



the
Golden
Candlestick

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Part 2

T. Austin-Sparks

Volume 195

GOD'S ETERNAL PURPOSE REALIZED THROUGH SONSHIP

Reading: John 17; Num. 3:5-7,9,11-13,41,45; 8:13,15; Acts 20:28; Eph. 5:25-26; Heb. 12:23; 2:10-12,17; 3:1.

It is not very difficult to recognise the spiritual link between John 17 and those passages which we have linked with them, both in the Old Testament and the New Testament. They are a commentary upon the chapter, an exposition of it. We shall, as we come to this point in our meditation, allow those Scriptures to interpret John 17 to us.

We are keeping before us the ultimate object of God. We can only understand any part of His Word, and get the full value from it, as we see it in the light of God's eternal intention, and so once more we remind ourselves that God sets forth His full thought in a representative way, and demands that that thought presented shall be a governing one for all generations. The full intention or thought of God is the manifestation of Himself, and to give Himself an expression throughout the universe, and He has chosen to do that through a vessel which shall be the instrument of the manifestation of God, and, therefore, that vessel must take its character from Him. It is not just a reflection of God, but a living expression of Him. That is what God has planned as the end of all things.

Levitical ministry

Now the Levites represent that thought. We must remember that the Old Testament is a book of spiritual principles; and we are not to take it in a literal way, because these opportunities are wrapped up in figures and types, representations and symbols. The types and the figures in themselves always fall short of that which they are called to typify, and what we have to look for is that which they are intended to embody and set forth as a spiritual truth. The Levites, therefore, embody a great spiritual principle, and we must not

take the Levites as representing something literal for all time. (We will touch upon that further later).

We begin, by recognising this, that the Levites do embody and set forth in a typical way the full thought of God. That is, the manifestation of Himself, God expressing Himself, God bringing a world into the knowledge of Himself, God distributing the knowledge of Himself abroad through a channel. To put that round the other way, it is an instrument, a vessel standing to show God's thoughts to men, to the universe, because it is not only unto man, but, in so far as the truth of the church is hidden in the Levites, the manifestation of God by them is also unto principalities and powers. It is a universal making known of God, expressing God.

Recognising that as the inclusive and comprehensive fact, we can break it up into smaller fragments, and note certain things about the Levites.

Firstly, the Levite was to be always kept and held in honour, regard and care. You notice that even in days of deep and terrible declension, when things had gone far from God's thought, the Levite was still held in honour and respect. He had a place — sometimes superstitiously so — but he was recognised.

Then note the Levites' relationship to the rest of the people. The Levites were taken as a tribe in place of all the firstborn. The Lord said, in the day that He smote the firstborn in the land of Egypt, that He took all the firstborn of Israel to be His. In the firstborn all the family is regarded as being included and summed up. The firstborn stands as over the family in an inclusive and representative way, so that, in taking the firstborn, the Lord said, The family is mine, all the others belong to Me just as the firstfruits were claimed by God as an earnest of all the harvest and all the fruit as God's right, to be held for God. So that when the Levites were taken in the place of the firstborn, from God's standpoint it was the taking of all the people as His. So they represented all Israel in relation to God, as being a priestly nation.

That is what we meant when we said that we must not take them in a literal way, but in a spiritual way, as embodying a principle. The Levites spiritually do not represent a class apart. Nowadays ministers and laity are spoken of, but that is a thought foreign to the Word of God, and it is just a failure to recognise this fact which has led to such a division and false position. The Levites are not the ministers among the Lord's people, but they are the Lord's people in ministry. All the Lord's people are regarded as ministering in priestly office unto the Lord.

Then note the corresponding truth, the counterpart of that, the relationship of the Levite to God. They were to be offered as a wave offering unto the Lord. They were His. They belonged to Him in an utter way: "They are

mine, saith the Lord.” But they are His as purchased with blood, redeemed unto God. That lies at the very foundation of Israel’s history in the blood of the Pascal Lamb. It is followed on in another symbolic way, by the half shekel of silver; the redemption of the firstborn by the half shekel of silver. Silver, as we know, is the type of redemption. Therefore the Levites set forth the fact that the people of God are His by reason of redemption, purchased with precious blood.

The next thing that follows is that the Levites were given to Aaron to minister unto him. They were a gift to Aaron, the High Priest. It is almost impossible for us to close our ears to the demand for entrance at this moment of words from John 17: “... those whom thou hast given Me ...”: “... they are thine, and thou gavest them to me...” — but we must not anticipate things too soon. The Levites were given to Aaron to be his fellows in responsibility for the testimony of the Lord, for the preservation, maintenance and perpetuation of the Lord’s testimony. They were fellows with Aaron.

Now those few things help us when we come to John 17 for undoubtedly we are in the presence of the High Priest, who is, according to His own words in this prayer, consecrating Himself, or has consecrated Himself. Everything in this chapter, so far as the Lord Jesus Himself is concerned, is High Priestly. He has, right through this Gospel, been represented as taking the place of Jewish ordinances one after the other. He has taken the place of the Passover, and has Himself become the Pascal Lamb, the shed blood. He has taken the place of the Feast of Tabernacles. He has stepped right into the place of all the Feasts of the Jews and transferred them to Himself. Now at length He steps right into the place of the High Priest and transfers that to Himself also.

But He is not alone. There is a priestly company for whom He is concerned, and He links their consecration with His own: “For their sakes I consecrate myself, that they may be consecrated.” There is a priestly company consecrated in the consecration of the High Priest, the Lord Jesus.

Now notice the family element in this chapter (and this is the heart of things). Notice the repeated occurrences of the name “Father”: “O righteous Father...”; “Holy Father...”; “Father, the hour is come...”. Then notice, linked with that, “the Son”: “... glorify the Son that the Son may glorify thee”. Then, as in that relationship; “Thine they were, and thou gavest them to me”; “... those whom thou hast given me”.

Sonship

When you want the explanation of that you turn to the passages of the letter to the Hebrews: “... he was not ashamed to call them brethren”;

“... saying, I and the children whom God hath given me”; “... I will declare thy name unto my brethren...”; “Wherefore, holy brethren, partners in the heavenly calling, consider the apostle and *High Priest* ...”. It is a High Priestly family, and that brings us to the heart of things. The heart of things is sonship. By what means, on what basis, has God determined from all eternity to reveal, to manifest, express Himself throughout this universe? It is through sonship, and what sonship means in its full thought. “Son-wise” is God’s eternal thought for the revelation of Himself.

The Lord Jesus in this chapter — while the actual words are not used — is clearly set forth as the Son from all eternity, the Firstborn. He speaks twice of His relationship with the Father before the world was, and, as we have already pointed out, He was chosen before the foundation of the world as the Son in whom God would sum up all things. Then in Him we were chosen and foreordained unto the adoption as sons.

Now we understand two things: the Levites being in principle the first-born; and the word in Hebrews 12:22-23: “... ye are come ... unto the church of the firstborn ones, whose names are enrolled in heaven”. So sonship governs everything, and Hebrews has again told us that by reason of our relationship with Him, “because the children are sharers in flesh and blood, He also partook of the same ... He that sanctified (or, consecrated) and they that are sanctified (consecrated) are all of one ...”; and these are the many sons whom He is bringing to glory.

That will lay the foundation of everything for us. First of all it will explain to us the real nature of our union with Christ, begotten of God, risen with Christ, joined to Him in risen life.

If you care to meditate long enough upon John 17 with this thought in mind you will find it unspeakably profitable. All the rest of John’s gospel is gathered into John 17. The Lord Jesus is set forth as having enunciated in word and deed great principles in relation to God’s eternal, ultimate end, the revelation of Himself in the universe through a company in Christ; and, having set forth those laws, those principles in word and in deed, He gathers them all up in prayer, and then, as it were, prays the whole thing through.

It is a lesson for us. Principles are not just abstract things, they are things which have got to be prayed about. They have to be prayed into action, into realisation, into fulfilment. It seems, moving in the realm of the Holy Spirit, as though the Lord Jesus took up all those things and prayed them through with the Father. He goes right back to eternity past, and takes things up as in the counsels of God, and then He comes on and touched upon all these things relative to that predestined purpose and end of God, the revelation of His glory. He touches in this prayer upon God being glorified in Him, and

He being glorified in God, and the church coming into that glory. He touches upon the fact that the purpose of God can only be realised in a corporate Body, sharing one life in a unity of one Spirit, and He prays it out.

This is not a matter for detached and unrelated individuals; it is a corporate thing, and He prays it through. So He touches upon all these things from the beginning.

We saw that the very first principle governing the end of God is the possessing of eternal life, and new creation life, and He touches upon it twice: "... that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given Him. And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Him whom thou didst send, Jesus Christ." The principles are all taken up, all the elements of this great purpose of God, and prayed over and prayed through, gathered up in prayer. That is where you and I have got to end; not in the accumulating of principles, not in the constituting of a kind of manual of spiritual laws, but in getting down in prayer to have these things prayed into expression, into realisation.

He gathers up sixteen chapters, so far as their governing principles are concerned, and prays them through. It is a most impressive thing. He is praying through, all-inclusively, and comprehensively, the question of sonship. It is not enough that in the eternal counsels of God the sons were foreseen, foreordained and chosen in Him. That is a great truth, but even that has got to be prayed over. This is one of the mysteries. We cannot reconcile these things mentally. They will always remain to us a mystery, but there is the fact, that while God knows everything at the beginning, sees the end and possesses the end at the beginning, from eternity, the realisation of that end comes about through prayer, through cooperation with Him. This He has pointed out.

The whole matter of sonship, gathered up in all its elements and features, is being prayed through. You can see what the church is as the church of the firstborn ones. It is heavenly in its origin, heavenly in its life, heavenly in its fellowship, heavenly in its unity, heavenly in its vocation. These are all things which are marked in type, in symbol in the Levites. Its heavenliness comes out of the fact, is the outgrowth of the fact, that it has received a heavenly life, and that heavenliness is developed by its living according to that heavenly life that is all the time drawing upon the exalted Lord, the heavenly Lord for its life, for all its resources. So it develops in its heavenly nature and heavenly vocation. Its very oneness, its very unity is the expression of that one life which it possesses by the Holy Spirit.

I do not believe that we are to pray John 17 now. Very often we hear people praying in the terms of John 17, "that they all may be one". That

prayer has been answered. At Pentecost that prayer was answered. He prayed it through, and it was answered at Pentecost. The church is one. We have to do nothing to make the unity of the body of Christ. All we have to do is to guard it, to watch over it, to cherish it and give diligence to keep it. Every believer out of every nation, tribe, kindred and tongue shares one life by one Spirit, and has their oneness in that basic fact. We discover that spontaneously. You know a living child of God when you meet one, without any introduction. If you meet one who has really got the life in them, it is not long before you discover them. That life is one life; it flows together.

The enemy has scored a great success by getting the Lord's people down on to that level where they accept a broken unity, and think that they have got to work for the recovery of unity, instead of taking the positive attitude that, whatever is done here on this earth, that in heaven, in Christ the body is one, and nothing can alter that. So far as the testimony to it is concerned, that is another thing. That is where we have to give diligence.

That is our Levitical ministry, to testify, to maintain the testimony to the heavenly facts. The Levites were a representation of heavenly things. The letter to the Hebrews tells us that this tabernacle, and all that had to do with it, were a pattern of the things in the heavens. The Levites were a pattern of things in the heavenlies. The Lord desires to have a testimony here to heavenly realities.

We dare not take the opposite view, that because the body is one in heaven, indestructibly and indivisibly, it does not matter how we behave towards one another here. It does matter. Our heavenly ministry and vocation is related to an expression here of heavenly things, the thoughts of God, and this is Levitical ministry in which we have to give diligence.

If we were going on at this point to see what the ministry of the Levites was, we should see that it has to do with the tabernacle (the tent) of Testimony, and that is Christ and His members, a corporate thing. They had the care of that. But what we want is to keep the emphasis here, and here we finish for the time being.

It is sonship which is God's way, means, method of manifesting Himself, and sonship is, in the first place, with God an established thing, but with us it is a progressive thing. Of course, all divine truths are like that. With God they are complete and perfect and settled. Even the church is finished with Him, the last member is added with Him; so in Ephesians it is always represented as a complete thing, but from our side the matter is progressive. The initiation of sonship is when He sends forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. That is the cry of the infant, it is the cry of the Spirit of Sonship, at its inception. But that sonship has to be progressive,

and it is that which is the object of divine attention and care. "God dealeth with you as with sons..." and in all His activities with us the one thing upon which He is concentrating all the time is the development of what is meant by sonship, full growth, spiritual maturity, the end of which shall be the fullest possible manifestation of Himself. That is an individual as well as a corporate thing, and while we should get all the help that should come to us from recognising the individual and the personal side of that, the meaning of the dealings of God with us, all the explanation of the way in which He handles us, the experiences through which He takes us, the mysteries of our life, the hard things, is unto sonship. But do let us remember that sonship in its fullest expression can never be by an individual or any number of individuals as such. It requires the corporate Body, and so there is a peculiar and particular kind of dealing on the part of God through corporate life which can never be known in separate individual life; that is, the House of God, the fellowship of God's people provides God with a peculiar opportunity for developing sonship. For the flesh the most difficult place is the House of God.

The House of God

Jacob came to Bethel, but he was in the flesh, he was a carnal man, and it was impossible for him to stay there. The House of God is always an awful place to the flesh, and Jacob said: "How awful is this place." Jacob went on his way, and for twenty years he was under the hand of God in chastening, and then he came back to Bethel and he was able to abide. He is now made suitable to the House of God, and he can be there in rest. The real spiritual fellowship of the saints is a very difficult place for us if we are in the flesh. We find the rub, the friction, the trial, the difficulty of relationships, of the different constitutions and temperaments and dispositions of the Lord's people. Ah, but it is the supreme opportunity for living in the Spirit, and not in the flesh; for living on a basis of the Spirit, and not on the basis of the natural life. It is a great opportunity for ascendancy over all that is of the old creation. The fellowship of the Lord's people is a tremendous discipline and training. There is nothing more valuable to us and to God than real spiritual fellowship among the saints, but it is there that you find your training, there you find your discipline, there you find the constant demand for not living in the flesh or else you make trouble, but of moving in the Spirit all the time. There you must not allow your natural feelings to arise and influence you. You must allow the love of God all the time to triumph.

Through assembly life and fellowship God is securing something He could not secure if He put us all as isolated units in different parts of the

world. It is this life in which we constantly refuse to take on what people are naturally, and to live in the love of God, in the Spirit of Christ. I have never yet met the person with whom I could find no fault at all; not that we look for faults, but sooner or later we do come up against something that we do not approve of, that we think is strange, peculiar, or something that they would be better without. Now, that is the opportunity to get above that. It is in the corporate life of His people that the Lord has a special opportunity. I do not believe our training can possibly be complete until we have got to the place where in corporate life we know the triumph of the grace of God. Is not that the tragedy of so much of the Lord's work — Christians not able to get on with one another, missionaries at strife with their fellows, and the work of the Lord being arrested and the testimony being lost?

The House of God is a great training centre for service — we mean by that, the fellowship of God's people — and no one ought to be put in a place of spiritual responsibility who has not graduated in fellowship, who has not learned to live triumphantly with difficult people — if they are the Lord's people. It is so easy to resign if people are difficult, and go and work somewhere else where they are not so difficult. If we do so we have thrown away our supreme opportunity of qualification for honour.

So the Lord prays this thing out, and He puts the testimony right in the balances with this: "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...". There is your ministry; there is your testimony. God deals with us in our relationships in a way of discipline to develop sonship.

Perhaps after this we shall have to take a different attitude to people, and see that that very difficult person whom the Lord does not remove from our lives is His way of developing sonship, and when sonship has been developed then perhaps the Lord can change the situation — or it may be that it is already changed, by the fact that we are changed.

Sonship is the way in which God is going to reveal Himself through this universe, and that will be as we — individually, as far as possible, and collectively, in a far bigger way — are conformed to the image of God's Son, and we have come eventually to the adoption as sons for which the whole universe waits, unto which the whole creation has been subjected to vanity. Then, when the sons are manifested, the creation shall be delivered.

THE CROSS IN RELATION TO GOD'S ETERNAL PURPOSE

Reading: John 17-18; Acts 20:28; Heb. 12:23; Eph. 5:25-27; Matt. 24:22, 24,31; 1 Peter 1:1-2; Eph. 1:4,7.

We come back to John 17 and 18. In continuation of this meditation, not dealing with all the content of these chapters, which is quite another step, but looking at the whole of this section in the light of the main object which has been brought into view. That is, God's eternal purpose and the instrument, or vessel, by which and in which that purpose shall be most fully realised, the church of the firstborn; the purpose being, as we have seen, the expression of Himself in this universe, that we should be unto the praise of His glory.

So in relation to that eternal purpose we come to the cross. We have seen throughout this Gospel a progressive development of the ways and means, the laws and principles which underlie the purpose of God, and now the cross stands over all. It is as though there had been an indicating of the way, and all that is in the way, and a bringing into view in chapter 17 of the end of the way, with Christ in glory. And then the Holy Spirit says, But the whole of this revealed way and purpose demands, and can only be entered into, known and realised, by the cross. So before there can be a beginning on our side we have to face the inclusiveness of the cross, and see what the cross means in relation to the eternal purpose.

Of course, the full meaning of the cross could never be comprehended or set forth in a short time, but it may be helpful for us to look at this matter from two or three standpoints. In so doing we shall be led to see the relationship of the cross to that purpose of God.

The Cross viewed from Satan's standpoint

1) His hatred revealed in crucifixion

First of all we look at it from the standpoint of the crucifixion. The crucifixion properly has very limited connection with the divine purpose. It is an aspect of things which comes from the outside, and yet it represents something of very real meaning. Crucifixion as such was not a part of God's thought, not a part of God's arrangement. The death of Christ is quite another thing, but crucifixion is not something which God had planned as a necessary part of

the whole redemptive order. The crucifixion represented, in the first place, Satan's hatred and malice.

We have to draw a line of distinction and discrimination between what we mean when we speak of the cross, and when we speak of the crucifixion. When we speak of the cross we really mean the comprehensive meaning of the death of Christ, but when we speak of the crucifixion we refer to just an aspect, a method; and that method and aspect represents this vehement hatred and malice of the devil. It was Satan's way of degrading, humiliating the Son of God to the deepest depths. No form of death in the eyes of the world was more despicable and loathsome, horrible and humiliating than crucifixion. So by the crucifixion Satan is revealed in the real spirit of hatred for and malice against God's Son. In a sense it is Satan's answer to His claims. At the opening of His public life and ministry he took up the heavenly announcement: "This is My beloved Son ...", and challenged that in the hour of weakness, in the hour of trial, under conditions of testing. He pressed home his challenge: "If thou be the Son ..."; and there at the outset he was defeated by the Son, and sonship triumphed over Satan. It was the triumph of that Sonship when Satan, the personification of all that is evil, hellish, and diabolical, came against Him. In the power of Sonship, under supreme testing, He triumphed over Satan, and Sonship was upheld and preserved intact. Unspoiled, unsoiled, Sonship came through the ordeal.

From that time onward there is this constant battle on the matter of Sonship. It is all raging round that point. You notice that the one thing that the Jews hurled against Him as the ground upon which He should be crucified, was, "He made himself the Son of God." They could never get over that, showing how true it was what the Lord had said, "Ye are of your father the devil." The terrific expression of Satan's hatred of that Sonship, and what it meant, was because of what it was going to mean ultimately.

It is as well to recognise how Sonship has been bitterly assailed in Him, and is always bitterly assailed in us. There are few things more bitterly assailed in this universe than the maturing of saints, the bringing of children of God through to Sonship. We understand that in the light of the throne, which eventually sees the whole kingdom of Satan cast out, and the manifestation of the sons with the Son.

However, here you have in the crucifixion the form taken by that hatred of Satan for the Son, and for what Sonship means in Him. That was never of God; for crucifixion is that. It has always been recognised that crucifixion was the most ignominious or humiliating form of death that the world then knew. That is why the Jews would not do it. They refused to crucify Him. They brought Him to Pilate. They forced the issue with Pilate. Pilate said,

“Take ye him and crucify him.” No, they would not; only Gentile dogs could do a thing like that. Even low as they had fallen morally, they were not going to do this with their own hands. They would use that which they considered to be far below them in the standard of this world’s moral estimates and values to crucify.

2) *His hold on men revealed in crucifixion*

Then there is this extra factor; the crucifixion reveals what a hold Satan had on men; in the first place, that he could make the Jews force that issue, and then make the Gentiles carry it out. What a grip Satan had on men to use them for this thing, the direst humiliation of God’s Son. It speaks volumes for the captivity of men to the devil, that men should be instrumental in Satan’s hands of doing that which in all history stands out as the worst thing that could be done to anybody. If He were only a man, to be crucified was the worst, most degrading thing that could be done to him; but He was God’s Son! Can you enter into the meaning of that?

Now, putting those two things together, and seeing crucifixion as an expression of Satan’s hatred and Satan’s grip on men to use them to fan that background hatred, then you have the setting for a wonderful manifestation of divine sovereignty. The strongest, bitterest, and most terrible thing that Satan could do, and that by the instrumentality of those who are gripped and held by him, became the very occasion for two things; one, the overthrow of Satan, and, two, the judgement of mankind. That is the crucifixion. The very crucifixion was turned to the overthrow of Satan.

An extra element was in the crucifixion to make it that, of course, and that is what we mean by the cross, the death of Christ; but through crucifixion Satan was entirely overthrown. In the place, and at the time of his most bitter and terrible assault upon the Son of God he was met and destroyed, and men, his instrument, came under the very judgement which they were being used to express against the Son of God.

We must recognise that on that side of things the cross of the Lord Jesus is the judgement of the world, and that is what He has just said, “Now is the judgement of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out” (John 12:31); and that in connection with the cross: “And I, if I be lifted up ...” (John 12:32). What was the connection? “It is not lawful for us to put any man to death” (John 18:31). They were not going to crucify Him. That is the connection for this comment of the apostle that the Word of Jesus might be fulfilled (John 18:32). If you look at the marginal reference it takes you back to chapter 12:32: “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me.” So that that lifting up, which the Jews would not do themselves,

but used Gentiles to do, became, on the one hand, the judgement of the world, and, on the other hand, the casting out of the prince of the world. It was the sovereignty of God right in the heart of Satan's most bitter antagonism.

The Cross viewed from the divine standpoint

Then we turn to view it from the divine standpoint. These things are clearly traceable in this account. One is that the cross of the Lord Jesus was divinely ordained. That is perfectly patent. It did not originate with man or devil, it originated with God in the divine economy. Not only was it divinely ordained, but it was divinely governed in all its details. That is seen very clearly in this record. It was carried through in perfect order, it was timed from above, and it was entirely under divine control. Men did try to manipulate these proceedings. They said, "Not on the Passover". He took it out of their hands and saw to it that it was on the Passover, because it was so vitally related to the meaning of the Passover. As Paul says later, "Christ our Passover". So they would have arranged the time, but He took the matter of the time out of their hands. He controlled it so perfectly in its order that bit by bit it fulfilled prophetic Scriptures. One feature of this record is the repetition of such words as, "That the Scripture might be fulfilled", just in perfect order. This matter is in the hands of God, after all, not in man's hands. There is another standpoint always.

God was doing the main thing here. What was He doing? After all, what Satan and men did was subservient, was only relative. The main thing was what God was doing. In a word, God was dealing with all that broke in against the eternal purpose. God's purposes had been established from of old, they could not be frustrated. But inasmuch as a great deal had broken in against the realisation of those purposes, God will deal with all that which has broken in and get it out of the way, and go on towards the realisation of that purpose.

One of the inclusive factors in dealing with all that which had come in, and making a way, securing His end, was the recovering of a racial man according to the divine type. Read again Hebrews 1 and 2, and a quotation from Psalm 8: "What is man, that thou art mindful of him, or the son of man that thou makest mention of him ...?" The literal translation is: "... dost put him in charge ... thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands". Then the Lord Jesus is brought into that very place. "We see not yet all things put in subjection under Him ... but we see Jesus ... crowned with glory and honour" (Heb. 2:8,9). He occupies the place which was intended to be occupied by the first Adam; transcending that place, of course, or, shall

we say, of which the first Adam was a type, for that seems to be what the Scripture says, that he was a figure of Him that was to come. Here, through the cross, that racial man, first born, according to divine type, was recovered, secured, and by the very cross which expressed the violent hatred of Satan and Satan's terrible work in man's heart, God was perfecting a Captain: "For it became Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the Captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings ...". Peter speaks of "the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow", bringing many sons to glory, the Captain of their salvation made perfect through suffering. In the very cross, with its dark background of evil, its cosmic encompassment of violence, God was perfecting a file leader of many sons to come to glory, made perfect through sufferings.

That does not mean that Christ was anything but perfect in His nature, but it was perfecting the perfect, it was developing perfection to its full dimensions, He was perfect in the beginning, as a child is perfect, but He was perfected as from the child to the man, and those perfections were brought to final development through suffering. There was patience in Him, but it was made perfect patience through suffering. All the graces and virtues were there without a tinge or taint of evil, but subjected to the fire they were developed, so that they became the full measure required by many sons. We have got a very great Christ in heaven. He has enough perfection for us all. He was made complete, mature through suffering.

That is the divine standpoint of the cross in relation all the time to the eternal purpose. Keep that in view, and make all your lines converge upon that. Was it Satan's activity in crucifixion? Yes, but your arrow takes you to God's purpose, not defeated but realised. Was it Christ's sufferings and death? Yes, but from the divine standpoint all ending in the realisation of the purpose.

The Cross viewed from the standpoint of the church

What are the great words that stand over the church? They gather the church into themselves. They are two words which govern (shall we say) two dispensations; the word "elect" and the word "redemption". Those two words govern the church entirely in its history from eternity to eternity. Election takes us back to the before times eternal. The words Paul uses are: "... chose us in Him before the foundation of the world", and the word "chose" there is the same as "elected". We were elected in Him before the foundation of the world. "Elect", says Peter, speaking of the church, "according to the foreknowledge of God the Father ...". That is why we referred at the

beginning to those passages in Matthew about the elect. Everything, you notice, is being governed in relation to the elect, “Except those days had been shortened there should no flesh be saved, but because of the elect those days will be shortened.” We will come back to that in a moment. We just point out that the other word is “redemption”, and it is peculiarly related to the elect.

Now we come back to “election”. There is a great deal of confusion about election. There is no need to be. I think a great deal of the trouble in relation to election and what is called the doctrine of election has come about because people have assumed that the elect is the only party that will ever be saved, which is not true. We are not talking about times, about this dispensation; we are talking about all dispensations. You cannot read the book of the Revelation and conclude that the elect is the only company saved. Read the book of the Revelation again, with that thought in mind. There will be many more saved at some time than the elect, but the elect will be saved in this dispensation. The elect in this dispensation represent that for God which shall be, must be, because He cannot be cheated of His full thought. There will be nations walking in the light of the City, which is the church, the elect. Because that has not been recognised, but it has been assumed that the elect represent the saved and all the rest are going to be lost, there has been such confusion in this matter. We are not going to the other extreme, and talking universalism, but we are saying that, as far as we can see, what the Word of God shows, is that there is a body within the great body, a company within the great company, and that inner company is the elect, and many more beyond may be saved¹. It is a wide sweep on the part of God to get a specific object.

Have you noticed this on the part of Satan, that he will make a very wide sweep to secure a specific object? He will slay all the infant sons to get one son. He is after that sonship. All the infants will be sacrificed to the sword in order to get one. All the babes of Israel will be sacrificed to the sword in order to get one in the devil’s intent, and so with Herod to get one.

God makes a wide sweep too. He spreads the wide net of His heavenly government (for the kingdom of heaven is that), and into that net all sorts of things will be found, but He is after something particular in the midst of it. There is a treasure in the field; perhaps not the only bit of the world that the Lord is going to have, but something in it that He is after. Satan is after the elect, and God is after the elect.

1. As the author will explain later (see pages 22-24), he does not mean that the elect are a special class of believers within the church. His view is — according to the approach that history is divided into dispensations — that the elect are people who are saved during the period of time between Christ’s birth and His second coming and that there are still others who are or will be saved outside that dispensation. The point he makes is that election involves vocation, a ministry that is to be fulfilled, namely spiritual growth unto maturity, which is, in one word, sonship.

This matter of election is set forth in type in the case of Israel. Israel was an elect nation, but no one reading the Scriptures will say that all the other nations were destined by God to be lost. There will be gathered out of every nation, and even in Israel's days there was a testimony in the nations, and God would show mercy to the nations; but Israel occupied the place of the elect in the midst of the nations. There are many prophecies as to the nations, even Egypt. Israel as the elect was not the only nation, or only company of people to know God, and to be saved, but their election was unto a specific purpose, and this is the thing that governs the whole revelation or doctrine of election: it is the purpose. Israel was elected from the nations to manifest God in the midst of the nations, and that is the purpose of the church in election. It is this that the Lord Jesus touches upon. He touches upon it lightly. It has to wait yet for a time, for a fuller development, but He has touched upon it. "Thine they were, and thou gavest them to me." God has secured them before they came to Christ.

Our danger and the danger of people always in connection with such a truth, is to begin to organise it, and act in a wrong way in relation to it. When they see people not responding to the gospel they conclude they are not the elect, and leave them alone for evermore. As soon as we begin to take up attitudes like that we are going to frustrate the purposes of God, we are altogether out of the right realm. There is one thing that is made manifest, and that is that from our side we must never give up, never to accept for a moment the loss of any soul, never to abandon any soul as hopeless. We shall find ourselves full of contradictions immediately we begin to systematise a doctrine like this.

The point is that there is such a thing as an elect, and that elect is engulfed in the whole flood of sin, of that which has broken in against God's purpose. There has come a tidal wave over the whole creation of evil, and that tidal wave has engulfed the elect. It is in the nations, it is in the kingdom of Satan, but it is there. Now then, the other word that governs the elect because of that is "redemption". It is the "redemption of the purchased possession"; it is "redeemed unto God". It is the highest expression of redemption.

I am afraid that aspect of things has been largely missed. We rejoice, and rightly so, in such words as, "redeemed from all iniquity"; "redeemed us with His own blood"; but that is not enough. It is "redeemed unto God". That is what Paul means when writing particularly and specifically in relation to the church.

That which is in Ephesians relates to the church. We are not saying that nothing else does, but it does there, and when Paul in Ephesians asks the Lord to give the church a "spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge

of Him, the eyes of their heart being enlightened”; it is that they might know “what the riches of ... His inheritance in the saints”. God has an inheritance in the saints. God has an inheritance in the elect. The elect stands in relation to God’s deepest and highest intention and purpose. It is the very centre and heart of the thought of God. God’s full thought is bound up with the elect, a central Body in whom sonship is brought through to fulness; therefore the purchased possession is for God, “redeemed unto God”. We spoke of the Levites, and you will remember that the Lord said, “They shall be mine”; “They shall be offered as a wave offering to the Lord”; “the church of the firstborn ones”; “... thine they were, and thou gavest them to me ... all mine are thine.” It is unto God all the time.

Why is it unto God in this specific and particular emphasis? Because God has the treasure of His own heart bound up with that Body, that elect, and, so, because the elect is involved in the state of the whole race, the elect must be redeemed in this specific meaning of redemption. What is the meaning of redemption? The word is ‘appolutos’, to loosen out, with the extra thought of a price paid, loosed out. When you say, He has redeemed us, you say, He has loosed us out; and when you say, We are redeemed unto God, you say, We are loosed out unto God, “translated out of the power of darkness, unto the kingdom of the Son of His love”, but that translation is a mighty loosing out. He loosed us in His blood. The cross, then, was the mighty loosing out of the church. It was the redemption of the purchased possession.

Viewed from the standpoint of the church the cross is this wonderful releasing from every kind of tyranny and bondage that had broken in to defeat the divine purpose. Now you see divine purpose realised through the cross, so far as the church is concerned.

Let us summarise that. That word “elect”, chosen, is a governing idea of God. It means, firstly, that not all will be saved in this age. It is not for us to say who will be, and who will not be saved, nor to accept, as we have said, the loss of anyone. But the fact remains that it is folly to think that everyone is going to be saved in this dispensation. That is one of the false doctrines, giving rise to a false enterprise. It is the basis of the post-millennial doctrine that all are going to be saved, the whole world is going to be saved. There is nothing in the Word of God to teach that, so far as this dispensation is concerned, but what God is doing is taking out from the nations a people for His Name.

Secondly, the full thought of God is bound up with the saved in this dispensation. We want to define that a little more. It is not enough from God’s standpoint, from the standpoint of the eternal purpose, that men should just be brought out of darkness into light and left there, that there should be what

is called the evangelistic work in the salvation of souls, and then for them to be left to get on with the saving of others. From the divine standpoint the full thought of God is not just to be saved.

That explains, in the third place, why the believers were from the beginning gathered into assemblies, and why the assembly order was brought into being by the Holy Spirit. That is the explanation of the necessity for corporate principles being recognised among the Lord's people, because the full thought of God is in view with the saved. The assembly was for a building up, a maturing of believers, and an assembly order is a great factor in spiritual maturity; no independence, no freelance activity, no personal and individual domination and interest, but an order. If we upset the divine order in the House of God we immediately arrest the operation of the Holy Spirit towards sonship. If we violate corporate principles we immediately put a limitation upon our own spiritual growth.

If you want any proof of that, look around you. We are not taking a censorious and criticising attitude. Do not misunderstand. It is a real grief and sorrow to recognise that there are scattered about the world what are called gospel Missions and in those Missions the gospel is continuously preached to the unsaved, although the majority of the people in them are saved, and there is a repudiating of anything more than what they call "the simple gospel for the sinner". There is nothing for building up allowed, and if it is brought in there is a restiveness. So you find everywhere gospel Missions like that, with companies of people, smaller or larger, which have been there for decades, and they are still spiritual infants and do not understand the language of men and women, only the language of childhood, and they cannot bear strong meat. There is no assembly order, no real corporate life, and so you get people growing old in years in Christ and never growing up from infancy, and it is a contradiction and a tragedy.

That was not what it was in the beginning; and again, let us note that ninety-nine per cent of the New Testament is for believers, showing how important God regards the maturing of saints, the bringing to full growth. Now He has loosed out the church by the cross with the full thought in view, and it is not enough for us to stay by the elementary things of Calvary, but to recognise that Calvary embodies and involves all that purpose which was in the counsels of the Godhead before times eternal. The cross is a tremendous thing, going right on to the end. When at length you get to the throne which is the throne of universal dominion, authority, power and glory and you look at the throne finally established, you find in the midst of the throne a Lamb. The cross leads to the throne; that is God's thought. The cross points on to the government of this universe, the revelation of God universally.

The main point at issue is, whether it is to the unsaved or whether it is to the saved in this dispensation, that God is working to one end, and that is the end which He determined should be in eternity past, the expressing of Himself through a vessel, and that vessel related to Him in terms of sonship. That is, mature spiritual life, with all that that means.

So sonship is the governing word; and if you want the other word for elect, it is “son” in the thought of God; and if you want the full meaning of redemption, it is sonship in the thought of God.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE RESURRECTED POSITION OF THE CHURCH

Reading: John 20-21.

Our last meditation in this series finds us right on the ground that we have been governed by all the way through; that is, resurrection ground. Everything has been in the light of resurrection.

At the outset, by way of a general survey of the chapters, we might follow the outline again of ‘A companion to the gospel by John’, and then perhaps make a few specific remarks.

This section of the gospel may very well be gathered up into those words of the apostle at the close of the letter to the Hebrews: “Now the God of peace, who brought again from the dead that great shepherd of the sheep, in (Greek translation) the blood of the everlasting covenant, even Jesus, make you perfect in every good thing to do his will, working in you that which is well-pleasing in his sight, to whom be glory for ever and ever.” You will have no difficulty in breaking that comprehensive word up into parts, and seeing how these two chapters can be arranged under those parts.

The Great Shepherd returns

Here we have the return of the Great Shepherd, brought up from among the dead, even our Lord Jesus.

Our outline follows this course, that these chapters are a very clear and concrete presentation of what the church is in principle.

First, it is an exclusive witness to the resurrection of Christ; that is, He

confined the revelation of Himself as the risen Lord to the church, and never gives that to the world. Inasmuch as there are many who believe or accept the historic fact of His resurrection, who cannot be regarded as of the church, this must be recognised to mean something more than just the fact that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. It must carry with it a revelation by the Holy Spirit of the risen Lord in the heart. That is essential to constituting anyone a member of the church. The church was constituted by a personal, immediate, direct revelation of Himself as the Risen Lord, and such a revelation was regarded as indispensable as to the foundations of the church. The apostle to whom there was given the unique revelation of the church, was given a unique revelation of the Risen Lord.

That is the first thing, that the living knowledge of the risen Christ is bound up with the church, and the church takes its very being and character from that knowledge.

Secondly, because of that, He constitutes the church a resurrection company, and then a heavenly people, by first ascending to His Father as its Head (John 20:17). It is quite clear that something transpired in the way of His appearing in the presence of God at a given moment during the course of the forty days after His resurrection, and early in that period. Otherwise we cannot understand a seeming contradiction, for here He said to Mary: "Touch me not, for I have not yet ascended unto My Father", but in another place it says that they took Him, or held Him by the feet when they saw Him. There is no word of rebuke recorded, nothing which indicates or intimates that He pushed them away, but it says definitely that they did hold Him. Then later He said, "Reach hither thy hand ..."; "... handle Me and see...".

We may regard the appearance to Mary as the first appearance after His resurrection, and between that and the subsequent appearances where they did hold Him and where He did say "handle me", there must have taken place some appearance in the presence of the Father, as represented by these words: "I have not yet ascended...".

So He constituted His church a heavenly people by first appearing in the presence of His Father as the Head of the church. We shall see more about that in a moment.

In the third place He constitutes the church upon the basis of the peace which He has made by the blood of His cross (verses 19, 20 and 26). It is upon the ground of that peace that the church rests, the peace that He has made by the blood of His Cross.

Next, He establishes the fact that the Holy Spirit will be the governing reality of the church in this age (verse 22). "When He had said this, He breathed on them, and said, Receive ye the Holy Spirit ...". That was

prospective not actual at the moment; that is, they did not receive the Holy Spirit at that moment when He breathed upon them. That is quite clear; but it was a symbolic act, which secured unto them the reception of the Spirit who came later. The symbolism will be mentioned again presently, but the point here is this, that the fact was then established that the Holy Spirit would be the governing reality of the church in this age.

Then again, He makes it clear that the full blessing of fellowship with Him as risen, is through faith (verses 24 and 29). Thomas was absent for eight days through unbelief, and eventually when he was present and convinced the Lord said, "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed." It is a greater blessing; and the full blessing of fellowship with Him as risen is through faith.

In the sixth place, He gives the church the beautiful character of a family: "Go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father...".

Now that is all a summary of points and principles which show what the church is from the Lord's standpoint.

Attachment to Him on the basis of resurrection

Passing on to John 21 we note that this chapter is an after-inspiration. It is fairly clear that John closed his narrative with verse 31 of chapter 20 and then, as by a new inspiration, he added what is chapter 21. This chapter tells of the events of Christ's third appearance to them after His resurrection. John says, "This is the third time Jesus appeared unto them."

What have we here represented? Inclusively it is a new attaching of His own to Himself on the basis which resurrection represents. There is an entirely new position represented by resurrection, and in that new position He seeks to bring them into an attachment with Himself. The old kind of attachment has been broken; that is all at an end, it has been taken away from them; it is as though they were suspended between heaven and earth without any kind of solid ground under their feet. Their relationship is a very indefinite and uncertain one, and in this third appearance He seeks to make definite the new relationship on the new ground.

Here are things which we may regard as symbolic. The church as represented by them is on the sea, and we know the sea as a biblical type of humanity. It is as though the church here was represented as being in the world among men.

Then, it has toiled through the night and known failure, for one reason, and that is because of self-energy. Peter said, "I go fishing." They said, "We

also go with thee.” They toiled all night and took nothing. It was a self-directed, and self-energised activity in the world, ending in failure.

Christ, however, is on the distant shore, and knows all about them, and all about their failure. But when eventually they come absolutely and completely under His government, the place of failure becomes the place of fulness. To come under His government in their case meant the setting aside of the whole of their natural reasoning. We have toiled all night (the best time for fishing), and to let down a net in the light is not good sense to a fisherman. If you have failed in the dark you are not likely to succeed in the light; but all such natural reasoning, and the laws which govern the natural man in his activities, have to be set aside, or we have to be willing to surrender them when we come under the complete government of Christ. It is a matter of subjection to His Headship in mind, and heart, and will. When that is so, then that which has issued in failure may, under circumstances which the natural reasoning would dictate to be altogether contrary to any hope or expectation, be the very place of fulness.

Therefore the church’s fulness does not depend upon favourable circumstances, but upon subjection to Christ. That is a principle, a law. The most unfavourable circumstances may prove very fruitful if it is in obedience to the Lord, while out of the Lord’s will the most favourable conditions, naturally speaking, may prove utterly unfruitful.

Then you note the precision as to the number of fishes, “one hundred, and fifty, and three”. If the Holy Spirit dictates the writing of any record, we may take it that He does not just use words for the sake of forming a narrative, but words weigh with Him, and if He inspired the writing of that statement He evidently meant something. They counted the fish when they had brought them to land.

We are not going to stop with the symbolism of numbers. The point is the precision. To me this speaks of the elect gathered out of the sea of humanity in this age, under the direction of Christ, and this represents a special relationship to Himself. That is set forth in verses 15 to 18.

We are going to stop with that last paragraph for a moment. Let us say again about the matter of the elect and election, that all we mean by this is the fact that the Word of God states that there is such a thing as an elect, and reveals that the elect is the elect in relation to a purpose of God. The very thing that governs God in election is the realisation of a specific purpose. To put that in another way, the elect was an idea and a thought of God with a view to particular and peculiar service to the Lord that is to be in the closest relation to Him, and in the fullest expression of Him for the good of others.

Election does not begin and end with the matter of salvation. I do not

know how far we may take it in relation to salvation. When we speak of the elect and of election, we have got to keep vocation always in mind as the thing which governs it. The elect simply stand in the counsels of God in a special relationship to Himself for a special purpose. That is all (but it is a mighty 'all'), and that is what we mean by election; a vessel, an instrument secured in the foreknowledge of God.

Always remember that it is: "elect according to the foreknowledge of God". God knows. God does not live in time. All time is present with Him; all that we call the future exists now in this moment with God. He is timeless. Get outside of the realm of our human senses and time ceases to be any consideration or factor at all. You know that when you go to sleep you lose consciousness. You might lose consciousness for some reason or another, for half-an-hour so thoroughly that when you regain consciousness it may be like years, a lifetime. The point is this: get outside of human sense and you get outside of time, and God is not governed by human sense; He is outside of all those things of our human life. Ages, and ages in which He submits His purposes for outworking are all in the present moment with Him, and He knows the end; and if He knows that at a certain time, because of certain things, in His grace and in His activity and in His sovereign working certain people will respond to the calling, then in the knowledge of that He can ordain that those people shall constitute for Him that vessel for that special purpose.

That takes it outside of the mere level of: God chooses some to be saved, and they cannot be lost, and those who are not chosen to be saved might be saved and might not be, but there is nothing whatever to go by in their case. Let us get outside of that realm of things, and see that election relates primarily, in the foreknowledge of God, to purpose, and the elect is a concrete Body. That elect belongs to this dispensation, and it is the church being gathered in this dispensation.

In our last meditation we said that the church, the elect, is not the only company that will be saved; others will be saved. But you will remember we were careful to say that we are not concerned with the time factor as to when the others will be saved, and wholly repudiate the idea of universalism that every being ever created will be saved, including the devil. We cannot tolerate such an idea. We do not believe it is scriptural, however cleverly men have formatted a system which seems to their satisfaction to prove to the contrary.

The point is this, that the elect are being gathered out in this dispensation, or this part of the dispensation, and there will come a point at which the church will be translated. But that is not the end of the age of grace; that is

not the end of the salvation of men. There is Israel to come in yet, and Israel is not of the church. The church is something altogether different. Israel will be saved, and there will be those yet of the nations who will be saved. That is all we meant by saying that the elect is a particular company for a particular purpose, which constitutes the main object of this dispensation.

If you prefer to think of the dispensation going on after the translation of the church we do not dispute that the dispensation may not conclude with the translation of the church. There may be other happenings before the whole dispensation is wound up. But that is not the point, and this is all that we meant by election and salvation coming to others beyond the church.

I have read again through those letters in the book of the Revelation carefully from start to finish, and one thing that has come to me with renewed force is this, that as you move through that book you find different companies in heaven at different times, and you find at a given point, when certain companies are already represented as in heaven, the angel going forth with the everlasting gospel. There is something in the everlasting gospel which is probably another gospel than the gospel of the grace of God at this time in the dispensation, probably a different gospel from the gospel of the Kingdom. We do not profess to understand it, but we see that is there, and the point is that you have different companies in heaven at different times, and you find the range widening, and when you come to the end you have actually got the Lamb, and the Bride the Lamb's wife, and you have got those who are bidden to the feast who are the guests, and then you have the appeal to some larger company (and, mark you, this is where a great many people have gone astray, and where our hymns have led us astray): "The Spirit and the bride say, Come, and let him that is athirst come ...". That has been said to be the Spirit and the church saying to the Lord Jesus, 'Come.' But look at the setting. You have got the river of the water of life (Rev. 22:1), and you have the church the bride, the Lamb's wife. The marriage supper has taken place, and there is the city, the river, the Lamb and His bride already there, and then this: "The Spirit and the bride say, Come..." (v.17). To whom? "... whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely". It is not a call to the Lord Jesus to come. It is an invitation to others to receive of that life, to enjoy that life which is here in the church, in the city ("And I saw ... the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven ... as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev. 21:2). You see you have a good deal to get over if you are at all disposed to argue that the church is the only saved company for ever and ever. Not at all.

Now, when Christ breathed upon the disciples it was a symbolic act, which suggested or set forth the new creation in resurrection. God breathed into the first Adam the breath of life, and he became a living soul. That is

how the first creation, the first race became animate, intended to show forth the glory of God. It has failed, and God has a new creation in Christ Jesus, coming out of His death, raised up in His resurrection, and on those who represent that new creation at the outset He breathes in a symbolic act. They are the first of that new creation by the Spirit of God, and that creation is destined in Christ to reveal to a wondering universe what God is like. That is the elect.

So the apostle urges: "Give the more diligence to make your calling and election sure." The apostle got that from the races with which he was familiar in the Greek world, the Olympic games. As the runners went forth into the race at a certain point in the course there was a bend, and from that point it was the homeward lap, and as they came round that bend the goal was before them, the prize was in view, and just at that point a notice was put up, a notice of encouragement, with words which in English mean, "Make speed". As they rounded that bend, and saw that notice, the crowd gathered there shouted and encouraged and did everything they could to make those words *living* words, with power in them, "Make speed", the goal is in view, do not drop out now, it is the last lap!

The apostle took that up, and said, Give more speed to make your calling and election sure. You are on the last lap now; do not drop out here, do not let go here — make speed! Is that not the spirit of Paul? "Brethren, I count not myself to have attained, neither am I already perfect (complete) ... this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and looking forward to those things which are before, I press towards the mark of the prize of the upward calling of God in Christ." "I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus My Lord." I make speed, I give the more diligence.

You see what the prize is and what the goal is. The letter to the Hebrews tells us. "Wherefore, holy brethren, partners in a heavenly calling..."; "We see Jesus crowned with glory and honour", bringing many sons to glory. It is the throne, the shared glory for the elect, for those who come through to sonship, maturity, who go right on with the Lord. That surely is the word today for the Lord's people: Make speed! Give the more diligence!

The note which rings out, and will ring out everywhere is sonship, the inheritance, the throne, the partnership with Him in the glory for administrative purposes in the ages to come.

May the Lord put His own urgency into our hearts, and give us a clear apprehension of what it is He is seeking to say to us, and through us to all His people.

Concluded.