

A Heavenly Calling

Reading: Heb. 2:1, 5-11; 3:1; 1:2; 11:3.

These fragments are just hints at a very much larger matter. It is upon that larger matter that I want to dwell for a little while. There are just two preliminary words.

Firstly, we are all — that is, those of us who are at all alive spiritually and concerned about things — we are very deeply exercised in these times as to the meaning of things. What does the present situation in particular really mean? What is the significance of that which is so heavily, and sometimes so terribly, pressing upon us, and some of us, I think not a few, are going through something of a travail, an anguish, seeking to have the explanation, to get God's meaning. We feel that we are up against a situation for which mere theories are useless, words become unbearable just as words. We need a touch of God's finger to answer some inward cry and groan; that groan, that cry, is produced in different people by different things, but it is all a part of a whole, and what we have to say, while not being the full answer, I believe does really touch very directly and definitely upon that matter, to give a clue, a key, a partial but very real answer to our heart enquiry. That is the first preliminary word.

The other is this — and it comes or brings us right near to the whole matter. We have read here two fragments literally translated "*by whom* (or through whom) *He made the ages*" (Heb. 1:2); in our translation, it is "the worlds", but that is not a correct translation. It should be "the ages". The other is "*By faith we understand that the ages* (not the worlds) *have been framed by the word of God*" (Heb. 11:3). That, I say, is a clue, an indication, and many other passages could be brought alongside which are of a piece with this matter. It is just this: the Word of God teaches that the course and history of this world is arranged in periods; it is divided up into distinct and definite periods of time, each of which has its own particular purpose and character. The world has already passed through several of these ages or specified periods of time, lasting for shorter or longer duration, hundreds or thousands of years, and it is quite easy, in reading the Bible right through, to see these ages and what particularly belonged to each. We are now in one specific age, one of these particular time periods. It commenced with the coming of the Lord Jesus into this world; it will close with His return. But that is not the end. There are still further ages mentioned. There is the '*age to come*' referred to; that is the next thing. Then we are told of "*unto the ages of the ages*", the ages reaching on. Now I am not going to talk about those ages, but here is the statement — through the Lord Jesus these ages were made, distinct and defined time periods were made through Him. What I am going to talk about is the one in which we are, this age.

The apostle Paul in one place speaks of "*this present evil age*" (Gal. 1:4). Again our version says "world" — that is wrong, so far as our language is concerned. In the original, of course, it had its own meaning. "*This present evil age*", this age. Then here the writer says, "*the inhabited world to come whereof we speak*" — that is the next age, and in this letter to the Hebrews he is very distinctly and very definitely making that age contingent upon this age, and seeking to emphasize that this age is to have its consummation and realisation in the next age.

Now then, as to this present age. What is its nature and what is God really doing in it? Though you may have heard this before, listen to it carefully with special regard to what we are experiencing in our lives inwardly just now, for things do become more vital to us when we are in conditions, circumstances and situations which give them point, otherwise they are merely theories, and our present experience does give point to this matter. What is it that God is really doing in this particular age and what is the character of this age from the divine standpoint? The Word of God is very clear upon this and yet it

is a point at which even Christians and official Christianity has gone so far astray. The conditions, the distress which exists, is very largely due to that failure to apprehend God's distinct meaning for this particular age or dispensation.

God's Concern in this Dispensation

Quickly then, the answer in the first place is this — in this age God is particularly and supremely concerned and engaged with taking out of this world a people for Himself, and uniting that people with His Son in heaven; not, in the first place, taking them out literally, physically, geographically and taking them home to heaven. That is not the first thing. He is taking them out in heart; if I said, spiritually, that is somewhat vague, perhaps, to some. If I say, taking out in heart, you understand better — getting our hearts out of this world. The Lord Jesus put it very simply, in the Gospel time before the Holy Spirit had come to interpret and enlarge these truths, He put it like this. *"Where your treasure is, there will your heart be"* (Matt. 6:21). And He had just said, *"Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven."* Now that really means the Lord Jesus is in heaven and the treasure of the heart of every true child of God is the Lord Jesus, and therefore the heart of every true child of God has gone from this world and is united with the Lord Jesus in heaven. That is what God is after. We have often said here that, in this dispensation, God is not concerned with doing something upon this earth, building something here. Eventually He is going to overturn everything that is here, He is not establishing something to remain. He says, *"I will overturn, overturn, overturn it: ... until he come whose right it is"* (Ezek. 21:27). Or, in this letter, *"Yet once more will I shake not the earth only, but also the heaven"* (Heb. 12:26). "I will shake". How foolish God would be to build up something He is going to overturn. God does not do that sort of thing. So He is not seeking to put something on this earth; He is seeking to take out from this world, out from the nations, in heart, a people for Himself, joined with the Son in heaven. This whole letter to the Hebrews sees the Lord Jesus there, passed through the heavens, and then the object and effort of the Holy Spirit through the writer is to get the Lord's people out in spirit, in heart, joined with the Lord Jesus in heaven, so that they in heart and in spirit are a heavenly people, living here, working here, moving here, but pilgrims and strangers here and knowing it in spirit. They really are not rooted here, they really do not belong here. This is a strange place for them, they are strangers here; we know that, immediately we are converted, the first result of any real coming to the Lord, turning to the Lord, is this: that the old talk of this world, the old ways of going on here, the people who once we could bear and perhaps enjoy — it has gone, there is something happening. It is not that we are becoming priggish or superior. Something is happening, we do not enjoy that any longer. It is the first sign of something going on in this nature — God is drawing out and the more we go on with the Lord, the more that is intensified, the more we feel how impossible it is to live in this world and be a part of it. It is a real cross to have to live here, it is a real trial to have to move about and have our life with this world and its people and its affairs. Ah, that is a true sign that we are in the very thing that God is doing in this age. If only Christianity had recognised that and not put up its things on the earth and tried to establish itself and root itself and make all its marks and symbols something on this earth to be taken account of, there would be none of the distress and perplexity of seeing all its churches broken to pieces and its organization brought to an end. There would be rejoicing, there would be no funeral over this. It is all right, that does not matter at all when the Lord sees that He can dispense with these outward things. It is something else that matters. This is quite all right — the Lord is increasing heavenliness. That is what He is after — increasing what is above in the hearts of His people, and therefore displacing everything else that is not above or from above, displacing it from their hearts, and our reaction to that sort of thing does determine or disclose just how deep the work of God has gone in our hearts.

I read a little while ago of one of the Dohnavur workers in India who had left home and mother and everything to go out there to serve the Lord, and a very dear mother, one to whom she was greatly attached. A cable came through to Dohnavur from this country to

say that that mother had gone to be with the Lord, and the workers there were afraid to tell her. They expected a scene and terrible distress and so they were whispering amongst themselves how they should broach the subject. They were all really terrified as to what the effect would be upon her, but at last they braced themselves and one took on the awful business of breaking this terrible news. With chosen selected words, they tried to take off the edge of it, they told her they had heard that her mother had gone to be with the Lord and then waited breathless. The dear girl was quiet for a moment and then said, How lovely for mother!

The reaction determines just how much the Lord is and how much His presence is. It is what the Lord is trying to do in this age, to get a people whose heart is with Him above.

Administration in the Age to Come

But the Word of God discloses something if anything bigger than that, because it is the reason for that. It is a marvellous revelation, a thing that one does not hesitate to say even to unsaved people. I believe people are far more likely to get saved on having brought to them what the Lord means for them in His great purpose than having the terrors of hell held over their head. What does the Word of God reveal to be the purpose of this particular kind of work in this dispensation? It is this — God is taking out of the nations — not trying to save the nations — He is taking out of the nations in this dispensation an elect whom He has foreknown. He will do other things in other dispensations: there will be others saved, but this for now — He is taking out this elect company, this people from the nations, to form them, to constitute them an administrative system for the ages which will follow. Here is the statement — *“Not unto angels did He subject the inhabited earth to come, whereof we speak”* (Heb. 2:5). That translation “inhabited earth” is only an attempt again at defining a word, in the Authorized Version it is “*world to come*”. In the Greek there are several words which are translated into the one English word ‘world’ and they mean different things, and the particular word here which the translators have translated “world”, or the “inhabited earth” as the margin puts it, is better translated by the word ‘economy’. What is an economy? Of course, we have a very limited meaning for that word now. We speak of people being economical. That is not the meaning here. An economy in this sense is ‘ordered household’, a particular system of administration, *“not unto angels did He subject the ordered system of things to come, whereof we speak”*. It is that which will obtain in the next age, the system, the order which God will have in the next age. Unto man He subjected it: that was the original intention of God. Man at the beginning missed it, and now it is secured in pledge. *“We see him ... Jesus.”* It is secured in Him and He is the pledge of it and it is to be given to this elect, this people that He has taken out of the nations in this age.

That is the wonderful revelation, and of course that explains a great deal in our experience. You cannot be a Prime Minister without some kind of training: you cannot be an administrative person without some kind of background. How would you like to be put into the shoes of the present Prime Minister or into many of the other administrative offices in the nation? I would not. But in the next age this people has to fulfil that administrative function, and therefore a lot of preparation is necessary, a lot of deep work is necessary, a lot of knowing the Lord is necessary, a lot of development of spiritual faculties is necessary, a lot of training is necessary. The apostle arrives at that in chapter 12, as you know — training unto this. That is what God is doing now — not making us rulers and kings on this earth, but preparing us to cooperate with his Son in the government of things in the next age. That is a whole big theme in the Bible. It can only just be mentioned here. Now you see the situation.

Administration in the Age to Come

But when we have said that, we must hurry to the next thing in that connection, to say a word about the terrible domination and mastery of this age and this world, and it is a very terrible domination, in us. What a tremendous place this life has with us even yet. What a big place this world and its things still has in our hearts. We had better confess it, it is true, it is a very difficult thing indeed for this natural heart to have everything outside of this world. This life is a big thing, and that is why death is such a terrible thing to so many. Death to so many is terrible because it is the end of everything, is it? The Word of God says it is the beginning of everything, but to us it is the end of everything, the end of so much, at any rate. Yes, this age, this world, this life, has such a terrible domination in us, such a mighty mastery over us. We view everything as to our success in this life, our stand and position in this life, what we get in this life, what we have in this life, in this world, how we get on here, what we can show for it here.

The thing that is so difficult for any of us to accept, but, dear friends, do ask for grace to accept this — and it will want grace: any committing of Himself by the Lord can only be when heavenly, spiritual and coming-age interests really dominate: for the Lord to commit Himself, it is necessary that heavenly, spiritual and coming-age interests have the mastery in us, and not this present life and world age. That is a very challenging statement, but it is very true. Where does the Lord commit Himself? Well, look at the life which has parted completely with its own interests, its own reputation, its own gratification, which has let go everything that this world holds, and is now with undivided heart set upon the Lord and His things, His satisfaction, the things of God. The Lord commits Himself to that life, and the Lord cannot commit Himself only in so far as that is true. That can be said in many ways. The life that really is sealed of God is the life that is not lived for this world but for the next age, for the things of Christ, the things which are above, the things of the Spirit. The Lord seals that life and marks that life and commits Himself there, and He cannot, only as that is true. All our testings are in this connection. What are we after? What are we set upon? We say, "I have given up all for Jesus, this vain world is nought to me." All right, let us find out! We say that we do not want anything here in this world, we do not want to see things on this earth great and prosperous, gaining favour and recognition. But, let everybody turn against you, let everybody misunderstand you, let everybody in this world shut you out — how much does it matter? The Lord tests us very, very deeply in this matter of how much, after all, this world and this life counts — not to have us a void, a vacant thing — rather with the positive, how much the other has taken the place of this, how much of Himself, how much of the eternal, the heavenly, that age to come, has come in to dominate. It raises all these questions. Are we really set upon spiritual and eternal interests in life? Where we are, where we are placed, what are we after? Does the Lord see our heart set upon spiritual matters, those souls and their eternal interest, His honour and His glory where we are? Set on whatever is for the Lord at any cost, at the cost of advantage, privilege, opportunity in this life: set on Him at all costs, so that, if necessary, we are willing, like the first Christians, to suffer the loss of all things for His sake. That was the test at the beginning and it is going to be the test in an inward way with us. We may not have the same form of persecution, homes destroyed and businesses brought to an end, as the Jews in Germany have been treated, unable to trade, yet the principle will be pressed home by the Lord. All things counted loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord. We are tested on that all the time.

Do you understand that that may be the explanation of what you are going through just now? This world is under a curse, God has put His curse upon this creation which has entered into league with Satan and is, in its very nature, governed by Satan, and a curse rests upon it. The curse of the serpent is upon this earth. The apostle says, "*The whole creation groans and travails in pain together until now*", "*the creation waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For it was subjected to vanity*" (Rom. 8:18-22), which

simply means that it is brought into a position where, under a curse, it cannot realise its destiny; it writhes to realise it, it struggles to realise it, but it cannot. It gets so far and then stops. This earth and this world is under a curse. If you have a link with it, you come under vanity. God cannot commit Himself; it is failure, frustration and vanity. Deliverance from frustration, from vanity, is deliverance from the curse by being united with Him outside of this world, and God commits Himself there. Oh, how difficult this is for everyone, and particularly for young people. What is your heart set upon? Is it really set upon things in this world and you are being disappointed, the whole thing is being frustrated and held up, it is not going through? Why? Is it for this world, for this life, for things here, for your own satisfaction, gratification, pleasure, enjoyment, to realise your ambition? What will you choose? If something were presented to you which had a name, a position, a standing, which was good and not evil, and would, by your having it, your being linked with it or with them, bring you into a nice position, recognised socially and financially and so on, there is nothing wrong about it, would you think in that direction more readily than in the direction of something perhaps not so appealing naturally, but which had infinitely more spiritual possibility for the Lord? What are we after? Is it for the Lord? Does the spiritual possibility at once appeal to us before anything else? Until that is so, the Lord cannot come in for those who are elect for this great purpose of His. So all the time His dealings with us are bearing down upon this question — how much are you really mastered by these heavenly, divine, spiritual age-to-come interests, and how much are you influenced and affected by this present life and its interests?

That is a very difficult thing for young people. Nevertheless, it has got to be faced, and this whole issue has to be a crisis in which we say,

"At Thy feet I fall,
Yield Thee up my all,
To suffer, live or die
For my Lord crucified."

A crisis and then a position maintained — for the enemy will come back. The Lord Jesus took that position in Jordan. His baptism was a crisis in His life, and He took that position of refusing everything for His Father's will. In the wilderness almost immediately afterwards, the devil offered Him the kingdoms of this world, and He had to maintain the position that He had taken. The position has to be a crisis and then it has to be maintained right on to the end. By every kind of subterfuge or suffering, the devil will try to make us change our position and let go the eternal for the present, the heavenly for something here. He will try and force us by sheer agony to change, or by some trick he will try to seduce us out of that position. It has got to be maintained.

God's Satisfaction

My last word, then, is this. It is all in this direction that God's satisfaction is found, for God's satisfaction is bound up with this. It was His original purpose. *"One has somewhere testified, saying, What is man, that You art mindful of him? Or the son of man, that You visit him?"* — that is retrospective. *"You made him a little lower than the angels; You crowned him with glory and honour, and set him over the works of Your hands: You put all things in subjection under his feet"* (Heb. 2:6-8) — that was the intention of God. God's whole purpose in man was this that we are speaking of, but man fell, and that eighth Psalm quoted as God's intention at the beginning retrospectively is now taken up by the apostle and made prospective concerning man, and actual concerning Him Who is the Son of man. It is secured in Him and secured in Him for those whom He calls brethren. *"Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling ..."* (Heb. 3:1). All God's purpose is bound up with this, therefore all God's satisfaction is in this direction, and the heart has to come to the place where its only satisfaction is when the Lord is satisfied, and in principle that is true, we know it. If the Lord is satisfied, what satisfaction there is in our hearts! If we know that the Lord has got what He wants even

in a little thing, what beautiful rest there comes into our hearts, and joy. The Lord has what He has been after, and it has its own echo in us. But see God having all His purpose realized, and what a rejoicing creation it will be. And when the elect see that He has got His eternal purpose in them as a first-fruits, in them as representative, what a glorified elect it will be. This is not theory. This is true. We can test it any day. The Lord is working with us, asking, constraining, yearning, drawing, appealing. God has been after me for a long time, I cannot shut my eyes to the fact, or, if I do, I must do it deliberately and wilfully — the fact that the Lord has been trying to get something with me, and I am not happy until He does. When we yield or begin to yield, there begins to come rest, the strain begins to yield. When we fully yield, what a joy flows in. Expand that until He gets all that He wants, not only in an individual and in individuals as such, but in a Body. What a Body of satisfaction that will be.

Well, what are your hopes and ambitions, young people? The real satisfaction of life for young people is in the Lord being their portion, wholly and utterly and tested out and proved. What is your strength, people of middle-age? Has middle-age brought a sense that you are losing out, not realising, life is going? The Lord is the hope of youth and the strength of middle-age. And old age — what is the satisfaction of old age? It is all here — that He is our object and He is getting what He is after. Yes, that is the best satisfaction, that is the greatest strength, that is the brightest hope. *"Partners of a heavenly calling"*. What a calling! Are you going to miss it? So the writer says, *"Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed, to the things that were heard, lest haply we drift away from them."* In the Greek, it is the picture of the boat and the moorings. Here is a boat on the tide, and there are the moorings. Those moorings represent the great purpose of God, and the boat is in the current and the man with the boat-hook is careless about the great calling, the great eternal purpose, and the current carries him past. He does not reach out the boat-hook and take hold of the moorings, and when he is past, he realises the great purpose of God has been missed because he was not diligent, he was not in earnest. *"Lest we drift"*. Let us take hold with all diligence.