely himself, to be the recipient of the promises—the channel through whom they would be fulfilled. This did not hinder Lot from being with his uncle, but indeed permitted him to share the blessings of Divine Providence, which guided Abraham's affairs. God's Covenant and promises were not made with Lot, but with Abraham only. Similarly, the spiritual children of Abraham alone are the heirs of the Abrahamic promise, and not their friends or relatives, although the latter may share a reflex blessing of spiritual influence through association with them.

These spiritual children of Abraham, Christ and His consecrated followers, are particularly specified as the

heirs of the Abrahamic promise by Paul (Galatians 3:29). They all have a faith similar to that of Abraham, and a spirit of obedience similar to his. Jesus is their Head, Captain and Leader, as well as their Redeemer, and they become His disciples by a covenant of sacrifice similar to His own. His promise to them is, "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with Me in My Throne"—the Kingdom which is to fulfil all the gracious promises which God made to Abraham – to Jews and Gentiles.

### **DECEITFUL RICHES**

God's blessing upon Abraham, shared by Lot, led on to more or less of ambition and strife, not between the two men themselves, but between their servants. Abraham loved peace, and perceived that it would be wise that the two families should part company. Lot assented. Abraham gave him his choice as to the section of country; and Lot chose the most fertile—the plain of Sodom, in the Valley of Jordan. The Plain of Sodom, afterward devastated as a judgement from the Lord, is now the Valley of the Dead Sea.

Lot made his home in Sodom, while his herds and flocks were pastured in the fertile regions surrounding.

The family lived there three years, although the riches of the country had a debasing effect upon the people. Lot's righteous soul was vexed, more than offsetting the charm of the country, which his wife evidently loved. Looking back with longing heart at the time of its destruction, she was overtaken in the catastrophe which her husband and daughters escaped.

Abraham, on the contrary, fixed his heart and hopes upon the gracious promises of God, which appertained less to the present and more to the future life. Sarah, his wife, was a real helpmate, who shared her husband's hopes and desired to co-labour with him faithfully for their accomplishment. In these two families, both well-intentioned, we see illustrated the difference between seeking chiefly the Divine approval and seeking chiefly earthly welfare and ease.

Many Christian people to-day make similar mistakes to that which Lot made. They allow conflicting earthly interests to separate them from the blessings of God's greater favour. They thus involve themselves and their families in the snare of the wicked, while at heart preferring righteousness.

The Master's advice should be remembered, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His Righteousness." Do that which is in harmony with that aspiration and leave to God the oversight and care of earthly interests, that He may give you the lessons and experiences most helpful for you. Those who follow His advice find peace and joy which the world can neither give nor take away—"the peace of God, which passeth all understanding."

### **GOD'S BLESSING MAKES RICH**

Whoever has the Lord's blessing is rich indeed, regardless of the amount of this world's goods which he possesses. Of what value is all the wealth of a Croesus if it brings not peace, joy and happiness? Wherever we go we find all—rich and poor—seeking pleasure, seeking the springs of joy; but how few of these seekers ever find it! Alas! it seems impossible for the world to understand the great fact that the blessing of the Lord constitutes the true fund of riches and pleasures for evermore—more than the life that now is, and the coming one!

Those whom the Lord makes rich with His promises and His favour, His guidance and His blessing, have the joy which others are vainly seeking. These true riches during this Gospel Age are obtainable by all who have the "hearing ear" and who learn of God's favour in Christ. In Christ are hidden all the treasures of Divine Wisdom, Love and Power.

The only ones who obtain a share of these blessings at the present time are such as become followers of Jesus through faith and consecration of their lives to His service. Nevertheless, in Him are also restitution blessings for the world of mankind, which will be dispensed during the thousand years of His reign. Peter tells us of this, and points us to the fact that it has been "foretold by all the Holy Prophets since the world began."—Acts 3:20, 21.

May each of the Lord's people seek only the true riches from God's bountiful hand, striving always to be rich in faith and good works, laying up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal.

"For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

(Matt. 6:20, 21)

(P.P. 11/35)