



the
Golden
Candlestick

THE WAYS OF GOD

Part 1

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CHAPTER ONE

THE WAY OF WISDOM

“When the woman saw that the tree ... was to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof” (Gen. 3:6).

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10).

The way of wisdom the way of salvation

It is quite clear that that first quest and bid to be wise and to obtain that kind of wisdom was a most disastrous and calamitous thing. The result — and I have no doubt that Adam often sat in judgment upon himself as to that very matter — was that he had played the fool; when he sought to be wise, he was a fool. It was a disastrous thing and contradicted the very meaning and essence of wisdom, for the function and value of wisdom is to save us from disastrous mistakes. That is very simple and lies right on the face of things. If ever we make big mistakes, we blame our lack of wisdom. So wisdom is that which is intended to save from and prevent mistakes and calamities resulting from such mistakes, so that the wise one would not have to say, ‘I made a terrible mistake, and as a result, there is nothing but trouble, calamity and tragedy.’ The wise one does not have to look back with those regrets. If we could therefore find the way of wisdom, we should find the way of salvation, the way of deliverance, the way of light, the way which will never bring any kind of regret, but instead real gratification. At the end we should say, ‘Thank God I took that way.’ That is wisdom in its very nature. Therefore the kind of wisdom which Adam got was not the true wisdom, and, as I said, it just contradicted the very meaning and essence of wisdom.

The way of wisdom the long-term way

But while that is true, the way of wisdom is often the long-term way;

that is, the true wisdom is often only revealed in the long run. It is not always that we see the wise step immediately justified. Wisdom often waits for its justification a long time, and it is only well on the road that the wisdom by which we have been guided, the wisdom which we have chosen, is really proved to be the highest wisdom, and it will wait until the end for its full justification. Only at the end shall we know how wise was the wisdom by which we were guided and what a lot we have been saved from by going in wisdom's way. Not always early in the course can we say, 'I am glad I took that step, I am glad I took that way, I am glad I chose that course.' It is only as we get on that we begin to see the wisdom that was there, but surely it will be.

The inscrutability of divine wisdom

And because it is so, we find ourselves in the presence of something which to the world and to our worldly minds, in the eyes of what is according to worldly standards, is incomprehensible and inscrutable, for divine wisdom is that. It would hardly be divine wisdom if all at once we could understand it, if we could bring it immediately within the range of our own comprehension. Divine wisdom is incomprehensible, inscrutable to this world. Seeing that there still remains very much of this world about our standpoint, we are greatly influenced by this world's considerations in great issues and decisions.

This matter of divine wisdom is a matter of faith. We have to commit ourselves to the divine wisdom in faith. All these things that I have just mentioned are wrapped up in that first great instance. Adam was not prepared to wait; he had to have it all at once. Adam was not prepared to trust; he had to understand immediately, have the wisdom in himself at once. Therefore the way of true wisdom is folly to this world. It cannot comprehend it; it cannot understand it. It is folly to the natural man.

These are the things which you and I, in practical life, are really up against in different ways. If you are out in the world, you know that these are issues which concern you — what the world calls wisdom and what it calls folly. Whether there will be a swift realisation and justification of the step you have taken, the course you are following, or whether you have to wait, seeming to be suffering loss. Will you be quiet, and close your ears to the arguments of those around you who would advise this and that contrary to the step that you have taken or the position in which you are because you belong to the Lord? Well, those are everyday practical

questions for people in this world, especially for young men and women. But it is true that all the time in spiritual work you are up against these things: the whole question of policy and diplomacy, and what is called worldly good sense. This whole range of Mr. Worldly-Wiseman is with us in the most spiritual matters. These issues are ever present.

The upshot of wisdom

What is wisdom? What is folly? There are two far separated standards of judgment about those. One is the earthly and the other is the heavenly, and these two never meet. Let it be said very strongly, the matter that counts is whether in the long run we are able to say: I have made a mistake which has confused my whole life and course. I have done the wrong thing; I have blundered and created complications; I regret that I ever took that course; it has made a difference to my whole life! It does matter whether that is the issue. That is the long run view and it counts more than anything else. That is the upshot of wisdom.

The folly of Adam's wisdom

And that is bound up in two persons. One is the first Adam, who, in trying to be wise, became a fool and made a blunder which not only involved himself but the whole race in untold trouble. And the thing that could be written upon the whole history of Adam is: I have played the fool; I have made the most terrible mistake; I have complicated everything by not choosing for true wisdom.

The wisdom of the last Adam

The other Man who embodies this true wisdom is the last Adam, and what should we say if we were summing up His history? We should say, You took the right course, You did the right thing, You made the right decision; there is no doubt whatever as to the wisdom of your way. We surely, every one of us in Christ, are a vindication of Him, His wisdom in His decisions and choices. Does it not come naturally from our hearts to say, Jesus was right! We should not be here but for that conviction, and it all amounted to this question of wisdom.

The beginning of wisdom

The Word here says in direct statement and by way of application and implication as to what we read in Genesis 3:6 — “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”, or, literally, the first part of wisdom. That is where wisdom starts. Now, while this word ‘fear’ has the element of being afraid, that is not the whole truth. This fear mentioned here is really born of love, not dread or terror, but of love. There may be one held very highly indeed in affection and regard. That love, that affection, is not free from a kind of fear lest that one should be in any way grieved, hurt, injured, or have reason to feel that they were distrusted. It is fear all the same. That is the kind of fear here. It is more the fear of a child for a beloved parent in the realm of love itself than of someone under the awful dread of a tyrant.

The fear of the Lord in relation to His revealed will

In the first place this fear of the Lord rests upon the mind of God having been made known, that we stand in the realm where God’s will is revealed. You see the difference very clearly at once in the two Adams. God had spoken His mind to the first Adam; but Adam never said, ‘We know God’s mind about this, we know what God said about it, we cannot plead ignorance; we are fully informed as to His attitude; we are informed that such is His will.’ Adam never said that. But the last Adam said: “It is written ... It is written ... It is written ...” (Matt. 4:1-10). God has said, God’s will is made known, and the fear of the Lord rests upon that. Now what are you going to do about it? The heart relationship to the Lord, this kind of fear, the fear of affection, takes the position of the son and the father. The Lord Jesus said, in effect, this: ‘My Father has left Me in no doubt as to what He wants; that is the thing that matters.’ We cannot plead ignorance as to the mind of God in general, and in a good deal of the particular; it is made known to us. And the knowledge of the mind of the Lord is available to us so that the wisdom which is the fear of the Lord is expressed by a fundamental and complete consecration to the Lord.

Complete consecration to the Lord

That is where the Lord Jesus was. He had a fundamental consecration to the Father and to the Father’s will. It was a thing which dominated Him

from His childhood: “My Father’s business” (Luke 2:49); “My Father’s house”; “The will of My Father”. It was fundamental, settled. This has to be settled basically right there in the foundation as to whether it is going to be the Lord or something else; or the Lord and something else; or whether it is going to be the Lord and the Lord only who has the complete acknowledgment of our hearts. We must have complete consecration, no double heart!

The outstanding illustration in the Old Testament of the double heart is Saul, when the Lord directed Samuel to say to Saul, “Smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not” (1 Sam. 15:3). Saul used his own judgment over against the known mind of the Lord. He said, “I feared the people” (1 Sam. 15:24), not, “I feared the Lord.” You remember the terrible words of Samuel: “To obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams ... Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, He has also rejected thee from being king ... The Lord hath rent the kingdom of Israel from thee this day, and hath given it to a neighbour of thine” (1 Sam. 15:22-24,28). Saul was the man who used those words I have used once or twice here: “I have played the fool” (1 Sam. 26:21). He had a double heart. On the one side, there was devotion to the Lord of a kind, perhaps, meaning well, but weak, not strong enough. He considered how he would stand with other people, how he would appear before their eyes, thinking what a pity it would be to let this go, sacrifice this, instead of saying, Well, that is how it appears to me and I know it is going to get me into trouble with the people and there are going to be consequences, but the Lord has indicated this to be His will and that is what matters.

The test of consecration

Remember that we shall always, like Adam, like Saul, like Judas (who is the great outstanding New Testament example), be put to the test by being given opportunity. The Lord does not step in and make us go His way, or leave us with no option or alternative. He is all the time allowing us to be in the presence of opportunities to compromise, to take another road, an easier way, to put our judgment over against His pronounced will, to do any of these things. He left Adam with an opportunity and a warning. Saul had his opportunity with a possible alternative. There is the opportunity and that is the test as to the fear of the Lord, the utterness of our consecration, the completeness of our heart relationship to the Lord.

The ultimate vindication of true wisdom

But this wisdom is eventually and eternally vindicated. It always is, though it be through faith, patience and suffering. This way of wisdom is the stranger way in this world, strange wisdom to this world, which says to the follower of Christ, ‘Look here, young man, young woman, you are a fool, you are jeopardizing all your prospects, you are taking the way that will not get you anywhere. If you were wise, you would do this or that which would make you secure concerning reputation, position and so on.’ Very often the way of heavenly wisdom proves to be the way of the wilderness of our Lord, which has to put back the kingdoms of this world for the time being, with their popular applause and acclaim. It means the cross and suffering the loss of all things, the reproach of men and the ostracism of brethren, for even His brothers did not believe on Him (John 7:5). Those were His brothers in His own family. Why did they not believe on Him? The probability is that they were ambitious men. They were brought up in poverty, adversity and difficulty, and for them the way of an earthly kingdom, of a great popular Messiah, weighed more than the way of this despised brother of theirs who was all the time doing things which brought Him up against the powers that be on this earth, and jeopardized His and their future. They did believe on Him afterwards, thank God. (James, the Lord’s brother, came to believe on Him and others also.) But, for the time being, until through patience and faith and suffering, He was vindicated, it was the way of loss, and that is often the very nature and essence of the fear of the Lord. Has the Lord indicated that this is the way for us, this is the course for our lives — a costly one, a suffering one, a way which, to others governed by this world’s standards, is a way of utter folly, a way for our own disadvantage? I am not suggesting to you that you go and be silly, that you unnecessarily cause prejudice and all that, but you know the realm of which I am speaking, the way of spiritual business. This is the way, the way of absolute foolishness in the eyes of this world.

Will you choose it? You know all that the wise man writing these Proverbs said about wisdom: “With all thy getting get understanding” (Prov. 4:7); wisdom “is more precious than rubies” (Prov. 3:15); “Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn out her seven pillars” (Prov. 9:1). The fear of the Lord is the very first thing in wisdom, and the fear of the Lord is an utterness of consecration to Him, never to be bribed, never to make compromises, never to be double-hearted. It is difficult, it is costly, it is

painful, it is bitter to this soul-life. It may apply to all sorts of issues and crises. It all hangs upon this: not, How is it going to affect me? Not, what I stand to lose or to gain, but, Where is the Lord in this? How is the Lord going to be satisfied? How is the Lord going to get what He wants? Or if I can see nothing as to what may be a good outcome, my attitude must be: I have no doubt at all that if I went the way of the Lord it would be this way; I cannot see any other way as answering to what I know of the Lord and that settles the whole question, that brings the battle to an end. I am going on with the Lord, no matter what it costs. “My goal is God Himself, not joy nor peace, nor even blessing” — no bribes, but *Himself*. That is fundamental, and that must be an issue of our love, our devotion to the Lord, our sense of what we owe to the Lord, how much the Lord is to us. On any other ground it can only be a hard, cold, legalistic relationship. May He find us in that position where we love Him and we keep His commandments for that reason only.

CHAPTER TWO

THE WAY OF VISION

Reading: Psalm 105:1-24.

This whole Psalm contains a record of the history of a vessel created for divine purpose. We will, however, draw a circle around that small section relating to Joseph, who is a concentrated example of such a history. The ways of God are always the same in that connection. All His ways are like His ways with Joseph.

We might begin by using Paul's great phrase, "according to purpose" (Romans 8:28), for that is so evidently the thing governing the life of Joseph, of Israel and of all, both in the Old and New Testaments, who are brought into that relationship with God.

Well, let us look at Joseph in some of these 'ways of God' which are the most evident. Behind Joseph's life there was the divine purpose. Before Joseph was born that purpose existed. Joseph, unconsciously at the beginning, was born into it and no doubt for some time was unaware of it. Then he came to realise that there was something more than just being in this world, and being alive, that accounted for his existence. He came to realise that God was deeply interested in him. But it was not Joseph's purpose for God, but God's purpose in Joseph. There is a big distinction between those two things. We may have purposes for God and arrange things and launch enterprises for God. Inasmuch as they are for God the Lord may bless them. There can, however, be quite a difference between our purposes *for* God and the purpose *of* God. It is important to remember that, because it is fundamental to everything. This purpose of God existed before Joseph came into this world. It had been revealed to Abraham that great day when God met Abraham and the covenant was made, the sacrifice divided, the lamp passed between the two parts of the sacrifice, there was a great horror of darkness (there is always conflict bound up with purpose), and then the covenant and the revelation of a people: "Unto thy

seed have I given this land” (Gen. 15:18). The very time was given, and that time led up to this crucial point. It was through Joseph that this people came into the land from Egypt as the next great stage in the plan of God.

The purpose was there before Joseph. He was born into it. The New Testament makes it very clear that by our new birth we are born into something that was in the heart and intention of God, far back behind time, before ever we came here. It exists, and we are brought into it; not *our* plan for God, but *God’s plan for His Son*. We are brought into that by new birth.

It is a special choice. Joseph was a peculiar vessel, even among his own brethren. What was said of him could not be said in the same measure of his brothers. He was marked out. It was his story, because he was chosen to bring his own brethren into that purpose. His was a peculiar vocation, part of the heavenly calling and heavenly vocation. Within the whole circumference of the purpose there is that purpose instrumentally to bring others into it. Joseph stood there, a peculiar vessel selected in relation to God’s purpose to bring others into it. The day came when Joseph became aware of that. He may have been foolish about it, as we shall see, but nevertheless, it broke upon him, this sense of destiny with which he was bound up and which was bound up with his life. The Lord had put His hand on him in relation to that covenant and that great purpose which had been revealed to his forefather, Abraham. This grew upon him, took possession of him, became the horizon of his life. He lived to serve God, not in a general way, but in the particular way to which he had been separated, serving that purpose. It was a power in his life. He just could not get away from it. He talked, and he may have talked unwisely, because this thing had got hold of him. He could not accept something general; he could only follow this distinctive and definite guidance. He would not have gone through all that he had to go through if this thing had not really been a power in his life. If you had asked him in the days of his great suffering and affliction why he held on, why he continued, he would have said: “It is not my hold, but the hold of God upon my heart. I have seen something of God’s purpose and intention and I feel that God has called me into that. I just cannot accept anything other or less. That holds me in its grip. That will carry me through to its issue.”

Yes, it was a power, but, of course, there were perils, as there always are, bound up with that vision. He fell into some of the perils. By talking unwisely to his brothers he revealed that there was something in him bound up with this whole thing which was not good and not right. He fell

into the perils, but both in his own testimony later on to his brethren and here, in this Psalm, there is this statement: “He (God) sent a man before them.” To his brethren Joseph said: “God did send me before you to preserve life” (Gen. 45:5). Here is the pioneer of God’s purpose. It is a special vocation to pioneer for the Lord’s people, but there are peculiar perils bound up with it, and there are peculiar sufferings.

So we pass on to see that interlude of discipline in the life of Joseph. It is a long period, dating from the day that his brethren put him into the pit and then sold him. He was taken into Egypt and there was a sudden reverse into what looked like good fortune, but eventually he found himself in the prison. It was a long time, and those conditions make time seem very much longer. It was a period of eclipse, the eclipse of everything, probably of vision, of hope and of God. A prison — a dungeon indeed! And long-drawn-out! But there was a divine necessity for this. It was something that God saw to be necessary because somehow natural elements had made an invasion into the divine purpose. It may have been pride that prompted him to talk to his brethren as he did about his dreams and that they, as they rightly interpreted, had to bow to him, acknowledge him and his position, his superiority. It may have been pride there that the Lord saw, some conceit — ‘I am the man’ — or ‘We are the people. We know it. We have got it. The Lord is with us particularly. We are going to do it.’ Probably all that was there in this young man, Joseph. Ambition: secret, but it was there. Zeal: yes, for God perhaps, but without knowledge it is a dangerous thing. Inexperience: the novice. Impulse, self-sufficiency, self-strength. Perhaps any or all of these things were there under the eye of the Lord, and he set himself to realise the vision without faith. It just amounted to that; he was not prepared to trust the Lord in this whole thing. He must set to work to bring it about himself.

You can see that in others, too. Abraham fell right there over Ishmael. Yes, he knew all about the vision and the purpose, but in a lapse of faith he tried to realise it himself.

Undoubtedly Moses had the vision in Egypt in the first forty years of his life. It was that vision that led him to behave as he did. The writer to the Hebrews says that he counted “the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt” (Heb. 11:26). He had the vision, but there came that day, that disastrous day, when he took it out of the Lord’s hands and took it into his own hands to realise it. He smote the Egyptian persecuting a Hebrew and thought that no one knew. He took the vision into his own hands.

Joseph was no doubt a favourite in the house of his father. He had many privileges and was no doubt pandered to — and he used that fact.

Now Abraham was doubtless a great man in Chaldea, and Moses was a great man in Egypt, well educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, a prince and an aristocrat. Joseph was no doubt a favourite in his father's house. But none of these things in themselves could be the means of realising God's purpose. We may be clever and successful in this world, with business acumen and real ability, but it is no use bringing all that in to try and realise God's purpose. We may have standing among men and much to our advantage, but nothing that is of this natural life, until it has been really disciplined under the Spirit of God, can realise the divine purpose.

These are the lessons we can learn from Joseph's life. All these things simply did not count when it came to God reaching His end. Spiritual values are so different from natural values. So Abraham only put the clock back *years!* Moses put the clock back forty years by trying to do things himself. And Joseph put the clock back years by his unwise, though perhaps very zealous concern for the vision! And he had to pass into this long and deep discipline to bring him to a specific place.

This is the great lesson you and I have to learn if we are really in the way of God's supreme purpose. In this realm only God can do it. Abraham had to learn that. Moses, in the forty years he was alone in the wilderness, had to learn that. Joseph, in prison, had to learn that. If it is ever to be, only the Lord can do it.

But, you see, the Lord was working at that. Until we learn that we are holding up time.

Indeed, we are only creating confusion. The purpose, the vision, may be right, but it can only be carried out by the Lord in the Lord's way. If we take it into our hands we bring unspeakable confusion and just put the clock back, perhaps for years.

Well, Abraham had to wait a long time. Moses had to wait his forty years. Joseph had to wait, and what a time of discipline it was! Apparently forgotten of God! It is a terrible experience when there seems to be evidence that God has forgotten. Think of forty years in the wilderness looking after a few sheep after having had such a position in the world! Forgotten by God! Read again those verses from Psalm 105 about Joseph. He could easily have felt that God had forgotten him. He was left alone, cast out, fallen out of the purpose. His entire life was devastated and his purpose in life seemed to have gone. It was disintegration, hopelessness, a state of being forsaken.

Many of the Lord's servants have gone that way. You know, it was many centuries before the Lord Jesus took the words on His lips that David cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1). Forsaken! It was not true, of course, but the depth of this thing is commensurate with the height of the purpose. Remember that the depth and the height are equal.

So Joseph went through this period of stripping, emptying and humbling just to reach the point where he was utterly dependent upon God. Whatever he had felt and thought at one time, however he had acted and betrayed himself, he now knew that nothing is possible apart from the Lord. The Lord must have that position, make no mistake about it! At any cost, any length of time, for His purpose He must have that position. When He gets it, when all these things which confuse and mix up the situation are dealt with, then we come to the set time of the Lord. A break comes in the Psalm at one point: the work is done. The set time of the Lord has come. Joseph was released and brought out, but only at the set time of the Lord.

It is not just that the Lord had a certain timetable. The Lord has not just planned things in the matter of the measure of time. The Lord's set time always corresponds with a work done *in* the instrument. You cannot reconcile these things, but there it is. Even the coming of the Lord Jesus may be fixed as to time, if you like, but it cannot be until something is ready, until a work has been done. And when the work was done in the life of Joseph, the set time came.

The work is accomplished, and the Lord knows when it is accomplished in us, when it is finished. *We* do not! We think there is nothing more to be done, or that can be done. The Lord knows, and He knows when that issue is settled, when that way is clear, when He can proceed with confidence and commit Himself. He knows when things are ready. That is His set time. When that time comes it just happens, and there is no power in this universe which can stop it.

You notice with Joseph it corresponded to an hour of need. Just a wonderful working together! The preparing of an instrument in this deep way unto a day that the Lord knew. "He brake the whole staff of bread." Why? Because He had been preparing an instrument to meet a need which concerned the next stage in His programme for the bringing of Israel to Egypt on the way to the land.

Oh, the beautiful balance of things! The symmetry! The instrument dealt with and prepared; the need manifested and the two brought

together! The wonderful wisdom and sovereignty of God! And all that has to be said is that the end justifies all. The enlarged sphere is God's end. How true, not only of Israel but of others among His servants, is the principle of the words, "Thou broughtest us into the net ... Thou hast caused men to ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water" (Psalm 66:11,12). It was true of these men — but, "Thou broughtest us out into a wealthy place." That justified it all. The end of the Lord is enlargement, increase and enrichment. If His ways are painful, as they are, even to the point of His seeming to have left us, His end is greater fulness through it all.

Let us believe, then, that we are "called according to His purpose". Does that mean that everything ought to go well and that the sovereignty of God ought to come in all the way along and make victory easy? Not at all! The history of a vessel for divine purpose is this: the Lord always takes such instruments through very deep ways.

Now, of course I must safeguard what I have said and mention that there is no conceit behind any word that I have uttered, no feeling that we are people anything like Joseph. What I mean is this — that the Lord does need Joseph instruments. He does need vessels that can be used not only for the salvation of the world, but to bring His own people into the knowledge and experience of Himself in a fuller way. That is a peculiar ministry, both for individuals and for companies, in order that His house should come into the greater fulness of His eternal thought for it. For that He must have an instrument, or instruments, but such go through very deep history with Him. It is a hard and painful way, sometimes a way which seems like utter desolation and God-forsakenness, but a day comes when it is all explained and justified, and Israel at length comes into the land.

The Lord interpret His word to our hearts.

THE WAY OF SPIRITUAL STRENGTH

“David therefore departed thence, and escaped to the cave of Adullam; and when his brethren and all his father’s house heard it, they went down thither to him. And every one that was in distress, and every one that was in debt, and every one that was discontented, gathered themselves unto him; and he became captain over them; and there were with him about four hundred men” (1 Sam. 22:1-2).

“Now these are they that came to David to Ziklag, while he yet kept himself close because of Saul the son of Kish; and they were among the mighty men, his helpers in war” (1 Chron. 12:1).

“And these are the numbers of the heads of them that were armed for war, who came to David to Hebron, to turn the kingdom of Saul to him, according to the word of the Lord” (1 Chron. 12:23).

Spiritual weakness made manifest by testing circumstances

This is a period during which Israel was particularly menaced by the Philistines. They are always the shadow over Israel’s life, and immediately Israel’s weakness and helplessness was related to the Philistines. The Philistines brought out and made manifest Israel’s weakness and helplessness. The Lord usually has some particular thing by which a state or condition is revealed. It is not always recognizable as a state in itself. There has to be something that brings it out. Because of this or that, the real condition of things is manifested, and it would not be recognized apart from that instrument that the Lord uses to disclose exactly what the state is.

It becomes positive, rather than abstract, by reason of certain things. The Lord will, for instance, create a situation, an experience, a difficulty, a concrete challenge, and then the inability to meet it, to deal with it. That shows that that particular thing, which under other circumstances, if things had been different, would have counted for nothing, would have at once been conquered and subdued, has now become the Lord’s means of

showing how bad the spiritual state is. The Lord has a way of doing that. When Israel came into right position and condition under David the Philistines did not count for anything; they lost all significance. But here they are very significant, they do occupy a very dominant place, and that is only because of the spiritual state of the Lord's people. So, spiritual weakness is here made manifest by means of the Philistines.

We have to ask why it was that Israel was helpless before the Philistines. Why was it that their weakness, their deplorable condition, was manifested in the presence of the Philistines, who otherwise would not have signified anything? When you dig down for your answer, you find that it was because there was so much in common between Israel and the Philistines. They had so much in common really deep down underneath. The Philistines are known to us by a certain epithet — the 'uncircumcised Philistines'. David used that phrase concerning Goliath of Gath, "this uncircumcised Philistine" (1 Sam. 17:36). But when you look at Israel, that was really *their* spiritual state. *They* were uncircumcised in heart. They were called the Lord's people, and in a sense traditionally they were. They had the ordinances, even the ordinances of circumcision, but it was all outward. Paul draws that very distinct line of discrimination between the outward circumcision, which he calls the concision, and the inward circumcision of the heart. He says it is the latter that makes us Israelites in truth, not the former (Rom. 2:25-29). Here you find Israel in exactly that position — uncircumcised in heart. The fact that they said, "Make us a king ... like all the nations" (1 Sam. 8:5), showed that the thing which was common to the nations had come into their hearts. They wanted to be like the other nations; that is, the spirit of the world had come inside. And thus they knew nothing of what Paul called "the circumcision of Christ"; "not the putting away of the filth of the flesh" (1 Pet. 3:21), but the putting away of the old man entirely. There was deep down something quite in common in Israel and the Philistines, and that being so, that had to be exposed, and the world exposed their weakness.

It is like that with a church, with a Christian community, or with a Christendom, which is really worldly in spirit, in principle or in method. It is the world that exposes their weakness and shows how helpless they are. The world, like the Philistines, laughs at them, and says, 'You don't count for anything; you are not to be taken seriously; we do not consider that we owe very much to you or that we are to take you seriously.' The world laughs at the church and the Christian who, in principle, has that which is in common with itself. The world says, 'We can do your job better than

you can.’ So we find that the world is very largely the instrument of exhibiting or exposing the weakness of Christians, simply because there is that common basis.

a) A life of faith, in separation unto God

At that point in their history, when things were like that, David is introduced. Over against Saul (the world principle in the church) David is brought into view, and we have three gatherings to David. They are very significant in relation to what we have just been saying. David, then, represents the life of faith in separation unto God, and a life of faith. Israel had said, “Make us a king ... like all the nations”; we want something visible to rest upon, something we can see and take account of with our senses, something tangible, something altogether contrary to the life of faith. The Lord said, “They have rejected Me, that I should not be king over them” (1 Sam. 8:7). They turned from a life of faith. David comes in as God’s principle of faith calling for separation from the world principle, the world spirit, the world mentality. It was quite clear that David was the one with whom God was, and to whom God had committed Himself. And it is not long before David is, by the sovereignty of God, put into a position which is going to be the testing situation for the people of God, going to provide a supreme test as to whether these people really are going on with God, or going on with Saul; going on with heaven, or going on with earth; going on in the Spirit, or going on in the flesh; and now David becomes the test of real spirituality.

In the first place, we find him in the cave in the wilderness. That is the place outside, spiritually outside, in rejection; the place apart from that worldly system which has captured the church, that merely traditional order of things; that which is only outward in form and ordinances, but not a thing of the heart. David is put right outside of that in the wilderness, and of course he is repudiated by that whole official system. It is positively against him, if possible, for his destruction.

So that the very first thing that arises for the people of God was the question of their discernment as to where God really was; discernment whether, after all, the Lord was with Saul or whether He was with David, whether they had spiritual perception as to where their deepest spiritual needs would be met. It is very unfortunate that that Hebrew word has been translated ‘discontented’ in the text. It would have been far better to have kept the marginal translation, ‘bitter of soul’, in the text as it is more correct. It has been used by a lot of people who speak of things like this as

caves of Adullam — by discontented, disgruntled people, who cannot get on with anybody else. But that is just sweeping aside the whole spiritual significance of this. God has had to do that sort of thing again and again. When the church has departed from a purely spiritual heavenly position, a true life of separation unto Himself, it has been found that the majority are not ready for that. It has only been a minority, and then people have said, Oh, that is a cave of Adullam, a lot of discontented people. No, they were bitter of soul, and unable to meet their spiritual liabilities, in debt because the provision for spiritual competency has been lost on account of something quite false having gained the position among the Lord's people.

But here is David outside of that whole world system among the Lord's people, and it became a question of whether the Lord's people discerned, and those that did discern went out to David to a place of faith.

b) Union with Christ in death

What I want to say here in the first place is that this position in the wilderness and all that it involved for David and for those who went out to him, clearly and positively represents the believer's union with Christ in death. It is what Paul meant when he said, "Far be it from me to glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14). These people had been glorying in this wonderful fellow, Saul, glorying in their idea of a great kingdom. It was a worldly thing according to the nations. Paul said, "Far be it from me to glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified unto me, and I unto the world." It is that union with Christ in death to the whole world spirit, to the whole world system, to the whole world tendency that is constantly invading the church, like the Philistines who came in again and again with their worldly principles, causing trouble and bringing the Lord's people into a place where He could not go on with them or commit Himself to them. The aspect of the cross which means death to that whole system was the position of those who went to David. He was being pursued for his life and those who joined him, joined in that. From one standpoint, it was a laying down of their life to the whole world. They lost all their position and all their hopes in the world. They laid down their life and took all the risks bound up with associating with David.

c) Union with Christ in resurrection

The second passage at the beginning of 1 Chronicles 12 brings us to Ziklag. Here we find that in Ziklag there was another secession to David.

While David and his men were away one day, the Amalekites made a raid on Ziklag and captured everything, wives and children and all possessions. The last thing that they had was taken by the Amalekites, and then they burned the city and went off. When David and his men came back, they found everything gone and destroyed. They wept, it says, “until they had no more power to weep” (1 Sam. 30:4). It was a very serious and critical situation. It was the death side in very truth. But then it says, “David strengthened himself in the Lord his God” (v.6), and he enquired of the Lord as to whether he should pursue after the Amalekites. The Lord said, ‘Yes, pursue’, and the Lord sovereignly facilitated David’s overtaking of the Amalekites, so that he recovered everything (1 Sam. 30:1-31).

This is another stage in true spiritual life and fulness. To me it corresponds to the letter to the Romans. In the first chapters of the letter to the Romans, we find continually everything being lost. From the first verses, you find this movement to discover something that has been lost in Adam, and when you get to the end of Romans 5, you find everything is lost. Romans 6 brings the cross in, and from then onwards, you find it is recovering everything; everything that was lost is recovered through the cross. And in Romans 8, you have a full recovery, even to the end of the chapter, where the whole creation, which was subjected to vanity, is recovered. All that was lost through Adam’s sin has now been recovered, and this is the resurrection side of the cross. The death always goes with it. We carry over from the wilderness to Ziklag on the death side. The Lord never departs from the death side, that in Adam, in the world under judgment, everything is lost, but then we take a further step here to the recovery of everything in the resurrection. David strengthened himself in his God. The Lord said, “Pursue ... overtake, and (thou) shalt without fail recover all” (v.8b). There is the other side. There is resurrection union with the Lord Jesus as well as death union. It would not do for us to take the death position with Christ and leave it there. We must come on to the other side. Spiritual progress means the apprehending of Christ risen for the recovery of all that has been lost — and it is recovered. It is a very full recovery.

d) Union with Christ in the heavenlies

Pass to the third passage in the second part of 1 Chronicles 12. “These are the numbers of the heads of them that were armed for war, who came to David to Hebron” (v. 23). The third stage is Hebron. The name means *league* or *fellowship*. It says about Hebron that it was a very ancient city. Its history lay right back in the mists of antiquity somewhere outside of

this world. This is a very advanced position spiritually. Where do we come to through death and resurrection? What is the next position? Surely it is in the heavenlies. The sovereignty of the Lord Jesus now comes into view. It is here they make David king. The whole question of His heavenly exaltation and government as outside of this world comes before us when we come to Hebron. We pass from Romans into Ephesians. It is the heavenlies in Christ Jesus. God “raised Him from the dead, and made Him to sit at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule, and authority, and power, and dominion, and every name that is named” (Eph. 1:20-21). David is coming to the throne now, and there gathered to him many to turn again the kingdom to him, at Hebron. It is the church in the heavenlies that comes in here, the fellowship that is outside of this world, the truly spiritual nature; union with Christ in death, resurrection, ascension in the heavenlies where He is absolutely, unquestionably Lord. He is made King. He is “head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fulness of him that fills all in all” (Eph. 1:22-23). Well, here it is something more than an earthly society or institution, something more than a company of the Lord’s people like a congregation on the earth. It is that which is brought out from the antiquity of “before the foundation of the world”. “He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4). We are the church of the eternal counsels of God. It is a heavenly position, a heavenly thing, a heavenly fellowship, which has broken its contact in spirit with this whole world system.

And there we find at Hebron they had a very good time. Seven days they feasted, they ate and they drank, and they wanted to have another seven days. With those who taste real heavenly fellowship, there is no question of what they belong to, what denomination, sect or association; they have left all that behind. They have come into a realm where it is Christ as Lord only and absolute. If you taste that sort of fellowship, you want to go on. You are ready to excuse Peter for wanting to make three tabernacles. We may say, “Let’s stay here forever instead of going back to our business.” That is how we ought to feel. We have to go back to it, but we do not leave our heavenly position. This is to be the constant consciousness of the life of the Lord’s people. We should be in the spiritual good of the heavenly fellowship of the Lord’s people, and we must stand for that.

The next stage would be Jerusalem. When the Lord gets something like that on earth, you may expect the Lord’s coming before long. Jerusalem will be the next thing.

THE WONDROUS WAYS OF GOD

“Thy way was in the sea, and Thy paths in the great waters, and Thy footsteps were not known. Thou leddest Thy people like a flock, by the hand of Moses and Aaron” (Psalm 77:19-20).

What a strange contrasting of similes! It would be difficult to have a greater contrast than we have in those two verses — the pilot through the sea, and a shepherd with his flock. The sea in a rage and an uproar, tempest, storm; and right alongside of it, the shepherd and his flock. One is a picture of unrest, disturbance, anxiety, stress and mighty forces in action. The other is a picture of tranquillity, restfulness and calm. What a contrast! — and yet brought together in one statement as to what the Lord is to His people — a pilot and a shepherd.

You need to read the whole psalm to get the full value of that. The first part of the psalm is a record of distress, perplexity, confusion; a crying out in trouble, the cry of agony, “Has God forgotten to be gracious?” “Is His lovingkindness clean gone for ever?” (v.7,8). And then the writer recollects and says, “This is my infirmity; ... I will remember the years of the right hand of the Most High” (v.10), and the whole tone changes. There is recollection and review of how it all worked out in the long run, reassurance. It is a summary at the end, and yet also an introduction, because undoubtedly the last two verses of this psalm are an introduction to the next one, that great historic record of the Lord’s dealings with His people — Psalm 78. What a long psalm that is, telling of the movements, guidance and dealings of the Lord with His people! With all there is here for helpful, encouraging, reassuring meditation, we will only look now at the gist of the matter.

I am going to change the metaphor again from the pilot through the storm, the shepherd with his flock, to the mountaineer. There are three peaks which every child of God has to master, the peaks that are

suggested by this psalm. We are not really qualified for the service of the Lord, nor for life itself in relation to the Lord, until we have mastered these three peaks. They will challenge us and they may again and again challenge us, but somehow or other we have got to be the masters of them and they have got to be things that have lost their terror and dread for us, and their power to defeat and weaken us.

Divine purpose governing all

The first of these peaks which arises out of this psalm so clearly is divine purpose governing all. You know how this mountain presented itself to Israel at the beginning of their history as a return to the sea and His paths in great waters. What is the psalmist talking about? Undoubtedly about the Red Sea as it confronted them. Oh, what a terror, what a dread that night! The east wind no doubt howled and the water lashed. What a dread that sea was to the people, with what fear and trepidation did they approach its banks, even though its waters were standing up. It was a terrible night, the passing through the Red Sea. It was in a sense a mountain to be negotiated and a mountain of — for them — terrible possibilities. But do you notice what the psalmist says? He says that these waters were in a certain condition; our translation does not give us the exact word. They were troubled, in anguish, groaning, and the original word which was used to describe the state of the waters was that they were in travail, the sea was in travail, and the nation was born in that sea that night. A nation was born in the Red Sea that night, and the waters were in anguish. It is an illustration.

You see divine purpose working in the tempest. Behind the fear, the terror and everything that seemed so awful that night, divine purpose was governing, producing a nation, bringing a nation to birth — paths in the great waters. That is one thing that we have sooner or later got to settle, that the raging, the terror, the dread, the threatening, the thing that seems to mean our undoing, is being governed by divine purpose to produce something of tremendous value to the Lord. The recollection of that saved the psalmist when he was crying out with these questions: “Has God forgotten to be gracious? Is his lovingkindness clean gone for ever?” The psalmist was in a state of distress. I think he was expressing the state of the people at that time, and wondering whether the Lord had not forsaken His people altogether and left them. Then he says, ‘Let us look back, let us go back to our beginning as a nation; were we not born in a threat? Did we

not begin our history in what seemed to speak destruction? Was it not in the most terrible tempest that we, by the mighty power of God, came forth as His people, delivered, saved, set apart?' That recollection saved the psalmist in his hour, and we have to get to the place where we say with every new tempest raging, every threat, all dread and fear, fierce attack, whatever it is: 'God has something in this; purpose governs.' But then, that involves something else.

Divine wisdom dictating

The other mountain peak is this: divine wisdom dictating; not only that there is purpose which is the end, but wisdom dictating the way to that end. The psalmist looked back and saw, 'Oh, at the time we could see no wisdom of God at work, the way we were going seemed to be such a confused way, a contradictory way; it seemed to be anything but the dictating of divine wisdom; but now I can see. God chose the way, the method and the means which He knew would most effectively reach His end, and we have to negotiate that mountain.' It does seem so strange, the way the Lord takes. What is the Lord doing? Why? We ask all these questions. Wisdom is dictating the way to the end.

Divine love controlling

And then, divine love controls. The end, the way, the motive, the pilot, but not a disinterested detached pilot, just doing his job without any heart relationship to the people in his care. The metaphor changes at once — 'Ah, there is something more in it than that; God is not just negotiating through difficulties in a cold, detached way; He is a shepherd.' And if there is one picture in the Bible of a heart relationship to others, it is the picture of the shepherd. God's heart is bound up with His people, and the psalmist says an interesting thing here. "Thy way was in the sea, and Thy paths in the great waters, and Thy footsteps were not known." What does he mean? Go back again, after it is all over, to the other side of the Red Sea. The wind has quieted down, and the tempest has come to rest, and you look to see where His footprints are, and you cannot find them. You cannot say, 'He did it like this and that.' The fact is He did it, that is all, and you cannot explain how. The psalmist is saying: 'That is how God does things.' He does it, the most wonderful thing, the things which involve the whole question of life and death for us. He did it, and

now you just cannot see any trace of how He did it, but it was done. Do we not have to say that? Yes, we come up against a situation like the Red Sea and say, 'How are we going to master this? What is the Lord going to do with this problem?' We look back and say, 'The Lord has done it again and again, but how, I do not know.' "Thy footsteps were not known." You cannot trace out how the Lord does things, but He does them. He brings the mighty tempest to serve His end by His wisdom, in His love, because He is the Shepherd of His flock; that is, His heart is bound up with us. It matters to Him about us.

To be continued