

Forgive Us Our Trespases

ON NOVEMBER 27, 1998, *The New York Times* reported an announcement made for Christians of certain churches, that “in celebration of entering the third millennium of Christianity, penitents who do a charitable deed or give up cigarettes or alcohol for a day can earn an indulgence!” Indulgences are an ancient form of church-granted amnesty that release penitents from certain forms of punishment for past sins.

LUTHER OBJECTED TO INDULGENCES

The news article continued, saying, “The medieval church sold indulgences, a practice that drove Martin Luther to rebel, beginning the Reformation.” Indeed, indulgences which began in early Christian times have not always been viewed favorably. When they became a moneymaking scheme, they were denounced by many.

In the 16th century, indulgences were offered in exchange for contributions to build St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Luther protested, and as his theological criticisms mounted he was excommunicated in 1521. Later the church banned the sale of indulgences because it became evident that the rich would profit most from such a practice. The importance, however, of indulgences was affirmed at the Council of Trent in 1563, and further elaborated upon in 1968.

The concept is not supported by Biblical authority. It is based on the teaching that when forgiveness is granted for sins, the person living and having weakness of the flesh will commit more sins and these can be covered by indulgences. Those who have committed such sins, and have died, must be punished for these in purgatory.

All of this is predicated upon the teaching that Jesus Christ and his saints have, by their good works, made vicarious satisfaction to God for the sins of others. The amount of the satisfaction is called doctrinally the ‘infinite treasury of merits’. The official statement of such remission by the church is an indulgence.

MILLENNIUM EXPECTATIONS

It is interesting to note the high interest the Christian world has in the start of the third millennium of Christianity. There are dire predictions and joyous expectations. The dire predictions concern a complete breakdown of information processing in the switch-over of computers from a two-digit dating system to a three-or-four digit dating system. Experts are working on the problem to insure avoiding a breakdown of the high technology that has been developed in the twentieth century. There is a fear of failure to supply utilities, purchase of food, bank transactions, and many services that have been computerized. For some people there seems to be a sort of 'doomsday' cloud overhead. For others there are brighter expectations.

The joyous expectation for the third millennium is only held by a few Christian people. It is the establishment of God's kingdom on earth, for which all Christians pray, using the Lord's prayer: "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven." (Matt. 6:10) Jesus gave many signs that would precede the setting up of the kingdom. These are recorded in Matthew 24:13-15; Mark 13:19-37; and Luke 21:25-36.

In the Luke account, Jesus says, "So likewise ye, when ye see these things come to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh at hand." (Luke 21:31) Jesus' words were spoken concerning Israel 'budding' as a nation. Mark also speaks of the same event, saying, "So ye in like manner, when ye shall see these things come to pass, know that it (summer—a picture of the kingdom) is nigh, even at the doors." (Mark 13:29) We are so close to the realization of our hopes and prayers, that certainly the new millennium is bound to see God's kingdom on earth.

EVER-PRESENT SIN

Conditions in the world at present continue to be tragic. There are wars and bloodshed, starvation and poverty, suffering and dying—all characteristic of the 'present evil world.' The Bible, however, tells of our deliverance from this present evil world, through our Lord Jesus Christ.

In his letter to the churches of Galatia, the Apostle Paul says in his opening salutation: "Grace be to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord Jesus Christ, Who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father." (Gal. 1:3,4) We note how Paul stresses that Jesus gave

himself for our sins. These include all of our mistakes. The Apostle John likewise confirms this when speaking to present believers who have consecrated their lives to follow Jesus. He says: “My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation [satisfaction] for our sins.”—I John 2:1,2

We know that those in this Gospel Age who are striving to be a part of ‘the Church,’ have the great blessing of forgiveness of sins. This is plainly written by the Apostle Paul, when, in advising the brethren on marital relationships, he says: “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.”—Eph.5:25-27

FORGIVENESS WITH LOVE

This love that Jesus has for the church was clearly expressed by him in his beautiful prayer to the Father recorded in the Gospel of John. He said, “I have declared unto them [the apostles] thy name, and will declare it: that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them.” (John 17:26) In John 3:16, it is also recorded how God loves the world: “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” It is little wonder, then, that when John writes about the sins of the church being forgiven through Jesus, he should hasten to add: “And not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.” (I John 2:2) The meritorious sacrifice of Jesus Christ is the complete satisfaction for all sins. There is no other payment needed to ransom the world of mankind.

John also presents a beautiful picture in his remarks on mistakes made by the followers of Christ in this present time after accepting Jesus as their Redeemer, and being forgiven by the Father. ‘If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.’ The scene depicted for us is in a courtroom, or the legal bar of justice, with the Great Judge being our Father in heaven. Jesus, as our advocate or legal counsel, pleads our cause. There are no special proclamations necessary, except that we try very hard ‘to sin not.’

This same type of scene is presented by the Apostle Paul in the book of Romans. Wilson's *Emphatic Diaglott* translates the words with a question being used as an answer to a prior question: "Since God is for us, who can be against us? Surely he who spared not his own Son, but delivered him up on behalf of us all, how will he not with him also graciously give us all things? Who will bring an accusation against God's Chosen ones? Will that God who justifies? Who is he who condemns? Will that Anointed one who died; and, still more, who has been raised; who also is at the Right hand of God, and who intercedes on our behalf?" (Rom. 8:31-34) How comforting it is to know that we have such a capable legal counsel pleading our cause for the mistakes we make as we battle against Satan, the world, and our own flesh. These foes cannot succeed in their accusations, since God and Jesus are on our side.

AWAITING THE KINGDOM

In this same chapter (8) of Romans, the Apostle Paul spoke earlier of the Church's sufferings with Christ, and how they will lead to being glorified with Christ. Then, speaking of the whole world he says, "The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay [or corruption] and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God."—vss. 19-21, *Revised Standard Version*

The world, in a subconscious way, is looking for 'better times'—which, unknowingly, is the revealing of the sons of God, when the footstep followers of Christ complete their trial. This is the way that the 'better times' will come, because the manifestation of the sons of God accompanies the revelation of Jesus Christ—the Prince of Peace, and the King of Kings, and the Lord of Lords, as he establishes his kingdom.

The blessings of that kingdom were prophesied hundreds of years before Jesus came at his First Advent. One such prophecy is Isaiah 55, which reads: "Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." (Isa. 55:1, *RSV*) The wording of this prophecy causes us to recall the blessing of life offered to all mankind in the kingdom message of Revelation. "The Spirit and the bride say, Come.

And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.”—Rev. 22:17

FREELY RECEIVE

During Christ’s kingdom in the Millennial Age, the waters of life are received through the raising of the dead. Then the poor, who have never had enough material necessities to sustain their lives prior to the kingdom, will be able to fill their needs without money. They will also receive an understanding of God’s plan (the milk of the Word), and the benefits of the ransom (wine representing the blood of Christ). All this is available without cost, which is quite different than in the present Gospel Age. In order to receive a knowledge of God’s Word and the benefits of the ransom now, it is necessary for the prospective members of the body of Christ to make a consecration to the Lord and to be willing to lead a sacrificial life under adverse conditions. At the beginning of the Millennial Age, the milk and the wine are available without cost. As mankind progresses and comes to a knowledge of the truth, and becomes obedient to God’s laws, they must consecrate to do God’s will.

The prophecy continues by reminding mankind that in the past they spent money on ‘food’ that was inadequate. All of the past philosophies and false religions will be gone. Instead, the good ‘food’ of God’s Word will cause them to “delight in the richest of fare.” (Isa. 55:2, *NIV*) God had promised to do all this for King David. He accomplishes this through the establishment of the New Covenant, and the kingdom of David’s descendant, Jesus, who will reign forever. (II Sam. 7:11-13) As stated in this prophecy, and many others such as Micah 4:1,2, all nations will flow into this kingdom.

The New Covenant, which is made with the house of Israel and Judah, is also mentioned in Jeremiah: “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a New Covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord: But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every

man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”—Jer. 31:31-34

A RANSOM FOR ALL

When the Apostle Paul wrote, in his letter to Timothy, the words, “This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth” (I Tim. 2:3,4), he was confirming Jeremiah’s prophecy. Paul does not stop there, but continues, saying: “For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.” (vss. 5,6) Such, then, is the great blessing for the world of mankind in the millennial kingdom— that of receiving forgiveness for sin through Christ’s all-satisfying blood. How glad they will be to know that the wicked deeds of the past will not be held to their charge. This is why our prophecy in Isaiah 55 singles out ‘the wicked’ and ‘unrighteous man,’ saying: “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”—Isa. 55:7

There will not be a teaching of less punishment for sin by the granting of indulgences, because God does not grant indulgences, and he is the only one who can forgive (along with those empowered by him, as was Jesus). The educating of all in righteousness will be the means whereby all return to the Lord. When it finally becomes clear to all mankind that God’s plan made a basic provision for their forgiveness, they will extol Jesus and say, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain” (Rev. 5:12), and will praise God, saying, “Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us: this is the Lord; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”—Isa. 25:9

The plan of salvation is God’s plan. He is the author of it. His only begotten Son willingly cooperated with his Father to lay down his life and make all these blessings of the kingdom possible. May praise unceasing be given to God, the Father and to his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, forever and ever. Amen.

Finding Life in Death

Key Verse: *“I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.”*
—John 12:32

Selected Scripture:
John 12:20-50

IN OUR KEY VERSE, citing our Lord’s words, ‘If I be lifted up,’ there is a reference to the manner in which he was to die. Jesus was likening this future experience to that of Israel’s in the wilderness. He said, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up.” (John 3:14)

Jesus knew that after he had left his heavenly glory with the Father and had come to earth as a man, that he would be the Savior of mankind. He would give his life as a ransom or corresponding price for the disobedience of father Adam. (I Tim. 2:6) As a result of faithfully laying down his life in death, he received life eternal, on the Divine plane, and a position next to the throne of God.

When Jesus said, ‘I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me,’ he was talking about the future. At the present time, the vast majority of those who know about Jesus live in the Western world; and of these, comparatively few hear and understand the message, or see the crucified one with the eye of faith.

The world of mankind in general is dying without knowing the plan of God; therefore only a few have had the opportunity to exercise true faith in Christ. Thank God, the day is nearing when he who was cruelly ‘lifted up’ at Calvary and afterward ‘lifted up’ in resurrection power—will be manifested in power and great glory—“the true Light which [will] lighten every man which cometh into the world!”—John 1:9

Earthly life and earthly blessings were lost by father Adam, or, as the Scriptures say: “In Adam all die.” Jesus will eventually restore these blessings, during “the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.” (I Cor. 15:22; Acts 3:21) Meanwhile, the church, the ‘body’ or ‘bride’ of Christ, is being called out from mankind first. This elect class, called to

a heavenly calling, a high calling, will be joint-heirs with Jesus Christ in his promised kingdom.

Jesus, after offering his perfect sacrifice as the man Christ Jesus, was rewarded with the Divine nature. So also the believers of the Gospel Age are permitted to offer their imperfect selves (justified or reckoned perfect through the merit of the precious blood of Jesus) as an offering to God. In so doing, these are begotten of the Holy Spirit to be “New Creatures,” “Sons of God,” and accepted as Christ’s brethren—members of the “royal priesthood,” of which Jesus is the chief priest. (John 1:12; I Pet. 2:9, II Cor. 5:17) These, we are distinctly told, are to “fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ”—to “suffer” with him, that they may also “reign with him.” (Col. 1:24; II Tim. 2:12) Thus the position of the church is notably different from that of the world in general, even as their calling is a heavenly, high calling, and even as their reward is the Divine nature.—II Pet. 1:4

At present, the great mass of mankind has not been drawn of the Father, but will be drawn by the Son, Jesus, who said, “[I] will draw all men unto me” (John 12:32), granting them blessed opportunities for knowledge and the blessings of the promised restitution. This drawing will continue throughout the kingdom age—for which all Christians pray, “Thy kingdom come”—and until all mankind shall have felt its influence, been blessed, uplifted, and restored to perfection.

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Living As Servants

Key Verse: “*Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him.*”

—**John 13:16**

Selected Scripture:
John 13:1-17

SIX DAYS BEFORE Passover, Jesus had been in Bethany where he had dinner with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, a short time after Lazarus had been raised from the dead. Jesus then made a triumphal entrance into Jerusalem with his disciples for his last meal with them.

According to John 13:2, they were having the Passover Supper together. When supper was ended, Jesus taught them a very important lesson. It begins with an announcement that Jesus knew his hour had come to depart from them

and go to the Father. “Having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end.” (vs. 1) He knew that the Devil had already put it in the heart of Judas Iscariot to betray him.

During the supper, Jesus—knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he was going to the Father—got up from the table, wrapped a towel about himself, poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet, including Judas, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. (vss. 4,5) When he reached Peter, the apostle asked him, “Lord, dost thou wash my feet? Jesus answered . . ., What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter. . . . If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me.” Peter then exclaimed, “Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.” Jesus replied that washing his feet was enough. (vss. 5-10) Having explained his actions to Peter, Jesus went on to offer a more detailed account of what he had just done. The Master acted as a servant to his disciples, and wanted this example to be understood as the service they were to offer to one another.

Our Lord, their acknowledged Head and Master, had humbled himself to serve them all, and at the same time set them an example that would apply to every affair of life. We may readily see that this washing of one

another's feet applies to every humble service of life. All should be glad to perform acts of kindness, especially the services of tenderness which would be along the lines of spiritual assistance and comfort. We should look for such opportunities on every occasion, both in the great things as well as in the common things of life.

The example which our Lord set was not so much in the *kind* of service it was, as in the *act* of service. This pattern was not to be a ceremony performed by the Lord's people annually, or at any other time; but it was the principle of this service that constituted the lesson. We are to love and serve one another, considering no courtesy too menial to be performed for another's comfort and good. The principle is summarized in Jesus' words, "The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them."—vss. 16,17

Jesus had demonstrated his humility to all of God's angelic creation when he left heaven to become flesh. He continued to display this humility as the Apostle Paul tells us, "[He] made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." (Phil. 2:7,8) Thus Paul admonishes us to "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus."—Phil. 2:5

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Fruitful Christians

Key Verse: “I am the vine, ye are the branches. He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.”
—John 15:5

Selected Scripture:
John 15:1-17

IN THIS CHAPTER Jesus calls himself “the vine.” (vs. 1) Previously he identified himself as the “bread of life,” saying that anyone who would come to him, eat of this bread, and believe on him, would never hunger or thirst. (John 6:32-35) Jesus, now having introduced a new illustration, calls himself the ‘true vine.’ In so doing he is presenting himself as the head of his church. The branches represent his partners who will bring blessings to the world.

But first, they must bring forth much fruit; and to do so they must abide in him. (vs. 5) What does it mean to ‘abide’ in

Christ? Those who have come into Christ by faith, and consecrated themselves to do the will of God, can be said to ‘abide’ in him. This means that their faith will endure, and their consecration to the Lord and his service will continue, being manifested in their daily lives. When Jesus said, “If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you” (vs. 7), it is evident that he was stressing the importance of his work, and the Scriptures. This must be in the minds and lives of all who are truly his! They must search the Scriptures to know the will of the Lord.

Our Lord also clearly states the necessity of continuing under his care: “Abide in me. ... As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.” (vs. 4) He continues: “If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.”—vs. 7

The Apostle Paul reminds us of this same necessity for abiding in Christ, saying: “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (Heb. 10:31) He proceeds to point out his meaning by quoting

from the Prophet Moses, “the Lord thy God is a consuming fire.” (Deut. 4:24) God’s love, no less than his justice, burns against all sin, and “all unrighteousness is sin.”—I John 5:17

Our Lord, in instructing his apostles of the importance of abiding in him, also stressed that his words must abide in us if we would have our prayers answered. His words, again, are, ‘If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you,’ as quoted above.

The most healthy branches in the vine may give evidence of fruit-bearing, but they still require pruning, representing difficult experiences in our lives. So also, the most honest and earnest of the Lord’s people require the discipline and care of the Lord. Otherwise they may fail to bring forth as much fruit as they could do with proper, continual pruning.

The true child of God will not be discouraged by this pruning, for he has full confidence in the wisdom of the great husbandman, being assured that the Lord’s will and ways are the best, and are intended to work out a blessing for each of us.

With the pruning that is received, the ‘fruit of the Spirit’ will be developed. What is this fruit? The Apostle Paul gives us the answer, saying, “The fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth; Proving what is acceptable unto the Lord.”—Eph. 5:9,10

May we all be fruitful Christians for God!

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Help in Time of Need

Key Verse: “The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.”

—John

14:26, Revised Standard Version

***Selected Scripture:
John 14:15-18,
24-26; 16:7-15***

NEAR THE CLOSE OF HIS ministry, Jesus spoke to his disciples about things that they could not understand. As well as speaking the words of our Key Verse, he told them: “I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth.”—John 16:12,13

It was necessary that they should have the Holy Spirit before they could understand. Referring to the time of his ‘departure’ from them, Jesus also said, “It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter [the Holy Spirit] will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.” (John 16:7) “The Holy [Spirit] was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet

glorified.”—John 7:39

Fifty days after the Lord was glorified, on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was given to the waiting disciples who were gathered in a large upper room in Jerusalem. “There appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy [Spirit], and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.”—Acts 2:3,4

The Apostle Paul said, “All things are yours; And ye are Christ’s; and Christ is God’s.” (I Cor. 3:21,23) It was to the early Christians, and to all the subsequent followers of the Master, that the Lord had given this assurance: “No good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly.” (Ps. 84:11) They are also told that they will be guided into all truth as it becomes due. What comfort there is in these words! What

consolation! What a privilege of fellowship we have with the Father and with the Son that we should be taken into their confidence—to have, step by step, the knowledge of his plans and purposes revealed to us!

And this comfort, the Scriptures assure us, comes to us through the Holy Spirit. It is, indeed, our Comforter (John 14:26), and those who have the Holy Spirit may rest assured that they will always have the full blessings of this comfort. It is only as we receive of the Spirit of the Lord, that we are able to understand and appreciate the length and breadth, the height and depth of his love as revealed to us in his ‘plan of the ages.’

Through his Holy Spirit we learn that God has compassion for us, and helps and comforts us continually as we have need of it. This comfort and help in time of need comes to us through the Scriptures. They are the means by which the knowledge of God’s grace and constant aid is available to reach us. We read in his Holy Word, “Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.”—Rom. 15:4

This help and comfort is *of* the Father, *through* the Son, and *by* the Holy Spirit. It comes to us through our understanding of the Holy Word. We are informed that the solace of the scriptural promises is also imparted through the members of the body of Christ one to another, as the Apostle Paul says, “Wherefore, comfort one another with these words.” (I Thess. 4:18) Let us each appreciate these blessed helps in time of need!

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Interceding in Prayer

Key Verse: “Now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are.”
—John 17:11

Selected Scripture:
John 17:1-5, 9, 11, 15-24

IN A PREVIOUS LESSON, the Lord had met with his disciples for his final meal with them. Afterwards, Jesus offered to his Heavenly Father one of his final prayers on behalf of his disciples, and also for those who would follow him thereafter throughout the Gospel Age. He had said several times to the disciples that he was soon to depart from them. Now his concern was for their welfare, knowing that they would be sorely discomfited as they witnessed the events of the coming day. Finally, they would even see him crucified between two thieves.

As we consider our Lord’s compassion concerning his followers, we see his love, care, and oneness he had with those who had followed him for the last three and one-half years. It was a oneness of purpose, sympathy, and love for each other. This same oneness that our Lord described as already existing between himself and the Father is the ideal goal toward which we are taught to strive. Those who are inspired by the true doctrines of the Holy Word of God, the Bible, and have true faith, will be bound together by the same cords of love. Their fellowship will be, as the Master said, “That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.” (John 17:21) At that momentous time, Jesus also prayed: “I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came out from thee, and they have believed that thou didst send me. I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine.”—John 17:8,9

As our Heavenly Father and our Lord Jesus are bound together inseparably by a mutual love, so likewise the true footstep followers will be one in spirit and in doctrine. As the Master said, “Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” (John 8:32) The reason for true brotherhood is that each one is fully consecrated to God and his service, is begotten of the Holy Spirit, and is devoted to righteousness and truth, and to doing the will of God. Thus, “They shall be all taught of God.”—John 6:45

Christians have believed the words of Jesus when he said, “My Father is greater than I,” and “As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.” (John 14:28; 20:21) They recognize the oneness between the Father and the Son as being not oneness of person, but oneness of heart, of mind, and of purpose. According to our Lord’s words in prayer, he said, “I pray for them ... that they may be one, as we are [one].” Most recognize that the man Christ Jesus is the only perfect representative sent by the Heavenly Father. He who ‘sees’ the Son, ‘sees’ the Father as well, because he is the “express image” of the Father’s “person.” (Heb. 1:3) Only in this way is it possible for mankind to ‘see’ the invisible, immortal God “whom no man hath seen, nor can see.”—Col. 1:15; John 1:18; I Tim. 6:16

Thus it is that the only begotten Son of God revealed the Heavenly Father to his footstep followers, and interceded for them in prayer.

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Joseph's Dreams

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

VERSES 1-4 “And Jacob dwelt in the land wherein his father was a stranger, in the land of Canaan.

“These are the generations of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brethren; and the lad was with the sons of Bilhah, and with the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives: and Joseph brought unto his father their evil report.

“Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of many colours.

“And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him.”

‘Jacob dwelt in the land wherein his father [Isaac] was a stranger.’ This was the ‘Promised Land,’ but so far as the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were concerned they were merely sojourners in it at that time. Their actual possession of the land will not be until they are raised from the dead and take their places among the other Ancient Worthies as “princes in all the earth.”—Ps. 45:16

Beginning with the second verse of this chapter is the unfolding of one of the most interesting stories ever written, the story of Joseph and his brethren. It possesses all the elements usually found in fictional dramas, yet it is a true account. In it are displayed the fallen human passions of jealousy and lust manifested in cruel intrigue of brother against brother, of mistress against servant, and friend against friend.

Also there are exhibited in the narrative those noble qualities of mercy and understanding, manifesting themselves in a willingness to forgive past injuries and to give glory to God for overruling the harm that was intended, to the great good of all concerned. And it is more than merely a true story of Joseph and his brethren, for in it are to be found striking similarities to the experiences of another favorite Son, even to Jesus, the beloved Son of God and Redeemer of the church and of the world.

‘Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, ... and he made him a coat of many colors.’ Thus do we have the setting of the narrative, the reason for the jealousy of Joseph’s brethren. “Jealousy is cruel as the grave” (Song of Sol. 8:6), the Scriptures tell us, and this ‘green-eyed monster’ soon was able to stir up Joseph’s brethren to take action against him. At first it was merely a passive hatred they held toward Joseph, but nevertheless a hatred so intense that they found it difficult to even speak to him in a friendly manner.

VERSES 5-8 “And Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told it his brethren: and they hated him yet the more.

“And he said unto them, Hear, I pray you, this dream which I have dreamed:

“For, behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, lo, my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves stood round about, and made obeisance to my sheaf.

“And his brethren said to him, Shalt thou indeed reign over us? or shalt thou indeed have dominion over us? And they hated him yet the more for his dreams, and for his words.”

When Joseph’s brethren heard about his dream in which they were seen as bowing down to him, they hated him even more. Under the circumstances perhaps Joseph was indiscreet in relating his dream to his brethren, but he was a mere lad and certainly innocent of any desire to impress his brethren with his greatness. But his brethren were quick to grasp the meaning of the dream and their jealousy increased.

VERSES 9-11 “And he dreamed yet another dream, and told it his brethren, and said, Behold, I have dreamed a dream more; and, behold, the sun and the moon and the eleven stars made obeisance to me.

“And he told it to his father, and to his brethren: and his father rebuked him, and said unto him, What is this dream that thou hast dreamed? Shall I and thy mother and thy brethren indeed come to bow down ourselves to thee to the earth?

“And his brethren envied him; but his father observed the saying.”

Joseph’s second dream carried more sweeping implications than his first, for it signified that even his parents would bow down to him. It was a true forecast of coming events, but his father rebuked him for relating it. Probably Jacob sensed the jealousy of his other sons and realized that

the telling of this second dream would but fan the flame of hatred and make it even more difficult to find a peaceable solution.

But Jacob was not jealous, hence his reaction to the forecast of Joseph's rulership over the rest of the family was quite different. He rebuked him merely for telling the dream. As for what it might portend, 'he observed the saying'—that is, he took note of it with the idea of watching the Lord's providences in connection therewith.

VERSES 12-22 "And his brethren went to feed their father's flock in Shechem.

"And Israel said unto Joseph, Do not thy brethren feed the flock in Shechem? come, and I will send thee unto them. And he said to him, Here am I.

"And he said to him, Go, I pray thee, see whether it be well with thy brethren, and well with the flocks; and bring me word again. So he sent him out of the vale of Hebron, and he came to Shechem.

"And a certain man found him, and, behold, he was wandering in the field: and the man asked him, saying, What seekest thou?

"And he said, I seek my brethren: tell me, I pray thee, where they feed their flocks.

"And the man said, They are departed hence; for I heard them say, Let us go to Dothan. And Joseph went after his brethren, and found them in Dothan.

"And when they saw him afar off, even before he came near unto them, they conspired against him to slay him.

"And they said one to another, Behold, this dreamer cometh.

"Come now therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into some pit, and we will say, Some evil beast hath devoured him: and we shall see what will become of his dreams.

"And Reuben heard it, and he delivered him out of their hands; and said, Let us not kill him.

"And Reuben said unto them, Shed no blood, but cast him into this pit that is in the wilderness, and lay no hand upon him; that he might rid him out of their hands, to deliver him to his father again."

The hatred which Joseph's brethren bore toward him was not reciprocated. He loved them, and had nothing but their best interests at heart. While apparently for some time they had not spoken to him peaceably, he was quite willing, when his father requested it, to look them

up in distant fields for the purpose of seeking their welfare and to report back to his and their father. This Godlike characteristic of Joseph continued to manifest itself throughout his entire life.

Those who are pure of heart and who desire only good for others, even for those who may be opposed to them, seem often to be incapable of imagining the evil plotting which goes on in the minds of those whose hearts are filled with hatred. A thief always suspects that others are thieves; but the innocent and pure are quite likely to be trustful of others. This seems to have been Joseph's attitude. Perhaps, if he had been warned, it still would have been difficult for him to believe that his brethren would take advantage of his insecurity in the open field, and lay hands on him for evil as they did.

It seemed to be the desire of all Joseph's brethren, with the exception of Reuben, to kill the 'dreamer,' but Reuben persuaded them to modify their plans and to cast him into a nearby pit. His thought was that when he had the opportunity, and unknown to the others, he would restore Joseph to his father. This was to Reuben's credit, although his effort was not wholly successful.

VERSES 23-28 "And it came to pass, when Joseph was come unto his brethren, that they stript Joseph out of his coat, his coat of many colours that was on him;

"And they took him, and cast him into a pit: and the pit was empty, there was no water in it.

"And they sat down to eat bread: and they lifted up their eyes and looked, and, behold, a company of Ishmeelites came from Gilead with their camels bearing spicery and balm and myrrh, going to carry it down to Egypt.

"And Judah said unto his brethren, What profit is it if we slay our brother, and conceal his blood?

"Come, and let us sell him to the Ishmeelites, and let not our hand be upon him; for he is our brother and our flesh. And his brethren were content.

"Then there passed by Midianites merchantmen; and they drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmeelites for twenty pieces of silver: and they brought Joseph into Egypt."

In agreeing to cast Joseph into a pit, Reuben's brothers had no other thought, apparently, than that of leaving him there to die. But having left him in the pit, Judah's intentions softened toward Joseph, and seeing an opportunity to dispose of him short of murder, he proposed that they do so by selling him to the Ishmaelites to be taken to Egypt as a slave. The others agreed to this, and it might be said on the part of all of them that this change of plans indicates that none of them were hardened criminals. They had been caught in a snare of jealousy and hatred, but when it came to the test they proved not to really be of the ignoble type who think nothing of committing cold-blooded murder.

VERSES 29-36 “And Reuben returned unto the pit; and, behold, Joseph was not in the pit; and he rent his clothes.

“And he returned unto his brethren, and said, The child is not; and I, whither shall I go?

“And they took Joseph's coat, and killed a kid of the goats, and dipped the coat in the blood;

“And they sent the coat of many colours, and they brought it to their father; and said, This have we found: know now whether it be thy son's coat or no.

“And he knew it, and said, It is my son's coat; an evil beast hath devoured him; Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces.

“And Jacob rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days.

“And all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted; and he said, For I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning. Thus his father wept for him.

“And the Midianites sold him into Egypt unto Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh's, and captain of the guard.”

Reuben had not counted on his brothers changing their minds about Joseph, and was evidently not with them when he was sold to be taken to Egypt. He returned to the pit with the evident intent of freeing his younger brother, and returning him to Jacob. But he found the pit empty. He reported the matter to his brothers, and asked where he should go, evidently for the purpose of finding Joseph.

Bible stories seldom give all the details involved, and there is nothing said here of how Reuben was reconciled to the sale of Joseph, for the report that was prepared for their father would have the same tragic

consequences as though his beloved son had actually been killed. Perhaps Reuben decided that it was useless to continue opposing the plans of his brethren, so he joined in the plot to deceive their father; and they did deceive Jacob.

When he saw Joseph's coat of many colors smeared with blood, he reached exactly the conclusion his sons had reasoned he would. No doubt was left in his mind that the boy had been slain by a wild beast. Jacob was heartbroken. It was almost more than the aged parent could bear. He wept bitterly, and rent his clothes and put sackcloth upon his loins, 'and mourned for his son many days.'

His family tried in vain to comfort him. He explained that he would continue to mourn for Joseph as long as he lived. But he did not express the thought in just this way. Instead, he said, 'I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning.' This is one of the very important texts of the Bible, although seldom recognized as such. This is because the translators have used the word 'grave' to translate the Hebrew word *sheol* used by Jacob in his statement, which reveals that he expected to continue mourning until he joined Joseph in *sheol*—believing, of course, that his son was dead.

This is the first time the word *sheol* appears in the Bible, but it is used many times in later books of the Old Testament. However, it is not always translated 'grave.' Thirty-one times this same word is translated by the English word 'hell.' The word *sheol* is descriptive of the only hell that is mentioned in the Old Testament; and in Jacob's use of it, he reveals that, according to his understanding, Joseph—whom he thought to be dead—was in hell, or *sheol*, and that he expected to join him there when he died.

We find that this expression of sorrow on the part of Jacob is most revealing, for it shows that the righteous as well as the wicked go to the Bible hell when they die. The Bible hell, however, is not a place of torment, but merely the state of death—a condition which the Scriptures liken to sleep, and from which there will be an awakening in the morning of the resurrection. In Ecclesiastes 9:10, where the Hebrew word is again used and translated 'grave,' we are told that in this condition "there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom"—in other words, it is a state of unconsciousness.

In Genesis 37:36 we are informed that Joseph was sold to Potiphar in Egypt by the ‘Midianites,’ whereas in verse 28 it is stated that his brethren had sold him to the ‘Ishmaelites.’ In Genesis 39:1 we read that it was the Ishmaelites who sold him to Potiphar. This might seem to be contradictory, but is not actually so. The Ishmaelites were Arab descendants of Abraham through Hagar, whereas the Midianites were Arab descendants through Keturah. Apparently they were more or less associated, and sometimes were called by one name and sometimes by the other.

The army of Midianite Arabs defeated by Gideon and his little army of 300 had Ishmaelites among them, as revealed by Judges 8:24. Apparently they were distinguished from the Midianites only by the fact that they wore golden earrings. It is possible that the band of traders to whom Joseph was sold by his brethren was made up of both Midianites and Ishmaelites, hence as a group they are referred to first by one name, and then by the other.

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God's Thoughts to "Us-ward"

"Many, O LORD my God, are thy wonderful works which thou hast done, and thy thoughts which are to us-ward: they cannot be reckoned up in order unto thee: if I would declare and speak of them, they are more than can be numbered."
—Psalm 40:5

IN REVEALING HIS will to his children of this Gospel Age, the Heavenly Father has made it plain that he wants them to work for him and with him in the carrying out of his plan. What a high honor it is to work with the Lord. Jesus, in his prehuman existence as the *Logos* had this glorious opportunity in the original work of Creation, hence we find Jehovah saying to him, "Let *us* make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness."—Gen. 1:26

How wonderful it would be to have the Heavenly Father similarly include us in his work! And this is exactly what he has done, for as the apostle writes,

we have been made co-laborers with the Lord in the great work of reconciling the lost world to him.—I Cor. 3:9; II Cor. 5:19; 6:1

Jehovah has been zealous in the carrying forward of his plan, and he is pleased when his co-laborers exhibit a similar zeal—the zeal of the house of God. The true followers of the Master are described by Paul as a "peculiar people, zealous of good works." (Titus 2:14) James indicates that we are to show our faith by our works (James 2:18) It is undoubtedly pleasing to the Heavenly Father that we should rejoice in this privilege of working with him, and that we should be happy at every evidence of his blessing upon our efforts.

We should ever keep in mind that what we do for the Lord is as nothing in comparison with what he does for us. It is only by his grace that our imperfect works are acceptable to him. Therefore, it is necessary for us to consider the many 'wonderful works' which he has done, and his solicitous thoughts 'to us-ward.' When we do this, we find how true it is,

as our theme text says, that the many things which the Lord has done ‘cannot be reckoned up in order,’ and that when we try to tell about them ‘they are more than can be numbered.’

HE INCLINED UNTO ME

The psalmist said, “I waited patiently for the Lord; and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry.” (Ps. 40:1) Throughout the ages, millions have waited patiently for the Lord, yet it was not his due time to ‘incline’ unto them and hear their cry. True, many of these lacked understanding in their waiting. Paul speaks of them as the “whole creation,” which, groaning and travailing together in pain, are waiting for “the manifestation of the sons of God.” (Rom. 8:19,22) The Lord knows about all these millions, and when, in his plan, their ‘day of visitation’ comes, he will ‘incline’ unto them, hear their cries for help, and will save them. Then they will say, “Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, ... we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”—Isa. 25:9

Meanwhile, during this Gospel Age, the Lord has honored one here and there by responding to their cry. Paul speaks of these as seeking the Lord, “if haply they might feel after him, and find him.” (Acts 17:27) It would be impossible for any to find the Lord unless he chooses to ‘incline’ to them, to respond to their cry for help; so if we have had this blessed experience of finding him, it means that his thoughts have turned to ‘us-ward,’ and that we can accept this as a manifestation of his special favor.

When the Lord ‘inclined’ toward us, what was the first of his ‘wonderful works’ on our behalf? David gives us the answer, saying that the Lord “brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings.” (Ps. 40:2) We were all in this ‘horrible pit,’ symbolic of being lost in sin and death. We remember the pit into which Joseph was cast by his brethren. It was a place from which he could not have escaped. Had his brethren not changed their minds and sold Joseph as a slave, he doubtless would have died in that pit.

We were indeed in a ‘pit’ from which escape was impossible, and made the more so by the miry clay into which we were sinking. It was in this condition that the Lord found us, and heard our cry for help. And he did more than listen. He took hold of us and lifted us up out of the miry

clay and out of the pit, and set our feet upon a ‘Rock’—the “Lord is my rock.” (II Sam. 22:2) Then we had a firm footing, a sure foundation, and joyfully we could sing,

“On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand.”

ESTABLISHED OUR GOINGS

God’s thoughts to ‘us-ward’ were manifested in further blessings. David writes that the Lord ‘established’ his ‘goings’—that is, his course in life, and that applies to us with equal force. While we were in the ‘horrible pit,’ and our feet were sinking in the ‘miry clay,’ life had very little purpose. Many times the question probably arose in our minds as to the meaning of our existence. We had no objectives, but all this changed when the Lord set our feet upon the Rock, Christ Jesus.

Realizing that the Lord had made a wonderful provision for us through Christ Jesus, our hearts responded in loving devotion to him, for we knew that we no longer were our own, but by right belonged to him, and should spend the remainder of our lives serving him. Thus we consecrated ourselves to do his will, and in revealing his will to us, our Heavenly Father established our ‘goings,’ that is, he pointed out not only what he wanted us to do in his service, but also that at the end of the way there was to be a prize, “the prize of the high calling.” (Phil. 3:14) Therefore he bid us to set your affection on things which are above,” and to “run with patience the race that is set before us. Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith.”—Col. 3:2; Heb. 12:1,2

Our Heavenly Father established our ‘goings’ upon the narrow way. Now life had a meaning, and a definite objective. We had a job to do. We were to work out our own salvation, for we knew that the Lord was working in us “both to will and to do of his good pleasure.” (Phil. 2:12,13) With our ‘goings’ thus established, we were ready to “give diligence” to make our “calling and election sure.” (II Pet. 1:10) With Paul, we said, “This one thing I do.” (Phil. 3:13) We heard Jesus saying to us, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God,” and hearing this, we realized that we could not afford to be halfhearted in striving for the goal that was set before us in the Gospel. (Matt. 6:33) Moreover, we rejoiced when we remembered that it was God’s thoughts to us-ward that had resulted in

our being in this position of high favor with him, a position in which we rejoiced “in hope of the glory of God.”—Rom. 5:2

A NEW SONG

David continues, “He hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God.” (Ps. 40:3) The song in the mouths of those in the world today is a very doleful one, if indeed they have a song at all. And it was so with us until we were lifted up out of that ‘horrible pit.’ How could we sing while our feet were sinking in the ‘miry clay?’ But now it is different. The Lord has given us a song to sing, even a song of praise to him. This ‘new song’ is in reality the melody of the truth.

“Many shall see it, and fear [reverence], and shall trust in the Lord,” continues the psalmist. (vs. 3) We know that ultimately the whole world shall be filled with a knowledge of the glory of God, but even now ‘many’ see and appreciate the truth to some extent, while one here and there—those to whom the Lord ‘inclines’ himself—embrace it in full consecration and run diligently for the prize of the high calling. To whatever extent an individual ‘sees’ the truth and appreciates it, his reverence for the Lord is increased, and in that proportion he puts his trust in the Lord. And what a blessing that is in this time of distress upon the nations!

The psalmist says, “Blessed is that man that maketh the Lord his trust.” (vs. 4) Today, one after another of the things in which men have put their trust are failing. Their ‘idols’ are crumbling, and, symbolically speaking, they are calling for the “rocks” and the “mountains,” (their gods and governments), to fall on and protect them. (Rev. 6:16) What a joy, therefore, it should be to us if in singing the new song of praise to God, some hear and learn to put their trust in God, realizing that in the fulfillment of his promises alone will peace and joy come to the world.

HIS THOUGHTS

Many are the wonderful works of God, and ‘many’ are his loving thoughts to ‘us-ward.’ It was his thoughts to ‘us-ward’ that led to the provision for lifting us out of the horrible pit and the miry clay of sin and death. He was thinking of us when he provided the ‘rock’ upon which our feet are now firmly established. It was to ‘us-ward’ he was thinking when he made it possible for us to present and yield our bodies a living

sacrifice. We have the assurance that our offering will be holy and acceptable to him through Christ Jesus our Lord.—Rom. 12:1

OUR JUSTIFICATION

“Being justified by faith,” Paul writes, “we have peace with God.” (Rom. 5:1) While we were in the ‘horrible pit’ we were alienated from God through wicked works. But “while we were yet sinners” God made provision for our return to harmony with him, and to enjoy peace with him as part of his thoughts to ‘us-ward.’ (Rom. 5:8) What a loving thought! It is beyond our ability to understand why Jehovah would make provision for our being at peace with him; but it is so, and by this loving thought of God alone we are overwhelmed.

Paul explains that by justification through Christ “we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.” (Rom. 5:2) ‘Into this grace,’—what grace? That wonderful position of favor in which we ‘rejoice in hope of the glory of God.’ We cannot grasp this at all. All we know is that God’s thoughts were ‘us-ward’ in making the provision, for the Apostle Peter explains that by the “exceeding great and precious promises” of God we are made “partakers of the Divine nature.”—II Pet. 1:4

THE HOLY SPIRIT

God has also given us his Holy Spirit—another evidence of his thoughts to ‘us-ward.’ And what does the Holy Spirit do for us? The Scriptures explain that by it we are begotten to a new hope of life; that we are anointed as members of the body of Christ, and thus authorized to be servants of God; that the Holy Spirit witnesses with our spirits that we are the children of God, and by the Holy Spirit we are “sealed unto the day of redemption,” or deliverance.—I Pet. 1:3; Rom. 8:16; Eph. 4:30

Yes, God does all these things for us, and more, through the operation of his Holy Spirit in our lives. By that Spirit we are guided in the narrow way; comforted in our sorrows; enlightened when the way seems dark; strengthened when weary; rebuked when wayward; and warned when in danger. And how wonderful is the Master’s assurance that the Heavenly Father is more willing to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask than are earthly parents to give good gifts to their children.—Luke 11:13

Receiving God's Holy Spirit inspires us to pray often for grace and strength in every time of need. By so doing we are strengthened in the battle fought against our foes and all of our enemies. God has made provision for us (even though we are sinful and imperfect) to come to him through Jesus' name to seek forgiveness for our sins, as well as to receive his guidance and strength.

Truly the psalmist was right when he said that God's thoughts 'to us-ward' are so many and varied that they 'cannot be reckoned up in order,' and are 'more than can be numbered.' In his love he thought of all our needs from before the time he called us, even until we reach the end of the way, and beyond that, provided "glory and honour and immortality, eternal life." (Rom. 2:7) He inclined toward us with mercy and love to forgive, to guide, to strengthen, to protect, to encourage, to comfort, to fill with joy, and to inspire with a heavenly hope. And daily, as he lifts up his countenance upon us to give peace, and the assurance that his thoughts continue to 'us-ward,' he wants us to commune with him that we may become more intimately acquainted with him, and thus rejoice the more that we are so richly blessed in being members of his family.

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