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Seeking a Bride

God's promise to Abraham that through his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed is the first clear statement in scripture of His purposes for mankind and the channel through which they would be achieved. Yet at the time the promise was given, Abraham (or Abram as he was still known then) and Sarai, his wife, had no child and were both well advanced in age.

How then was the promise to be fulfilled? In Gen. 15, we read that Abram in fact enquired of God as to whether, in the absence of a natural heir, the trusted steward of his house, Eliezer, might be his heir. However, God assured Abram that he and Sarai (later re-named Sarah) would in due time have a son, and in their old age, Isaac the son of promise was born.

This then was the immediate fulfilment of the promise of a seed through which God's blessings would flow, but when we turn to the New Testament, we see the ultimate fulfilment in the words of Paul in Gal. 3:16 - "now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ."

Following from this, it does not surprise us to find in his birth and the subsequent circumstances of Isaac's life that there are wonderful illustrations of our Lord's birth and offering up, as well as the calling of the Church to be His bride. For the birth of our dear Lord was also miraculous and how beautifully the account of Abraham offering up Isaac on Mt. Moriah foreshadows the love of God who gave His only-begotten Son for us all.

Further, in the mission of the ruler of Abraham's household to find a bride for Isaac, we surely see a clear and detailed outline of the Gospel Age calling of the church. Though this ruler of the household is not named in Gen. 24, he would appear to be the same Eliezer about whom Abraham had enquired of God. He was not to be the heir but would gladly do service for the rightful heir. What a wonderful character he exhibits in faithful devotion to his master, Abraham!

The story of Eliezer's mission is told in Gen. 24 and abounds in noble characters. As we read, we cannot fail to be impressed with (1) the loving concern of the father that just the right bride be found for his son, (2) the utter faithfulness and obedience of his steward, (3) the beauty of character of the chosen young woman and (4) the humility and submissiveness of the son and heir at all times.

The procedure followed was evidently in keeping with the custom of the time, even though the record shows that Isaac's own son, Jacob, undertook the task of seeking a bride for himself. The seeking of a bride for Isaac, no doubt by divine over-ruling, more clearly prefigures the Gospel Age call of the Church, even to the point of the bride-to-be's consent being obtained - evidently not by any means the case in those days. Many features of the story, indeed, are significant for the Lord's people of today.

The account of Eliezer's journey may be briefly summarised as follows:

1. Abraham directed him to go to Nahor where his relatives still lived and there choose a bride for Isaac.
2. If the young woman chosen would not return with Eliezer, he was absolved from his task; in no case was Isaac to be taken to Nahor.
3. Eliezer loaded ten camels with supplies and gifts for the bride-to-be and her family and set off for Nahor.
4. On arrival, he asked God to direct him to the right young woman by a specific response to a request for water to drink from the well where he waited.

5. Rebekah soon came by and gave the right response, whereupon Eliezer gave her gifts of bracelets and earrings. At his request, she took him to her family home.

6. Food was set before him, but Eliezer first insisted on explaining his mission and how God had guided him thus far.

7. Rebekah's family recognised God's hand in events and agreed to her betrothal to Isaac, but asked that her departure be delayed "a few days". (Margin - a full year)

8. Eliezer however asked for an early start back and the family agreed, subject to Rebekah herself being willing. With her assent, the party set off home.

9. Meantime, Eliezer had presented further rich gifts to Rebekah and her family, all of whom appear noble characters.

10. Not far from the home of Abraham, Rebekah glimpsed Isaac "meditating in the field at eventide". Learning that it was her husband-to-be, she veiled herself as was the custom of the time, until Isaac came to receive her into his mother's tent and she became his wife.

Clearly in this lovely story we see a picture, or a type, of the Gospel Age calling of those who will be prepared to forsake their earthly surroundings, with their associations and ambitions, and journey daily onward to meet him of whom they have heard, who has already blessed them with rich gifts and whom yet unseen they have come to love. This is beautifully expressed poetically in Psalm 45 - "Hearken, O daughter, and consider, and incline thine ear; forget also thine own people, and thy father's house. So shall the king greatly desire thy beauty; for he is thy Lord, and worship thou him."

In Abraham, we see in this account, as in the account of his offering up of Isaac on Mt. Moriah, clearly a picture of the Heavenly Father Himself, who gave His only begotten Son to be the Saviour of the world and who is seeking those who are willing to be joined with Him in obedience now and in blessing later. In Isaac, the son of promise, we see unmistakably a picture of our Saviour, the ultimate seed of blessing as promised to Abraham. In Rebekah, the beautiful young woman chosen for Isaac, we see a portrait of the Church, all of whose members are to be joint-heirs with Him and form His Bride. Of these, Paul writes - "I am jealous over you with godly jealousy, for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ." (2 Cor. 11:2)

What then of Eliezer, the faithful steward of Abraham? His mission without doubt reminds us of the work of the Holy Spirit down the Gospel Age, animating firstly the apostles and subsequently all who have followed them to the work of proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, with its call to personal separation, self-sacrifice and daily following in the footsteps of Jesus, out of every century and every nation. In many features of the story of Eliezer's mission, there are indeed lessons for us.

Abraham's explicit instructions to his steward at the outset were clear - "thou shalt not take a wife unto my son of the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell, but thou shalt go unto my country and my kindred and take a wife unto my son Isaac." (v.3,4) The Canaanites were idol-worshippers and he was rightly concerned that no-one of that heritage be bride to his son. So it was to his own country that he sent his steward, to those who already had an established and acceptable relationship with him and with his God.

So it is with the call of the church - God does not call people of the world, however good or noble or mighty. Only those who have been justified by faith in Jesus their Saviour and who have the ready spirit of service and sacrifice, as had Rebekah, may receive His call. It has been well said - "Like Rebekah, we (the Lord's people) were already virgins, pure ones, whose sins had been pardoned and therefore of the household of faith, before we were called of the Spirit to go to Him (Christ) to become His bride and joint-heirs." "Thine they were and Thou gavest them to me."

Eliezer's mission was a selective one; he was not just to seek a bride, but to select exactly the right one for Isaac. So with the Gospel Age call, it is declared in Acts 15:14 how that "God at first did visit the gentiles, to *take out of them* a people for His name." This is in harmony with Jesus' own words - "No man can come to me, except the Father who hath sent me draw him." (John 6:44) It is notable also in Abraham's instructions that if the chosen young woman was not willing to return with Eliezer, he was relieved of any further responsibility and he was further specifically directed that in no circumstances was Isaac to be taken back to Nahor, which Abraham had left long ago. So also it is the Bride of Christ which is to journey on to the Bridegroom's waiting heavenly home - only there can the marriage take place.

But how was Eliezer to recognise the right young woman? He had travelled some 500 miles to Nahor with ten camels bearing gifts for the chosen one and her family, as well no doubt as supplies for the journey. Now he had to meet and select the right one for Isaac's bride. We note his plan - first he went to a place where the young woman of good character and readiness to serve would be likely to come, then he asked the God of his master to guide him to the right one. Is there a lesson here for us? In life's problems, do we take such steps as

we reasonably and rightly can, then seek Divine wisdom and guidance as we wait on God?

So Eliezer waited by the local well to invite whoever might come by to give him water to drink from her pitcher. Almost immediately, it seems, Rebekah, a great niece of Abraham himself, came to the well and he made his request. "(He) ran to meet her, and said, "Let me, I pray thee, drink a little water out of thy pitcher. And she said, Drink my lord, and she hastened and let down her pitcher upon her hand and gave him to drink. And when she had done giving him drink, she said, I will draw water for thy camels also, until they have done drinking. And she hastened, and emptied her pitcher into the trough and ran to the well to draw water and drew for all his camels. *And (Eliezer), wondering at her held his peace.*"

How such a ready and bountiful response must have gladdened Eliezer's heart! Surely, here was God's answer to his prayer and in token of his appreciation for her kindness and as a sign of the bounty of the prospective bridegroom, he gave her precious gifts of golden earrings and bracelets. Does this remind us of a much later encounter at a well in Sychar where Jesus asked a Samaritan woman to give Him a drink of water and rewarded her with the precious message of the water of life which He alone can give?

One writer has said - "as in the type (Rebekah's call), certain gold ornaments were presented to Rebekah from the moment that she entertained the good tidings, so with us; from the moment that we first gave ear to the Father's invitation or "high calling" we have been blessed. The ornaments being of gold symbolise divine blessing . . . first earrings, representing the blessed effect of hearing the call, and second bracelets, representing the blessed effect of the divine call upon our doings thereafter." Later on in the story, of course, Rebekah received even more and greater gifts from him to whom she was then betrothed.

The account tells us very little directly about Rebekah, except that she was "very fair to look upon, a virgin, neither had any man known her" (V16), but external appearance is not the criterion by which God makes choices and we learn far more of Rebekah by her gracious words and actions. "Man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart." (1 Sam. 16:7); and, again, evidently picturing the Church, the future Bride of Christ, the psalmist declares in Psa. 45:13 - "The king's daughter is all glorious within." It was surely the inner qualities of heart that Abraham was looking for in a bride for Isaac, and the same graces of humility, readiness to serve and self-sacrifice are those which our Heavenly Father desires to see and develop in each one called in this Gospel Age to be a member of that company which is to make up the Bride of the greater Isaac.

After giving her gifts, Eliezer asked to lodge at Rebekah's family home and she, knowing the family generosity and hospitality, readily agreed. Here we see again something of the beauty of character of Eliezer, Abraham's faithful steward, for we read that he "bowed down his head and worshipped the Lord" (V26). Often we seek the Lord's leadings in our affairs; do we always recognise them when they come as being from Him? As the way opens up before us, do we always remember, like this noble character of old, to bless and thank our God? Is our standard always "hitherto hath the Lord helped us"?

At the family home, Laban, brother to Rebekah, extended the welcome to Eliezer - "come in, thou blessed of the Lord" and when he had entered, food was set before him. But he said "I will not eat, until I have told my errand" (V33). So he then recounted the details of his mission so far and asked if the family would consent to Rebekah's betrothal to his master's son. We read the father's and brother's reply in V50/1 "This thing proceedeth from the Lord, behold, Rebekah is before thee, take her and go, and let her be thy master's son's wife, as the Lord hath spoken." Here, Eliezer presented further rich gifts to Rebekah and her family.

The writer earlier quoted goes on to say "greater blessings (i.e. than those first received) followed when we accepted the call to leave our father's house (the human nature) and our own people (earthly friendships) and go to our Espoused One. So in type, when the decision was reached and Rebekah was betrothed to Isaac (whom having not seen she loved), the servant presented her with vessels of silver (symbolising truth) and with further jewels or ornaments of gold (divine blessings and graces) and with new raiment, symbolising the newness of life and relationship to the father and son whose call she had accepted."

In the giving of gifts to Rebekah's family, perhaps we see something of the blessings which come to those who may not themselves be drawn of God to His "so great" call, but who still appreciate in some measure the beauty of the Christian gospel and of the love of Jesus Christ. The family, nevertheless and understandably, desired Eliezer to allow Rebekah to stay on with them for a little time before setting off for the five hundred mile journey to her husband's home. The Authorised Version says that they sought a stay of "a few days" but in the margin "a full year or ten months". Some suggest that a betrothal period of twelve months was not unusual, during which time the bride-to-be, though fully committed to her future husband, lived at home. At Eliezer's request, however, for an immediate departure, Rebekah herself was called and she agreed.

The procedure for choosing a bride for Isaac is strange by our modern standards, but it is noted that ultimately Rebekah's own agreement to go with Abraham's servant was regarded as necessary. Only then did her family send her away with their blessing. Earlier, Eliezer had also been assured that if the girl herself or

her family were not receptive to his invitation, he had no further responsibility. And so it is, the call to each prospective member of Christ's bride is in every sense an invitation; there is no coercion, for our Heavenly Father seeks only those of willing, ready heart. The Psalmist echoes this spirit in Psa. 45:10,11 - "Hearken O daughter and consider and incline thine ear, forget also thine own people, and thy father's house; so shall the king greatly desire thy beauty, for he is thy lord, and worship thou him".

Then began the long journey back to Hebron in Canaan where Abraham dwelt with Isaac his son, who was at that time forty years of age. Today the journey of some five hundred miles would not take long, but in those far-off days it would have taken quite a considerable time and very likely much discomfort for Rebekah. And indeed, each one of God's dear children of this Gospel Age is a traveller, a pilgrim journeying on to that place where his or her real citizenship lies. "We nightly pitch our moving tent, a day's march nearer home". Each one of us is journeying onward to meet Him who has trod the way before us.

Like Rebekah, we have not yet seen our bridegroom but we have learnt of Him and of His love and of His beauty through the message of God's word implanted in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. How well this is pictured in the mission of the faithful servant of Abraham, who was sent to bring the precious invitation and rich gifts to the chosen bride, not in his own name but on behalf of his master and the prospective bridegroom. Such wondrous gifts and blessings speak to us of that "earnest of our inheritance" which is the seal and the assurance of each child of God.

So the long journey continued, until at last the party neared the home country and for a moment Rebekah caught a glimpse of her future husband Isaac as he meditated in the field at eventide. And so with us, all along the way we have been on the lookout, as it were, for Him whom we have not seen. Perhaps, like Rebekah, we have caught a fleeting glimpse of Him, in the mature beauty of some saintly soul, in the loving word or action of a Christian friend, or as we have again meditated on the words of the beloved apostle - "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us; and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth". (John 1:14)

In the experiences of life, also, how often have we felt His presence near, who promised - "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age" and "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee". Indeed, all the trials and difficulties of our life's journey fade when we think upon Him "whom yet unseen, we love; though now we see Him not, yet believing, we rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory" What fullness of joy awaits all who are faithful unto death and who, when He shall appear, shall be like Him and see Him as He is.

At this point of the story of Eliezer and Rebekah, she veiled herself until Isaac came to receive her and to take her into his mother's tent to be his wife. It is suggested that this may picture the need for each member of the church to pass through the veil of death before the union with the heavenly bridegroom. The original story, as far as it typifies the call of the church, the bride, ends here with the union of the bride and groom -Rebekah and Isaac. But as we look into the last book of the Bible, we read of the glorious event which that union foreshadows - "Let us be glad and rejoice and give honour to God, for the marriage of the Lamb is come and His wife hath made herself ready. To her was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white, for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints". (Rev. 19:7,8)

What a privilege it is for any to be invited to share, if faithful to the end, with our Lord, the greater Isaac, the heavenly bridegroom, in the work of blessing all mankind in the age to come! May we each one prove faithful to that gracious call!

The bride eyes not her garment
But her dear Bridegroom's face;
I will not gaze on glory
But on my King of grace."
Not at the crown He giveth
But on His outstretched hand
The Lamb is all the glory
Of Immanuel's land.

"In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength." (Isa. 30:15)

Thou Shalt Remember

(Deut. 8:2)

’Tis good to remember the way He hath lead us,
To view once again both the track and the road;
To muse on the fact, that unfailing He fed us,
Our faithful and loving, compassionate God.
’Tis good to review how He surely was leading,
Though we saw him not, nor knew
all He planned.

’Tis good to recall that whate’er we were needing
Was wondrously met by His bountiful hand.
’Tis good to remember; to pause; and to ponder;
It stirs us to worship, and tunes us to praise;
Such retrospect helps us of Him to grow fonder,
Whose goodness and mercy have
followed our days.

Christ Enthroned Within

The indwelling of Christ within each true believer is surely one of the rich treasures of the gospel message. Those who love the Saviour, who have received and keep His teachings, are assured of the Heavenly Father’s especial love and that both the Father and the Son will come unto them and make their abode with them. (John 14:23)

This indwelling first requires the emptying out, by the one who has come to know Jesus as Saviour, of self-will and earthly ambitions, so that the Holy Spirit of promise, the Spirit of Christ, may enter and occupy the heart, making the recipient a truly begotten child of God and fully associating him or her with Christ, both in development of His character likeness and in the life of obedience and self-sacrifice, like unto His.

The apostle Paul speaks of this as a mystery (Col. 1:26,27) and certainly no precedent was known to the Jews; God’s dwelling place with their nation was manifest in the tabernacle and the temple, though, even then, He promised to dwell in a sense with those of contrite and humble spirit, to revive and strengthen. (Isa. 57:15) But now both our Lord’s and the apostle’s words proclaim a personal indwelling of Jesus in each believer, whether Jew or Gentile.

The new life which flows from the indwelling of the Spirit of Christ is described at length by Paul in Romans 8, to quote verses 9-11:

“But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His. And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the spirit is life because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, He that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by His Spirit that dwelleth in you.”

“Christ in you”, the apostle goes on to say (Col. 1:27) is our hope of glory, and it is certain that real progress in the Christian way and towards the goal, the prize of the high calling in Christ Jesus, cannot be made without it. Elsewhere he speaks of Christ being “formed in you”, that is, in God’s people, as of new life being developed within each one’s heart and being (Gal. 4:19). Surely it is the earnest desire of every would-be follower of the Master to have His likeness developed and fellowship in His service enriched with each passing day.

Redeemer, Come! I open wide
My heart to Thee, here, Lord abide.
Let me Thy constant presence feel,
Thy work of grace in me reveal.

O! Come my Sovereign, enter in;
Yet more Thy nobler life begin.
Thy Word and Spirit guide me on,
Until the glorious crown be won!

Caleb - Lifetime Devotion

(NUMBERS 13:26-33, JOSHUA 14:6-15)

“And Caleb stilled the people before Moses, and said, Let us go up at once, and possess it (the land); for we are well able to overcome it.” Num.13:30.

“And Joshua blessed him, and gave unto Caleb.. Hebron for an inheritance... because that he wholly followed the Lord God of Israel.” Josh. 14: 13,14.

Caleb was eighty-five years of age. He had a good record behind him. When it can be said of a man that he has wholly followed the Lord his God, he must have been a remarkable character. It has never been easy to do the divine will, and certainly it was not easy in Caleb's time. The people were frequently turned aside from a steady purpose to apply the principles of God's law to their lives. It took courage and backbone to stand for the Lord.

When Caleb and Joshua went with the spies to spy out the land of Canaan, the report brought back was that there were giants in the land, before whom the Israelites seemed as grasshoppers. This filled the people with fear, for they were in no condition to cope with giants. But Joshua and Caleb were of a different opinion; they remembered the mighty works that God had wrought on behalf of the people, and they knew that they who had God on their side are always in the majority. Just what the plan of their attack was we are not told. Perhaps they had not a set, definite plan, but were just trusting in God, having in mind how He had visited the plagues on Pharaoh and had led them through the Red Sea.

There are always giants in the land for those who see them. John Bunyan told the story of Christian and Hopeful who beheld two great lions right in their pathway. They were filled with fear at first, but then suddenly discovered that the lions were chained. As a rule, Satan tries to terrify us at the outset of our Christian careers. He is said to go about “as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour,” (1 Pet, 5:8) He tries tactics similar to the instincts of the lion of the jungle, which roars so as to paralyse its prey by fear.

There is nothing that disarms opposition like a strong stand. When the enemy sees that we are determined to pursue a right course and that nothing will turn us aside, he realises that he may as well leave us for the time, and determine upon some other method of attack. God's Word says, “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw nigh to God and He will draw nigh to you.” (James 4:7,8) Courage is required from first to last of the Christian way. The faint-hearted will not get very far along the road. “Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might - take unto you the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand in the evil day. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life,” (Eph: 6: 10-13, 1 Tim. 6:12.)

Caleb was privileged to enjoy the reward of his faithfulness - or at least a measure of that reward -in this life; but the Christian receives his or her reward in that life which is to come. As long as they are here, struggling along in the flesh, the world will not pat them on the back and call them good fellows, for they do not conform to the world's ways. “Rejoice, and be exceeding glad,” said the Master, “for great is your reward in heaven.” (Matt. 5:12)

Caleb received the inheritance of Hebron, but the Christian receives “glory and honour and immortality,” even the divine nature. (Rom.2:7) When the kingdom of God is established on the earth, no doubt Caleb will be one of those whom God will set up as “princes in all the earth.” (Psa.45:16) He will not be classed as a member of the Church; for the Church is a body of people selected during this present Gospel dispensation and not during the time when Caleb lived, before the first advent of Christ.

Jesus Himself began the selection of the members of His Church, His Body, and there was no such church before that time. Caleb will be one of those who are often referred to as the “ancient worthies”, of whom we read that God has “provided some better thing for us (the Church), that they (the ancient worthies) without us should not be made perfect.” (Heb. 11:40) Meantime, he stands as an example of faith and steadfastness in that “he wholly followed the Lord God of Israel.”

Rich in Mercy

(CONVENTION ADDRESS)

“God, who is rich in mercy...” Eph. 2:4 “Blessed are the merciful...” Mat. 5:7

Mercy is one of the great threads which runs throughout God's word. We might say that the Bible itself from end to end is an account of the measureless mercy of God towards mankind. It is one of the most far-reaching of the elements of His character, for it is inescapable proof of His love and compassion for His creation. “Thou O Lord art a God full of compassion and gracious, longsuffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth”. (Psalm 86:15)

Many of the gods of man's devising on the other hand are presented as callous, arbitrary, unfeeling, even capricious, but we find from our own experience that our God, the only true God, the God of perfect justice

and wisdom and all power is also a God of lovingkindness and tender mercy, of compassion and of pity, all of which are summed up in His character of everlasting love and mercy.

Mercy is not only part of the character of our God however but His willing gift to all who seek. This we can see expressed in His dealings with individuals, with the nation of Israel and in this Gospel Age with the Church. In due course, His mercy will be extended to and bear fruit in all mankind as they come to realise and appreciate just how great is the love and mercy which He has shown towards them in the gift of His dear Son. "God so loved the world..." (John 3:16)

Furthermore, God desires mercy in the hearts of His people in every age and this was never more clearly expressed than in our Saviour's own words - "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." (Mat. 5:7) Happy indeed are all those responsive recipients of God's mercy who are always ready to show mercy to others, whose natural reaction has become one of showing forth a merciful spirit! "Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful." (Luke 6:36)

In our courts of law, a person may be found guilty of some crime, but because of mitigating circumstances a plea for mercy may be made on his behalf. And in God's word we read that "mercy rejoiceth against judgment." (James 2:13) It is not that these two qualities are in opposition but rather that the one deals in the facts of the case alone, while the other takes account of all the personal and circumstantial factors. Because of sin, God could rightly condemn mankind to death with perfect justice, but we read - "He knoweth our frame, He remembereth that we are dust" (Psalm 103:14) and in His over-riding mercy He has provided a way of release.

Well can we say with the Psalmist - "O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good, for His mercy endureth forever." (Psalm 136:1) All mankind has had to experience the fruits of sin, but all in due time may share in His mercy. This is the great message which it is our privilege to pass on to others. But to know His mercy now in Christ Jesus is the greatest blessing of all and belongs to all those with the ears to hear and the hearts to seek after God.

It is right that we think of this Gospel Age as the dispensation of grace in which God's mercy is so wonderfully shown in the forgiveness and salvation made available in Christ Jesus, but we can see clear evidence of His everlasting mercy towards those able to receive it during Old Testament times also. Very many of the psalms commemorate the mercy of God in His dealings with the nation of Israel as well as with individuals.

David himself confessed his appreciation and personal need of God's mercy for indeed he sinned greatly at times. Yet he found God merciful when he turned again to Him in repentance. Psalm 51 records one such occasion - "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy loving kindness; according to the multitude of thy tender mercies, blot out my transgressions." (Verse 1) David's ultimate confidence was that (God's) "goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." (Psalm 23:6) This is surely the Christian's confidence also.

Even in the giving of the law, which Israel because of the hardness of their hearts found a burden, we can see a portrait of God's character of mercy. "I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me, and *showing mercy* unto thousands that love me and keep my commandments." (Exodus 20:5,6) God here made it clear to Israel that He must reign supreme and that He requires total allegiance. Those that choose to disobey must expect His judgement, but to all those who love Him and seek to do His will, He is ever ready to show His mercy.

The Psalmist's appreciation of the great merciful heart of God is beautifully expressed in Psalm 103:1-18. In the psalm, he sets out to praise God for *all His benefits* including His lovingness and tender mercies. "*The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy* the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear Him, and His righteousness unto children's children." (Verses 2,8,17)

David's hymn of praise recognises not only God's mercy to the nation, beloved for the fathers' sakes, but to himself. We may be sure that he speaks also for all true Israelites indeed, including the heroes of faith of Old Testament times, who saw beyond the commandments of God the outlines of His character and the real requirements of heart He desired in His people. We see this recognition of God's character in the faithful Zacharias, father of John the Baptist, who prophesied - "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel for He hath visited and redeemed His people through the tender mercy of God, whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us to give light to them that sit in darkness...to guide our feet in the way of peace." (Luke 1:68,78,79)

Through the law, God sought to teach Israel the principles not only of justice but of mercy and love. Those whose hearts were in tune with God saw beyond its "shalls" and "shall nots" to the greater ideals behind them. Through the prophets God had declared - "I desired mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6) "What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (Micah 6:8)

These are the weightier matters of the law - judgement, mercy and faith - with which the Lord challenged the scribes and pharisees. (Mat. 23:23) They observed the law in fine detail and took infinite pains to ensure that others did so, but they had not grasped its real direction or purpose. Even in this day of grace, it may be possible to concentrate on lesser details and externals to the detriment of the real essentials of love and justice, mercy and faith, which are among the precious fruits of character which God most desires in us.

If God expected the fruit of mercy in His natural people, how much more from His people of this age who have so lavishly received of His mercy. *“What if God, willing to show His wrath, and to make His power known, endured with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction; and that he might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had before prepared unto glory, even us, whom He hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles”* (Romans 9:22-24)

Again, the apostle Paul reminds us just how great, how rich, His mercy has been towards us, who as Gentiles were outside that nation so long favoured only by God, but now made nigh by the blood of Christ, invited into His family. (Eph. 2:13,19) God truly is rich in mercy, as the apostle Peter also declares - *“according to His abundant mercy (He) hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you”* (1 Peter 1:3,4)

Not only have we been blessed with such a call, but we have access to His constant mercy, for we not only have a Heavenly Father who knows our frame and who loves His creation, but we have in Jesus a merciful and faithful high priest who because He Himself has suffered being tempted is able to succour them that are tempted (Heb. 2:17,18) So in every time of need, we can heed the apostle's words - *“Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need”* (Heb. 4:16)

When our Lord sent out His disciples two by two to preach the message of the kingdom, He instructed them - *“freely ye have received, freely give”*. (Mat. 10:8) Surely this principle is true in all God's dealings with His people. We have freely received of His mercy in Christ Jesus, how can we justify failure to show the same merciful spirit to others? We remember the Lord's story of the two debtors, one forgiven so much but not willing to forgive his own debtor a trifling sum. The apostle James also warns that *“he shall have judgement without mercy, that hath shown no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgement.”* (James 2:13)

One writer has well said - *“The Lord is very merciful, Love is His name, and in proportion as we have received His spirit, in that proportion we are full of love and mercy. He who lacks mercy lacks the spirit of the Lord. . . . O merciful Lord, help us, we pray thee, that we may more and more become copies of Thy dear Son and thus copies of our Father whose mercies endure forever.”*

“Put on therefore as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering, forbearing one another and forgiving one another...and above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfectness.” (Col. 3:12-14)

Our appreciation of the mercies of God in our own lives will be reflected not only in dedication to His service but in all our dealings with His people. Our judgments of others will be influenced by realisation of how greatly we need not only God's mercy but also how much we need the merciful judgements of others. It seems easy at times to criticise the actions of others, very often in the areas where we ourselves are by no means free from fault. Here the three great qualities of Micah 6:8 are so important - to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly before God - and towards all with whom we have to do, especially the brethren.

The lessons of mercy towards others is surely an essential one for those whose call is to help in the great work of the coming age of blessing for all mankind. In this present age of experience and preparation, we need to be learning sympathy and understanding for others, generosity of judgment, and kindness and mercy in all our dealings with others. Our own High Priest is merciful and faithful, able to bless us, and we need to be developing the same character likeness if we are to be a blessing to others, even now and more so in the age to come. Mercy is one of the great characteristics of the true heavenly wisdom, which God waits to give to those who seek. (James 1:5 & 3:17)

As the people of God, we have received bountifully of His mercy to us in Christ Jesus, we have his throne of grace to which we can come boldly and in full confidence to find mercy and grace in time of need. And we have the opportunity and the responsibility to show that same spirit of mercy to others in our judgements, in our words and in our actions. Moreover, there is rich blessing for those who see and grasp this privilege. *“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”* (Mat. 5:7) These are our Lord's own words and they are true not only in the sense of final rewards but in daily experience.

It has been said that mercy is twice blessed - it blesses not only they that receive but they that give. There is a blessing to our own hearts, there is growth and development into the character likeness of our Father and our Lord, in the exercise of mercy, in demonstration of a merciful spirit in actions of kindness and gentleness, understanding and compassion. We do well to heed the counsel of the wise man - *“Let not mercy and truth*

forsake thee, bind them about thy neck, write them upon the table of thy heart.” (Prov. 3:3)

As seekers after righteousness and truth, blessed through the abundant and abiding mercy of God, may we in grateful response each seek in turn to be daily exponents of the gracious quality of mercy in all our dealings with others. **“Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.” (Luke 6:36)**

Under His Wings (Psa.91:4)

Under His wings I am safely abiding,
Though the night deepens and tempests are wild;
Still I can trust Him - I know He will keep me,
He has redeemed me, and I am His child.
Under His wings, under His wings
Who from His love can sever?
Under His wings my soul shall abide,
Safely abide for ever!