

THE ISRAEL OF GOD

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Chapter One

THE PRINCIPLE OF TRAVAIL

The seed plot of this series of meditations is found in a little fragment at the end of the letter to the Galatians:

"And as many as shall walk by this rule, peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16).

We will put alongside of that some other passages.

"Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied" (Isaiah 53:10-11).

"Who hath heard such a thing? who hath seen such things? Shall a land be born in one day? shall a nation be brought forth at once? for as soon as Zion travailed, she brought forth her children" (Isaiah 66:8).

"Therefore will he give them up, until the time that she which travaileth hath brought forth: then the residue of his brethren shall return unto the children of Israel" (Micah 5:3).

"For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And... we ourselves groan... waiting for... adoption... the redemption of our body" (Romans 8:22-23).

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, that ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy. A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but when she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for the joy that a man is born into the world" (John 16:20-21).

"My little children, of whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you..." (Galatians 4:19).

Now let us bring together particularly that phrase from Galatians 6:16: "The Israel of God", and the fragments in Isaiah 53:10-11: "He shall see his seed"; "He shall see of the travail of his soul". "His seed... the travail of his soul".

We have before us a very full, deep and far-reaching matter: nothing less than that of the producing, securing, training, and using of a spiritual seed - a new spiritual Israel. We begin with a brief consideration of a principle, found in a word occurring in all but one of the above passages - the principle of travail.

Let us first of all remind ourselves that this is a law which God established after the fall. There is an established law of travail. You will recall what the Lord said, first to the woman, and then to the man, as recorded in Genesis 3:16-19. He there linked this law in two realms with production and reproduction: in one connection with children; in the other connection with the earth. And in these two connections of the law of travail we find three things.

Reproduction, and Hence Travail, the Justification of Life

First of all, the very justification of life is in reproduction, in multiplication, in a seed. Life is never intended to be an end in itself. Its only justification, according to God's law and principle, is that it reproduces. And so the law of travail is linked with reproduction. That runs through the whole realm of grace, and through a large part of the realm of nature. But if there is no reproduction without travail, then the travail becomes the basis of the justification of existence. That is something much deeper than perhaps appears. One might put it like this, quite bluntly: If we are without travail, there is no justification for our existence. We shall come back to that later.

That was implicit in what God said to the woman. Then He turned to the man and spoke about the travail of his labour - of the ground bringing forth thorns and briars, that it would be by the sweat of his brow that the ground produced, and that this was the preservation and sustentation of life. This was the justification of life: the preservation and sustentation of life on the principle of travail.

And then, of course, in both cases the issue is a triumph. That is made perfectly clear in both connections. Paul puts his finger upon that, you remember, in his letter to Timothy (1 Timothy 2:13-15). Yes, travail, but triumph. God will see you through in spite of it. It is the triumph of life in both connections - the children and the earth; it issues as a testimony to something having been overcome, a victory over forces at work which would prevent or make it infinitely difficult. Travail, you see, is God's law by which He is not defeated. That is where the test comes always for us: *HE* is not defeated. Out of the adversity, out of the difficulty, out of the suffering, something stands as a great testimony to triumph, to victory.

Travail Implies Something Costly

Now note the implication of this principle of travail - and there are many connections in which the law of travail operates: just go through the Bible and see the great number of connections where struggle and conflict and pain and anguish presages the emergence of some tremendous new thing of God. But note the implication of such a law. What did God mean by it? I think simply this - and perhaps much more, but certainly this - that nothing was going to be easy and cheap. To put it another way: that God was really establishing the tremendous value of everything. He was saving man from regarding things as being of little concern or value, forcing him to recognise that this thing is costly because it is valuable. Surely this is the offset to the whole tendency of man's nature to get things easily and cheaply, not to pay a price for them, to escape suffering, to escape labour, to get it all without any cost. And God has written in the universe this law that anything that is of Him, whether in creation or in grace, has a price attached to it, is a costly thing; it is infinitely precious and valuable, and worth suffering for!

Note, it is intended to bring the soul in - "the travail of his *SOUL*"; "My *SOUL* is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death" - to bring the soul into relation with things; and when we say that we mean love. What we get cheaply and easily we do not really love. But that which costs binds our hearts to it - it becomes a matter of the heart, of love. And so by travail the soul is saved from lightness, carelessness, frivolity, cheapness, and brought to recognise that there is something here that is infinitely precious. How far-reaching is that truth and that law! What a lot of ground it covers! God is not going to let the creation off in this matter. This is the explanation of so much. And nations and peoples that just give themselves up to frivolity, to cheapness, to escapism and all that sort of thing,

are on the high road to a bad time in their history. It will not be too long before they pass through some fiery ordeal, in order to bring back the preciousness and the seriousness of things.

And if this is true in the realm of nature and the world, how much it explains in the realm of God's spiritual things! Oh, the infinite tragedy of trying to make the things of God cheap and easy - even salvation, and the Christian life! - appealing always to the pleasure side of men, trying to eliminate the cost. The Lord Jesus never did that. Salvation is something of infinite cost: everything to do with salvation is infinitely precious, and there is not one fragment of all that is of God which is not of surpassing and transcendent value. It is not just going to be had willy-nilly. "Through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). Yes, suffering is attached to anything of value, and that is particularly true of spiritual things.

At that very point, you and I need to have our minds "converted" - we need a tremendous change of mind. Unless you recognise that, unless that has become true for you, there are some things in the Bible you cannot understand. They sound flippant, garrulous; they sound as though they are just words, words, words... Listen: "Our light affliction, which is for the moment..." (2 Corinthians 4:17). What are you talking about, Paul - "our light affliction"? Well, listen to his catalogue of sufferings! Listen to him as he tells us of all that he had to go through for the Gospel's sake, and read the much more that Luke tells us, that Paul never mentions personally. What that beloved servant of God went through for the Gospel's sake -! And yet he talks like this: "Our light affliction which is but for a passing moment". You cannot talk like that in the presence of suffering unless you have seen the infinite preciousness of that toward which God is working and bringing you. "Though now for a little while... ye have been put to grief in manifold trials, yet... ye rejoice greatly with joy unspeakable and full of glory..." (1 Peter 1:6, 8). Now look at the context of that: fiery trials. You cannot get through, understand, endure the travail, unless you have some sense of the value of things.

All Divine Operations Effected Through Travail

(1) Initiations

This law is carried through from nature to the purpose of God, to the divine purpose, and is seen in the Scriptures to be the principle or law of all divine realisations. If you look again, you will see that in all new beginnings, in all the initiations of God, this law is ever present. Everything of God emerges from some agony, from some convulsion, from some death struggle. Look at your Bible again. It is like that all the way through: without or within, some tremendous travail marks every new beginning of God. Can you put your finger upon any instance in the Bible where God began again and there was no association with the principle of travail? You will have difficulty. It is the law of birth, you see, and it relates to the spiritual world, the purpose of God, just as much as to any other realm.

(2) Enlargements

And what is true of God's beginnings and initiations, is true of every enlargement. Whenever God sets Himself for increase, for enlargement, to get something more than that which He has already got, it seems that He plunges things anew into travail. Every spring-time, for instance, is to see nature enlarged, growing beyond what it was before, and in its increase there is a new travail. Perhaps you will think me unduly fanciful, but you can almost hear the trees travailling at certain

times as you walk in the woods. Probably if our ears were more attuned to that realm - and there are sounds, real sounds, to which our ears are not attuned - we should hear the groaning of the creation. Paul says this: "The whole creation groaneth and travaileth..." (Romans 8:22). Why? It is pent up, it is held back, it is under arrest; it is groaning for its expansion, its enlargement, its liberation.

That is a law in spiritual things. Every fresh measure of Christ, every bit of spiritual increase, is fraught with a fresh baptism into His passion. We should recognise that, because so often we do not understand why it is that, when we ask for spiritual increase and enlargement, we immediately are plunged into a bad time. The increase comes that way, does it not? Some of us have learnt that so well that, if we say these things to the Lord, it is so to speak with our tongue in our cheek! We are very, very careful what we say to the Lord. We have learned that the way of enlargement is at cost, through fresh travail, and we cannot get away from it. Yes, there are successive baptisms into the passion of Christ. The law of His universality is the law of His passion. "I came to cast fire upon the earth... But I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened until it be accomplished!" (Luke 12:49-50). By the travail of His soul, the passion of His Cross, the straitening was removed, the fire was scattered, and the enlargement took place. But that is equally true of the church as of Himself. The church has never expanded and been released without some convulsion. That is a matter of history.

(3) Consummation

Again, what is true of God's beginnings, and of God's continuations and enlargements, is true of His final consummation: that in the finality of things there will be one mighty convulsion. If you like to change the word - travail. I am not sure that the church has not entered upon that already. It is certainly coming, and it will be, at the end, the explanation. It is true to the Word. That ultimate, final, intrinsic thing of glory and preciousness, God is going to bring out of the fiery ordeal at the end. Yes, the travail of the church at the end will issue in the final emergence of the church in glory and in the consummation of the divine purpose. The Bible sees a great travail in the church and in the creation, out of which the Kingdom in fullness will finally come. "When these things begin to come to pass... lift up your heads; because your redemption draweth nigh" (Luke 21:28). It means your escape, your release, your exodus, your *WAY OUT*.

Travail Has Universal Significance

Now this principle is, of course, comprehensively gathered up in Christ Himself and in His Cross. Christ's Cross - His passion - is central to the whole universe, and it is central in this particular respect: it is travail through which the universe is redeemed. Yes, the heavens and the earth. The Cross of the Lord Jesus affects the whole range of things in the earth and beyond the earth. His travail is of universal significance, of infinite reach. And in every experience of true spiritual travail there is something that is of far-reaching significance and account.

Here is this one little man, Paul, thought very little of, despised, by the world both in his own day and through centuries since. A certain writer - a great man in his own eyes - calls him "the insignificant little Jew", Paul of Tarsus. Well, that is the world's estimate of him. Here he is saying: "I fill up... that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church" (Colossians 1:24). In other words: "I sip His cup, and, in so doing, I touch the whole Body of Christ." It is a tremendous statement, is it not? But was it true? Has history proved that it was true?

I would like to stop here with a parenthesis on the historical side of things. Fifty years ago, the whole realm of biblical scholarship, as it is called, "finished" Paul. They wrote him off; they decided that Paul's teaching was not Christ's, that it was in another realm altogether - it was not Christian. That was Paul finished, they thought! But somehow or another, he has had a mighty resurrection. The remarkable thing is that the whole realm of biblical scholarship is now anew giving Paul his place, seeing the immense significance of the man. It is a quite fascinating thing to follow the course of biblical interpretation, and to be able to see today the tremendous come-back that is taking place. Why it is, of course, we know, and they are all going to be made to know that this man, because he shared the sufferings of Christ, has a universal significance for the whole Body.

While that is interesting - and I could add so much more to it - the point is this. Here is the principle: that, if you and I really do share in the spiritual travail of Christ, we are lifted out of anything that is local and small and placed right in the universal. It is a value secured for the Body of Christ beyond anything merely earthly and parochial. That is the principle of His travail, which is placed at the centre of the universe; and to share that does mean such enlargement, such release. You see, we come back to that again: release, enlargement, expansion, fullness, reproduction - use what words you will. The law is always the law of travail.

Travail Reveals "Heart" or "Hollow"

The Lord allows travail - indeed, He not only allows it, but appoints it - in order to find out whether really there is a heart-relationship to His things. A few months ago, I found a tree lying at the side of the road, not far from my house. The day before, it had been upright and growing, and looking like all the other trees. It had all the leaves of profession, all the proximity of association with other trees, and outwardly it could pass off as being the real thing. But a storm came, and now it was lying there; and when I looked at it I found that it had no heart: it was a completely hollow thing - there was only a framework. That is a parable. That is what is happening, and what is going to happen, and what God will cause to happen everywhere. The travail will come - the suffering, persecution, trials, whatever it may be; and, whatever may be its form, whether it be within or without, it is going to come in order to discover whether there is a heart there for God, or whether, after all, it is hollow, it is profession, it is simply association on the outside, and not real on the inside. God must expose what is not real, and God must test everything to prove it.

But what had happened to the other trees - those that stood near the fallen one? Well, they survived the storm, and they are still standing. But is that all? Not a bit of it! The next storm that comes will probably find that it has got a little harder work to do than last time to move these. Those roots have felt the strain and they have reached down and taken a tighter hold. They have got a grip on things; they have realised that storms are realities, and that it is a matter of life and death as to whether they stand.

It is so easy, is it not, when things get difficult, to walk out, give up? How often we pray that the Lord will protect from difficulties and troubles! - but the Lord never answers prayers like that. These things come to us personally, and they come to us in our little companies - storms, shaking storms, things calculated to devastate and scatter, destroy and finish what is there - and the Lord does not protect. But what is He doing? On the one side He is finding out whether there is a heart for Him, and whether there is reality in every member, or whether it is only outward show and hollow inside. On the other hand, He is seeking to bring out the expression of preciousness: that this thing is too precious to let go easily;

it means far too much for us to abandon at the first onset of adversity and trial. That is the meaning of it, and it explains very much, does it not?

The Two "Israels"

Now this comprehends God's whole conception of a spiritual Israel. Why have we taken that fragment - "the Israel of God"? You know, Paul was almost invidious when he used that phrase. If you look at the letter to the Galatians, you will see that he is dealing with two Israels, and in that phrase he is saying that there is a true Israel and a false. I think Phillips, in his *"Letters to Young Churches"*, has put in a word which, while it is not in the text, is what is generally believed to give the meaning of Paul. His rendering is: "To the *TRUE* Israel of God". That is exactly what Paul meant. There is another Israel, which Paul says is not the true one. But there are those who "walk by this rule", this measure, this standard. What standard is this? If you look at the letter you will see. "My little children, of whom I am again in travail till Christ be formed in you..." (4:19). "As many as walk by this measure... the true Israel of God." The measure of Christ is made complete by travail. The true Israel of God is the "seed" which is "of the travail of his soul".

We see, then, that, whether we like it or not, this is an established law. We can, of course, do many things in order to avoid or get rid of the travail, but God's law means that there is something of preciousness that comes out when it is suffered for, when you suffer for it. May we never get to the place where we try to make the Christian life cheap and easy - a perpetual holiday. While there is the joy - and it should be there; while there should be the deep worship, thanksgiving and praise to God: surely the truest reality even of the joy is that it comes from deep experience through suffering. It is not the superficial, flippant, frivolous kind of Christian who really knows the Lord most. No: "We rejoice", said Paul, "in our tribulations" (Romans 5:3). There is something precious for the Lord bound up with suffering, and you and I have to face that.

A few months ago I received, as out from China, a message given by brother Watchman Nee just before he was put in prison about four years ago. The subject of that message was - the necessity for the breaking of the vessel in order to reveal the preciousness of the treasure within. It is true. Now he is experiencing it. But: "He shall see his seed... He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied".

Chapter Two

A SPIRITUAL SEED

"When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed... he shall see of the travail of his soul" (Isaiah 53:10-11).

"They are not all Israel, which are of Israel: neither, because they are Abraham's seed, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, it is not the children of the flesh that are children of God; but the children of the promise are reckoned for a seed" (Romans 9:6-8).

"Now to Abraham were the promises spoken, and to his seed. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ" (Galatians 3:16).

"And as many as shall walk by this rule, peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16).

For our present consideration many other fragments of the same kind could be added, but these are sufficient, surely, to impress us. Of course, they will not impress *US* in the same way as they did those to whom they were first written. We are not able, without some very real illumination by the Holy Spirit, to recognise and appreciate the tremendous implications, the profound meaning of these statements of Paul. No, we have not yet fathomed all that Paul had come to see of what Christ meant, of what came in with Christ, of what happened when Christ came in, of what turned upon the advent of Christ. May the Spirit of God register something of those tremendous implications, even now.

It was this revelation which came to Paul, and his apprehension of the significance of Christ, that was the cause of all the trouble. If ever there was a man who got into trouble; around whom trouble circled and seethed, wherever he went - who seemed to make trouble, it was this man Paul. But when you ask what the cause of it all is, it is just this with which we are now occupied. It is a matter which in principle will always set up a furore; and as to its significance it comes from the realm of greater intelligence than the human.

Now Paul did, of course, recognise that there was such a thing as a nation of Jews, a Jewish nation. That sounds far too trite and obvious. With a wave of the hand, and mark you, a significant wave of the hand, a kind of objective wave, he said, "Behold Israel after the flesh". Whilst that is something to take account of, it is, nevertheless, objective - "Behold Israel, after the flesh". He recognised that that nation stood in a special relationship to the sovereign ways of God in history. Indeed, he was proud and very glad that he had been born in that nation. He had a deep heart-love for his nation, and he longed, as he said, that they might be saved: "Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God is for them, that they might be saved" (Romans 10:1). Notice how objective is his attitude; he is not saying: "that *WE* might be saved". Note that, because it is a feature of this whole matter.

But, with all, with all his recognition, all his pleasure, and his longing and praying in that direction, he had come to see that they were not by nature "the Israel of God". That is the root of all the trouble. I underline the words *BY NATURE*; they were not by nature *THE* Israel of God, which, of course, they claimed to be. It is true that Israel was something, but the *TRUE* Israel, the true Israel to which he referred in that fragment "the Israel of God" or the true "Israel of God" - was not a natural thing at all, and it is not. It is spiritual. It is not a Jewish, historic,

earthly thing; it is not Abraham's *NATURAL* generation. This is what Paul is saying, and it is only what his Master, the Lord Jesus, had said. This Israel is Christ's generation; this "seed" is Christ, and those who are Christ's, begotten, born out of His travail. Christ's seed is essentially spiritual. No one was ever born of Him naturally. And yet, through those many centuries, the world has become occupied by His seed, which He is seeing, as of the travail of His soul. This seed is not begotten of Abraham, but begotten of God; it is not descended from Abraham through Jacob, the man with every feature of that which is natural ("supplanter" his name means, that is, "one who takes hold", whose nature it is to be possessive - a very clear mark of the natural man) not through ambitious, scheming, cunning, clever, opportunist, unscrupulous and self-strong Jacob. This seed does not come through Jacob, but through Israel. What a great deal that means spiritually; that, having encountered God, and being virtually dead, through the grace of God he has survived. He said "I have seen God face to face, and my life is spared" - the most wonderful thing has happened; I have seen God face to face, and my *LIFE* is spared! To come into an encounter with God, as did Jacob, means death: yes, and virtually that is what it was: and typically, Israel must be born, or there is no future - there is no future at all - Isra-*EL*! Surely this all leads us to the true "seed of Christ", the true "Israel of God".

The Significance of Abraham

We begin therefore with the true significance of Abraham. Abraham represents a terminal point in the history of the Old Testament, and then, from him, an unbroken course of national existence proceeded up to Christ. Through Abraham a race was re-born and marked out in special relationship to God's eternal desire. There is much that is technical, interesting and instructive in that study, but we leave it. You know that the first name, designation, of that nation or race, was "Hebrew" which means "that which has come from beyond"; "the man from over there, beyond the river", meaning, beyond the Euphrates, simply, "the man from beyond". The Hebrew race then, is that which has migrated over, come from beyond. Later, they became known as the "Jews"; that is quite a limited title, and just means the "descendants of Judah". In the beginning it just had that limited meaning of "descendants from Judah", in their country of Judea, but it became more general. Later still they became known as Israel - the descendants of Jacob *AFTER* his crisis at Peniel.

Knowing all this, Paul nevertheless says that this was not the true Israel. He, like all the others, at one time believed that it was; but he had come to see that it was not the *TRUE* Israel, that the true Israel is *INWARD*, and not natural or outward. And that opens up a large field of very important consideration, which we will deal with later.

Israel - A Great Object Lesson

As the tabernacle in the wilderness, and later the temple in the land, with all its components, was the embodiment of spiritual and heavenly principles and realities; as the priesthood, the sacrifices, the feasts were likewise the embodiment of spiritual realities, and not the realities themselves - so it was with Israel. These are the things which make up the nation, they make up the life of the nation; they *ARE* Israel. The point is this - it was possible, and is possible, to separate between the things themselves and those spiritual thoughts and principles. So that it is possible to have a tabernacle, replete with priesthood, sacrifices, and feasts, and yet not have the spiritual reality. It is possible to separate these things, because they are not one. Even God has no place for those symbols when they have lost their spiritual power and meaning. He will

vehemently reject the *THINGS* - ark, tabernacle, and everything else - without compunction.

Paul carries this right through to Israel. He says: "Israel after the flesh" is one thing, "Israel after the Spirit" is *ANOTHER*; these things can be divided, and God has set aside "Israel after the flesh". Put it another way - what God is after, what He is concerned with, what He is going on with, is that which was represented by them, the reality.

The cry of all the prophets is that this divide has taken place. Israel is going on with the temple, going on with the services, going on with the sacrifices, but it is all hollow. There is a tremendous difference between the seed of Abraham after the flesh and the seed of Christ. What is the seed of Christ? It is something essentially, intensely, spiritually *REAL*! It is not something that bears a name; it is not something which holds certain doctrines and truths - the Law, or what corresponds to that in Christianity. It is not something that performs certain rites, and goes through certain ceremonies. It is not something along that external line at all - be it intellectual, emotional, volitional, or physical - it is something inwardly real. It is "Christ *IN* you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27). This is what God is after. And if Israel was raised up for a purpose, it was to set forth these realities in a pictorial, symbolic way. God's object is not a Jewish nation as such, but a heavenly people, constituted on spiritual realities. Israel is for all time a great object lesson which God has set in the midst of the nations to indicate spiritual principles. They will remain that object lesson to the end. God, in preserving, keeping that nation, does so, not because of that nation itself, but to maintain an object lesson in the midst of the nations, especially to Christianity.

Unmistakable Features

Let us look at Israel after the flesh. There are some features which cannot be mistaken! Many years ago, I knew an outstanding and well-known Christian Jew, who had travelled all over the world. He said to me on one occasion: "It does not matter what nation I go into, and how much they have become apparently absorbed in the nation where they are living, I can always tell a Jew; he may have fair hair or dark hair; there may be differences arising from their living in different countries for generations, but there is something that I can always recognise, and I never make a mistake." What does God say about that? He says to us, as being of the seed of Christ, that this true Israel should be at least as pronounced in its features, in its distinctiveness, as they are! There should be no mistaking a child of God. Everybody should know when they have met a child of God. By means of that, God says to us that this seed, which is the true Israel of God, born of the travail of Christ, is to bear the unmistakable character of Christ. All who meet that seed know they have met, not father Abraham, but another Father - they have met God in Christ.

This is very searching; but it is the true exegesis, the true interpretation of this word - "his seed", "he shall see his seed": every one betraying His features, bearing His characteristics, being recognised; not because they bear a name - whether that be Israel or Christian; not because they observe the law and the customs; not because they hold the oracles and the truths; not because they do or do not certain things - but because they bear the likeness of Him of whom they are born. That is what God says - unmistakable features! "By this shall *ALL* men know... if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35).

The Law of Separation

Another thing about "Israel after the flesh", which goes very much along with that, is that law which God laid down for them, so firmly and so severely, and upon the observance or violation of which their very national existence hung - the law of separation. Abraham is in Ur of the Chaldees, in Babylon, with all the Baalite worship, the two thousand deities, on the other side, over there. God calls him "Abraham the Hebrew"; he has come across, passed over, come out, been severed from his country, and then brought into another land which God is going to purge of every other seed. That is His intention, to purge that land of every other seed, and to populate it and fill it only with this seed; and then to lay down, in the strictest possible way, the law forbidding intermarriage with any other people or nation on pain of unqualified rejection. There were, of course, deep reasons for that. There was the spiritual reason of "other gods", and the opening of the door to that other spiritual realm. That is what is meant by "iniquity" in the Old Testament, what the prophets spoke of as "fornication" - the marring of "the virgin daughter of Zion". But here it is: no intermarriage whereby there will be loss of distinctiveness of life and character. It is the severest law of God. Because of the violation of that law God had all His long-drawn-out controversy with Israel through the prophets, and, at last, sent the nation where they chose to be - into another land - and let them feel something of what that means. The bringing back of that remnant is so full of significance, when you recognise that it is reconstitution on this very principle.

Indeed God has written this large - and "the things that were written aforetime were written for our learning". He is saying by Israel: On the positive and on the negative side My seed is different; My seed is distinct; My seed must have no intermarriage, it must not lose its distinctiveness, it must be a separate thing. The seed of Christ is like that - spiritually separate. It seems that right from the beginning, in the case of Adam and Eve, and from then onward, the one determined intention of Satan has been to destroy that distinctiveness of what is of God. All Israel's history is just that; and he did not stay there, he pressed it through to the very case of Jesus Himself. That is the focal point of the temptations of Jesus, in some way to insinuate something that would destroy His separateness from everything that was not of God. Satan's efforts to destroy distinctiveness, so successful in the case of Israel, so unsuccessful when concentrated upon Jesus Himself, have been continued throughout the history of the church. God's spiritual law is written so deeply here for us. This seed is something not of the flesh, not of this world; something different, something quite other; a divine seed that does not belong here, has not originated here, has not its roots here. "If then ye were raised together with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is... for ye *DIED*" (Colossians 3:1, 3). Now Paul saw quite well that Israel after the flesh had become something very other than that, very mixed up and compromised here in this world.

The Cohesion of Israel

Another thing about Israel which is quite apparent even now, and has been all the way through history, is their cohesion. There is no doubt about it. If you deal with these people, you meet "clannishness" (if you like to call it that), something very loyal to itself - *VERY* loyal to itself. They are a people bound together in blood and in consciousness and in jealousy, about whom there is a unity, a cohesion and an integration which is unique. Though scattered over the earth, and seemingly broken up, they are one people. What a lesson! What an object lesson!

Turning to the New Testament we find that this seed, having one origin, one source, one life-principle, is one. That is the meaning of John 17, is it not? The

secret of oneness, of unity, is not in doctrine, in practice, in tradition or in names - God only knows how true that is! It is something deeper than that - it is in *BIRTH*, and what that means, inheritance in the blood. How pathetically tragic that there is not this jealousy, this loyalty, among those who claim to be of this seed! What a breakdown! We ought to be very jealous for every child of God; we ought to be loyal to one another, because we are of the same family. There ought to be something here that is stronger than all the outside forces. That has proved true in "Israel after the flesh", for the most violent action of outside forces has only brought out their inward cohesion. Their unity is manifested and even strengthened by opposition and antagonism and persecution - what a lesson!

Discrimination as to Food

Then there is this whole question of food - a very acute question with Israel after the flesh. The Law required them to be very particular, very careful, very discriminating - but all that is written only as an object lesson. It says something of which the children of God, the true Israel of God, must take note. Have we a spiritual faculty which corresponds to their natural one in selectiveness of food? *DISCERNING* - this is exactly what John was talking about in his letter, when he said: "The anointing which ye received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any one teach you" (1 John 2:27) - "you know... you know..." - this is a spiritual instinct or faculty of knowing what is of Christ and what is not of Christ. How important it is to keep the seed pure through spiritual discernment!

Israel's Governing Hope

There is one further undying feature with "Israel after the flesh". It has persisted all down the ages, and is as strong today as ever it was - their hope! Why is it that those who are able still go to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem? These people are characterized by this deep-set, deep-rooted hope! Hope! Something; sometime; someone; one day - they live for that; it is that which has carried them through, supported them, sustained them, kept them - their hope! If ever that should fade in Israel, they will disintegrate indeed, and they will fall a prey to their enemies. It is this that holds together, and this that gives the power to stand up and go on. With us, it is a spiritual thing, something that is part of our birth. The true spiritual seed of Christ is dominated, mastered, by what the apostle calls, "the blessed hope", "the day of the Lord", "the promise of his coming" - a master-hope. Is it not true to spiritual experience, that when we are really born again, a sense of prospect, of a future, is born in our hearts, and it remains a strong thing throughout. This is not something taken on as teaching, not even the teaching of the "Second Coming", the coming again of the Lord, but there is something beyond the teaching, the Spirit Himself has given birth to a hope within us. We are living for a Day, and that Day is our strength; it holds us on our way. How true that is, and how rich it is in the suffering people of God in all times, and in our own.

The Turning Point of the Dispensations

In the light of what we have been saying hitherto, I want to turn you to the Gospel by John, and in particular to the third chapter.

In spite of many years of familiarity with and much reading of that chapter, I feel there is still much in it that I have not yet grasped. All that we have said, and more; all that is indicated and signified in the whole of the Old Testament and of the New Testament is implicit in this third chapter of John's Gospel. It is a chapter upon the meaning of which two mighty dispensations turn. The tremendous change which has been indicated, which Paul came to see by revelation - this

tremendous change from "Israel after the flesh" to "Israel after the Spirit" - centres in that chapter.

This Gospel by John has been more of a bone of contention, controversy and conflict, than any of the other Gospels. The popular trend amongst Bible "scholars" now is to rank Mark's gospel first and highest. Mark is the key to everything; Mark is the sum of everything; they are making a tremendous amount of Mark! We are not saying they are wrong. After all, there is not much difficulty about Mark, is there? Matthew and Luke - well, they do not present much trouble, they provoke very little dispute or conflict - but John! Some of them have written him off altogether, ruled him right out, they will not have him. Is that not significant? When you are dealing with the Gospels of Mark and Matthew and Luke, you are dealing mainly with the historic Jesus, the earthly Christ, what they call the Jesus of history. When you come to John's Gospel, you come into the absolutely spiritual realm - it is the heavenly Christ that is here - not born of Adam or Abraham, but - from eternity. Look at the word "heavenly" on his lips in this Gospel. Everything here is in the spiritual realm. John, as you know, calls all the miracles "signs" - things that have another meaning, that signify something else, and we cannot see the other, the something else, unless God opens our eyes; it is spiritual and is set in the spiritual realm. That is what Satan hates, that is the cause of all the trouble. Men who only operate in the realm of human intellect and reason, even in their approach to the Scriptures, cannot come into this realm at all without a sense of uneasiness, for it exposes unspirituality. When we come into the realm of the spiritual seed - or to put that another way - when we come into the realm where God is after, not an earthly, a traditional, an historical, but a spiritual people, we come into the realm of the intensest conflict and controversy. Notice how this very Gospel proceeds in an atmosphere of antagonism - it is like that. There comes a time when, because of that, Jesus has to withdraw with His disciples in order to have them alone, to prepare them for a day that is coming. This controversy, this conflict, is constantly surrounding them.

The Securing of "True Israel" - the Realm of Intensest Conflict

Now that is very significant in the larger application. The securing of a spiritual, a heavenly, a divine seed, in Satan's domain, is fraught with the bitterest conflict, an opposition, the intensity of which can only be explained on this ground. The more the children of God are found going on with Christ in a spiritual way towards God's full end, the more diverse and inexplicable conflict will they meet, and that from every realm. It just happens! If we really get off the traditional, historical basis of life, even in Christianity, on to those higher levels of what is spiritual or what is of Christ, essentially and utterly of Christ, we shall come into the realm of the bitterest conflict.

That is why this all leads back to the matter of travail which was before us in the previous chapter. We find in the New Testament that the travail was not all over when the child was born. It was not all over typically and symbolically when Israel was secured out of Egypt - it went on. When Moses came back and met Hobab, his father-in-law, it says they greeted one another, and asked of one another's health, and that "Moses told his father-in-law all that the Lord had done... for Israel's sake, all the travail... by the way" (Exodus 18:8). After Egypt! So the birth is not the end. Paul says: "I am again in travail until Christ be [fully] formed in you" (Galatians 4:19). The church was born out of the travail of Christ, but what a travail she has been in again and again, and will be to the end. It all comes back there - the securing and perfecting of this spiritual seed is fraught with conflict. Whether we see the implications of what is signified by that statement or not, we need to think about it - it will explain a great deal. There is

the difference of two worlds between spiritual Christianity and traditional Christianity, just as much as there is between "Israel after the flesh" and "Israel after the Spirit" - a tremendous difference. It is going to be seen eventually that the obtaining of the perfected seed of Christ was a very, very costly thing.

May the Lord just write something of this on our hearts, and show us very, very clearly what it is He is really after, that His heart is set upon a people for Himself - a people according to Christ, a heavenly people, a spiritual people, whose life is not comprised of outward things at all, but whose life is the corporate expression of God's Son; those who bear His unmistakable features. Oh that it might be possible for people to say: There is no mistaking that one - no mistaking what he is, what she is - he is a "Jew", she is a "Jew", in the spiritual Israel - he, she, is a member of Christ!

Chapter Three

THE FOUNDATION OF FAITH

"When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed... he shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied" (Isaiah 53:10-11).

"For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel: neither, because they are Abraham's seed, are they all children... That is, it is not the children of the flesh that are children of God; but the children of the promise are reckoned for a seed" (Romans 9:6-8).

"Know therefore that they which be of faith, the same are sons of Abraham" (Galatians 3:7).

In our further consideration of this matter of "his seed", "the travail of his soul"; in our seeking of a fresh apprehension of that upon which the heart of the Lord is set - a divine and spiritual seed, born out of His travail - we will turn to another fragment of Scripture: "Know therefore that they which be of faith, the same are sons of Abraham."

There is one supreme characteristic of this divine seed, and that is faith. Whether we like it or not, Christianity rests upon one word and that word is *FAITH*. The beginning, the continuation, and the consummation of the Christian life rests upon that one thing - faith. It relates to salvation, initially; it relates to and governs the whole course of progress, spiritually; it relates to service; it relates to prayer; it relates to the perfecting of the believer; it relates to final victory. There is no phase, no aspect, no stage of the Christian life which is not bound up with this issue. It is, from beginning to end, at all times, in all things, just a matter of faith, and it is just here that we find the weakest point in human nature. There is no doubt about it, sooner or later, we discover that this is our weakest point. There was a time when I used to look at certain people who seemed to have natural faith, with whom it seemed not to be a difficult thing at all to believe in God; it seemed quite natural to them to believe in God, they seemed to have no difficulty about it. Here was I, born with an unbelieving heart and an infidel mind, and they seemed to have none of those difficulties. But I have lived a few years, and I have watched those people, and I have seen them come to a time and a place where the most difficult thing in all the world for them was to believe God. Sooner or later we discover that this is our weakest point.

Faith and God's Good Pleasure

But, on the other hand, this is the strongest point in the divine nature. This matter of faith, then, is basic to our union with God. This strength of faith in the divine nature, and weakness as to faith in our nature, cannot exist and obtain together in a true union; they are contradictions, they are quite against one another. And the issue is: it is either God or ourselves. Union with God always rests upon this matter of faith. The same is true of communion, the continuation of union and living in the good of it, the expression of union - communion. It is all a matter of faith. It is a matter of God's pleasure in us, and that is an important matter: "Without faith it is impossible to be well-pleasing unto him." Now that goes very deep. It is possible for God to bless us and to use us as instruments, but at the same time not to take pleasure in us; we are just being used by the Lord, and yet we know that the Lord is not taking pleasure in using us: He is doing it all in sheer grace and mercy. You may not be able to understand that, but it is true. Somewhere, even in the servant, there may be a reservation about the Lord, which holds up the Lord's good pleasure in His servant. There is

something more than having blessing from the Lord; something even more than being used by the Lord - the Lord having delight in us. And, mark you, the point at which the delight factor comes in is just this matter of faith. It does not say "without faith it is impossible to get any blessings from the Lord, it is impossible to do any work for the Lord", but it does say, "without faith it is impossible to be well-pleasing to the Lord."

Faith and the Divine Virtues

And then what a great number of other things depend upon and rest upon this foundation of faith. I only mention them and leave you to think them out. Love rests upon faith. Think about that. It depends upon faith, does it not? Joy rests upon faith. We know how miserable we are, if we have lost our faith, or if we have got any doubts or questions. It is only when faith is clear and bright that we are really happy. You see, joy hangs upon faith. And does not peace hang upon it? If you like, change the word for rest, that is the biblical way of putting it - rest. Peace just rests upon faith. There is no rest or peace unless there is faith. Then again, meekness. What is the opposite of meekness? Well, it is a trying to force things, to assert ourselves; doing out from ourselves, trying to hold our own ground, vindicate ourselves. Faith undercuts all that, does it not? We need not worry at all about anything; we can be perfectly restful about issues if we have faith. Patience - well, it is so obvious, is it not? Patience rests upon faith. Those two things are put together in the Word of God. And so are all the other things - hope and longsuffering and kindness - all the divine virtues rest upon the foundation of faith. And if the faith is not there, these other things are either wanting or they are weak. It is a tremendous matter, this matter of faith. If you look in the Bible you will see that all the tragedies and the calamities there resulted from a lack of faith. The first great tragedy and calamity of what is called the Fall came about simply because faith failed, was not there. Israel's tragedy in the wilderness? - it was the same reason. Israel's going into exile and captivity? - the same reason. And perhaps worst of all, it is the cause of Israel's present setting aside. There are personal instances, such as Abraham's lapse resulting in Ishmael, and the bringing in of a perpetual open sore in the history of God's interests in this world. There are many more, but we pass on: the tragedies and calamities, whether personal, national, or collective, can all be traced to this one cause: a breakdown somewhere in this matter of faith.

Faith and the Character of God

Now faith is always faith. That may sound like a platitude, but faith will always be objective; it will always focus upon the very character of God. That is faith's focal point - the very character of God. And remember that any weakness or absence of faith - I am speaking of course about spiritual faith - is an impugning of the character of God. That is where our Bible begins: "Hath God said...?" Man's initial and all-inclusive breakdown began with an impugning of the character of God, a calling into question of the character of God, a throwing of doubt upon the character of God. And so it has always been, because, you see, the focal point of faith is nothing less or other than the very character of God. Whether we will believe that God is what He says He is - that is the ultimate matter in relation to faith. But it is always *FAITH*. We are always wanting faith to be something other than faith, trying to substitute something else, either sight, or experience, or what we get, what God does for us. But God always keeps things in the realm where, after all, it is faith. He never moves out of that realm.

“True Israel” - the Seed of Faith

Look at the tremendous implications of this one fragment of Paul's statements on this matter of faith in Galatians 3:7: "They which be of faith, the same are sons of Abraham" - are Abraham's seed. He has said that not all they that be of Abraham are children - are the seed: "He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ" (Galatians 3:16). This is the true seed, the seed which is of and by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

(1) The Covenant

For a moment or two let us look at this further implication of Abraham's seed with whom the covenant was made. We are referring now not to "Israel after the flesh", but to the spiritual counterpart which, as we see in the Scriptures, is that which is born out of the travail of Christ, the fruit of His Cross, the reproduction and multiplication of Himself as *THE* corn of wheat, the fruit of His having fallen into the ground and died. This is the seed. All the covenant promises made to Abraham are fulfilled and realised in Christ and His seed. We inherit all that. Of course, we are familiar with this as truth, but it all comes to us through faith in Jesus Christ, because we are the true seed promised to Abraham. Let us, then, look briefly at Abraham as God's great example of faith. God carried through the whole system of His purpose from eternity to eternity - in creation, in redemption and in established fulfilment - through the soul of one man. Yes, Abraham rightly has a large place. It is as though God, in prospect, forced through the very soul of that man the whole plan of His divine purpose and redemption, and it was all on the principle of faith, by a long succession of demands for faith. It is here written for our instruction.

(2) The Land

First, there is the promise of a land. "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will shew thee." Then He promised him that land - "I will give thee" was His promise and His covenant. Abraham left his country and, subsequently, his father's house, and came into the land. All his lifetime he went up and down in it, dwelling in tents, and never obtained a foothold. That is true, if we view things in strict accordance with the covenant and promise. We can read the story in a few minutes, but the record covers many years.

There was plenty of scope for question and doubt through the years with all the demand for patience. The difficulties, the trials, and the adversities of many years, provided plenty of evidence for saying, "I have made a mistake, a fundamental mistake, I had an idea: evidently I was wrong. Something happened and I have come out on a wrong line altogether. Nothing that I imagined I was told is being supported" - there is plenty of room for all that sort of thing. We could enlarge upon it, but I do not think we could exaggerate what Abraham had to encounter in his own soul on that one question of the land.

(3) The Seed

But that is not all, he was promised a seed - "In thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed" - "thy seed", "thy seed", again and again that word is spoken by God in covenant to Abraham. He was promised a seed - and, not a child, not one! On natural grounds, there was little or no prospect of anything like that. His own situation utterly contradicted God's promises concerning this seed. There is plenty of room there, is there not, to have a controversy with the Lord and to have all sorts of tangles in the soul? What a mess one could get into with a

situation like that! And it was not just for a day, or a week, or a month, or even a year, that Abraham had to cope with this problem.

And further, God came and repeated this, reiterated this, and focused down this matter of faith upon the child Isaac. He promised him this child when all natural hope had receded, and went away and left him with the promise for a few more years! It was just something said to him, and there was nothing to support or bear it out in actuality. God went away and left him! If the hope had receded far back to the horizon before the promise was actually crystallised, surely it has gone beyond the horizon now. God had said it would come to pass and is leaving him with *THAT* situation! And then, the child is given. Yes, the son is born. We know the great test of faith that came in with that period between the promise and the realisation. Even Abraham broke down and failed. We know about Ishmael, but we leave that. In spite of everything, the child is born, there is the infant, and with what wonder they must have looked at that child. There is the little child growing up in their home, and how they must have cherished him in the light of all that God had bound up with his life. He grows up to youth, no doubt an object of great love, care, devotion, watchfulness and expectation. And then the blow fell: "Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest" - God seems to be rubbing salt into the wound, does He not? "Thine *ONLY* son", he had no other, "whom thou lovest... and offer him". Well, we need not press this further. Abraham went on, came to his very old age, and died - not having received the promise. "These all died in faith," says the writer to the Hebrews, "not having received the promises." No, he had not inherited the land, he had not seen the seed in any commensurate way, but he died in faith - that is the point. Through it all faith survived.

Now we must break off there. "They which be of faith" are Abraham's seed, *THIS* seed, these children, this people, this true Israel of God is on that basis, on that principle, and after that kind. Let us make no mistake about it. I started by saying, "whether we like it or not", and we do not like it. It is the hardest, the most difficult thing, but there it is - the matter of believing God, not because of what He can do or will do, but because of what He *IS*. That goes a long way, and very deep down; it tries us on everything - God's postponements, God's delays, God's seeming contradictions and paradoxes, a thousand and one things. The end is, after all, what are we going to do about it? *IS* God? And is God *WHAT HE SAYS HE IS OR NOT?* Our interpretation, our argument, our position, our mind about things - does it really set God aside? Does it? Or is our attitude that of faith? - *GOD KNOWS WHAT HE IS DOING.*

We could carry that into the realm of spiritual life. You know, in our spiritual lives, in our spiritual growth and the perfecting of us in the likeness of Christ, there are many things that we think the Lord ought to have removed long ago, and He has not removed them - even matters of our character. If we could, we would have God make us absolutely sinless this very moment, and He does not! He is dealing with us on the matter of faith, even over spiritual transformation. And how many other things would we have God do for His own glory, and He does not do them; for the facilitation of His own interests and work, and He does not do them. Well, either God is, or He is not; either He is faithful or He is not; either He is consistent or He is not. You see, after all, we are brought back to this question of faith. "They which be of faith" are Abraham's seed. What is Abraham's seed? - Christ and those born out of His travail. And what travail there is related to the fruit of faith! Now there is no real fruit that is not the fruit of travail, and travail is always a matter of faith.

Chapter Four

THE GREAT INVITATION

We turn now to Luke 14, to what is called the story of the Great Supper and the Great Invitation. It might be thought that this story has very little relationship to what we have been considering. But I want to correct that idea immediately and to say that it is an integral part of this very matter of the kind of people that God has set His heart upon, who are to be the fruit of Christ's travail.

There are two applications of this story. There is what we may call the dispensational interpretation, and there is the wider interpretation and application in relation to the Kingdom of God.

A Time of Transition

The dispensational interpretation finds this story closely related to what was happening at the time that the Lord Jesus spoke these words. It was in the time of the great transition from Israel to the church, from Judaism to Christianity. The utterances of the Lord Jesus in these chapters, including the so well-known fifteenth chapter of Luke, containing the parables of the lost things - the lost coin, the lost sheep and the prodigal son - these utterances were all of a piece, and were probably gathered into the last week of our Lord's ministry.

If you go back to the Gospel by Matthew and take it up at say chapter 21 and move right on, you will recognise that these are undoubtedly the closing days. What is being said here has to do with His going and the great crisis which was immediately in view - the crisis of the Cross. In chapter 21 He has made that statement to the Jews, to Israel as a nation after the flesh: "Therefore the kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof", and then straight into chapter 22, and to a story about a king who made a marriage supper for his son, very similar to this one in Luke 14. The same kind of invitations went out.

Now this story in Luke is all of a piece with that: it circles round the great crisis. Israel is about to be set aside, rejected; the Kingdom of Heaven is about to be taken away from them, and to be given to a nation which would bring forth the fruits of that Kingdom - the nation to which Peter later referred when he spoke of believers in Christ as a "holy nation". It would be not another nation on this earth, but God's own people out of the nations of this world, the people for His Name. So you see, this story in its historic setting relates to that great crisis, that great transition, that change-over: the rejection of one people and the putting in their place of another. We have to read the story in the light of that, for here we have the death-knell of Israel after the flesh.

Who Shall Enter the Kingdom?

And, as I said, it is in keeping, in the main, with what we are considering at the present - a people, a kind of people, secured by God through the travail of His Son in the Cross. I think that is the outstanding thing in this story and in these stories: the kind of people that will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. There is a much larger application and interpretation than the immediate, for it applies to the whole meaning of the Kingdom of God. And that is a matter of supreme, of superlative importance - who will be in the Kingdom of Heaven? Here we have the Gospel of the Kingdom, there is no doubt about it.

There are certain very clearly defined features to this story of the Great Supper and the Great Invitation. Firstly, we find here God in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, and speaking as by His mouth, for what He says is what came from God. God is here taking up a common, social custom, a feast, and bringing it into use in relation to the Gospel of the Kingdom. We notice, of course, that Jesus was, at the time when He gave this story, at a feast. If you look at the earlier part of the chapter, you will see that He went to a feast that was made by a prominent Pharisee, evidently a wealthy man, in a good position, because certain very important people - in their own eyes at any rate - came in and took the top places. Jesus noted all that and had something to say about it. But the point is: it was a feast and Jesus went to it, and it says that they watched Him. Now there is a great deal of detail that we leave untouched, but we note that Jesus took hold of this and enlarged it in relation to the Kingdom of God. That is, He took up this common social custom of a feast and used it for Gospel purposes, to interpret the Gospel, to interpret the Kingdom of Heaven, to interpret the whole matter of who would and who would not get in at the feast.

The Significance of Acceptance

Appreciation - Appetite - Fellowship

There are certain things about this feast which, although not exactly stated, are quite evidently implied. We might note three of them. A certain man made a feast and sent out his servant with invitations. The implication is that that man would be respected and honoured. He would not have done it if he had thought that he was in disfavour and that no one would accept his invitation. He was assuming that they would respect him and his invitation, and be quite glad to go to his feast and to be with him in his house. Now that is quite simple, but you will see what it means as we go on. It is the assumption that the invitation would be welcomed and that he would be in good standing with them, and they would give him respect and honour and respond suitably to the invitation and would go to his feast. The second thing that is assumed is that the invited people would have an appetite for a feast. A feast might not interest some people very much: they would turn down any invitation purely on the ground that they have no appetite for such things, or there is something wrong with their digestion; they just could not face it all. But it is assumed here that the people who were invited would have an appetite for the feast, for the provision. That is very simple. And then, of course, the third thing that is assumed is that they would be quite happy to meet other people in this house and have good intercourse and fellowship, have a good time together. These are things which are part of any feast of this kind. We are glad to go and meet the host, glad to go and meet the other people, and we are glad to have what is provided. That is the atmosphere; these are the elements of this very thing. Dismiss any of them, and you dismiss the whole point of a feast: the feast breaks down at once.

The Forbearing Grace of God

Jesus is not speaking casually. He knows; He has a very deep and comprehensive knowledge, indeed: He knows God's mind. Now note this: God foreknew the refusal that would come to His invitation: the foreknowledge of God, His omniscience made Him to know that this would be the reaction - they would not accept, they would not come. And Jesus knew that, otherwise He would not have said all these things, especially perhaps that consummate thing: "Therefore... the kingdom of God shall be taken away from you and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof." He knew what the issue would be, God knew what the reaction would be, but God did not act upon His foreknowledge in this matter - He sent out the invitation. In that is one of the great gospel principles. God, who

foreknows all about men and their reactions to His invitation and His great provision, does not begin from that point and say, "I know they won't accept, and I know it will be to their doom: therefore I will never invite them; I will doom them right away in My foreknowledge." "God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world..." Whatever God may know about men's refusal, He leaves the door wide open; He always takes the positive line in grace, never the negative line in judgment. That is one of the great things about the gospel. Though He knows, nevertheless, God comes right out in infinite grace and opens the door wide and makes His appeal and says, "Come, for all things are now ready." You see, God keeps back that foreknowledge of His while He tries in grace to make a way. It is a tremendous thing that, the grace of God holding back the judgment of God until the thing is settled by man himself. He knows the truth, and yet He does not, in the first instance, act according to His knowledge of men's reactions: He acts in grace to give them an opportunity to respond.

But note that there is something else involved in this. God removes all ground upon which man's doom could be laid to His charge. In the end it will never be possible for any doomed man or woman to say: "You never gave me a chance; You never gave me an opportunity; the door was never opened to me; the way was never provided." No, God removes all that ground. You see, in His grace and His mercy He takes all the ground of the possibility of His own condemnation away and puts the whole issue upon man. If anybody misses all that God has provided and calls them unto, it will be their own fault entirely. God is seeing to that. He puts it back on us.

Condition Indicated by the Choice

As we read a story like this, it looks on the face of things as though - and now put God into the place of the man who makes the feast and sends out the invitations - it looks as though He assumes that those invited will respect Him, honour Him, and give Him credit for being worthy of their acceptance. It looks as though God assumes that. Of course, He knows, but nevertheless He proceeds upon this basis, and in His procedure He is appealing to man to give some expression to and some proof of his respect for God; and if man does not respond to God's appeal and invitation, it means that man has no respect for God: he has not given God His place, he has put Him out, he thinks He is not worth considering. The implications are tremendous, are they not?

Further, it means that man has no appetite for the things of God. We have only to imagine these people, when they received the invitation, saying, "Well, now, I don't care about his feast, I don't think I want to go, I have not much of an appetite for that." Ah, yes, but look: that very desire or absence of desire for the things of God is the deciding factor - the Kingdom or not the Kingdom. Jesus had elsewhere said, "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness." There is something bound up with this appetite or the lack of it. The same applies to this matter of the people of God. It is very discriminating. To refuse means, not only that I have no interest in God and His things, but that I do not want to have any association with His people. All this, you see, is forcing a choice.

God the Only Joy of His People

Now, if we turn that round, it is surely not difficult to see what kind of people will inherit the Kingdom, what kind of a seed this will be that He shall see as of the travail of His soul. A people, in the first place, who, above all other things, desire God: and then, who desire God's things, to feed upon them: and then, who desire God's people. It is a remarkable thing, is it not, how that takes place and becomes the very constitution, the make-up and nature of children of the

Kingdom of Heaven. One thing that is pre-eminent with them is their love for God, their desire for God; that He is their joy - not only their chiefest joy, but really their only joy. It is a wonderful thing that happens in us. Something happens, something takes place so that we come to the state where we just cannot live without God. If there should be an hour in our life when any shadow comes between us and God, that is the darkest hour, the most wretched time. He has spoilt us for all but Himself, He has made Himself indispensable to us, we cannot get on without Him. It is not only a matter of being able to, having a desire to - we just long to be in His presence. Our hearts cry with the Psalmist: "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God." It is like that; something happens inside.

The Oneness of the Children of the Kingdom

That is a test as to whether we are children of the Kingdom or not, and a test as to whether we are going to inherit the Kingdom. It would be a poor lookout for anybody who had not that disposition to have to live in the presence of God for all eternity; it would be a very miserable thing. But it will not happen, of course. And what is true in that connection is true in these other two things. Something happens to us so that *OUR* company, *OUR* people - may I use the word? - *OUR* set, is the people of God. We have to move in this world, and we have to live with others, but we are not happy with them; there is no deep, basic, fundamental oneness between us: we belong to two different worlds. But with the people of God it is different: we are at home, we are in the family. It is something that happens to us, it is not something that we decide upon: that we are going to be Christians and mix with Christians, and have meetings. It is simply this: we long for the fellowship of God's people, and if we are deprived of it, we are deprived of our very life. I think that those who have very much of it are sometimes in danger of losing the sense of its value, but if you were to ask some of those Christians who have to live in isolation, with little or no Christian fellowship, you would soon discover that something has happened in them. They long for this fellowship. These are the children of the Kingdom!

And as for the feast, the things of God spread for His children! Is not the coming together of the Lord's people, in some places in such large companies, an evidence, not only of the Lord's desire to provide, to spread a feast, but also of a deep hunger? There is something constitutional about this; there is an appetite. These are the children of the Kingdom. You see, God is working on that principle; discriminating, selecting, in order to give the Kingdom.

Now, we must go back to the story, to the other, disappointing, aspect. God in His grace, putting back in His foreknowledge the doom which He knows will most certainly come upon many who will react unfavourably to His invitation, putting that back and saying nothing about it for the moment, goes out in grace, inviting, inviting, inviting, in spite of His knowledge of them. It is a question of who will respond. So we see here what is really shown to be the case with many. They are totally indifferent to all these things: to Him, to His feast, and to His people; they are totally indifferent. They are not touched by the invitation, it makes no appeal to them; there is no sense that they are either under obligation or in peril of losing something of vital importance. And that is their judgment: that is their condemnation: that is their doom.

The Wilfulness of Human Choice

Let us look at this setting as to Israel, as to the Jewish nation. You remember how the Lord Jesus put this to them in another way. Weeping over Jerusalem, He said: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killeth the prophets, and stoneth them that

are sent unto her! How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her own brood under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate" ... "because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation" (Luke 13:34-35; 19:44). Now note two things: "ye would not", "thou knewest not". But that was something in themselves. It was not that they *COULD* not, but that they *WOULD* not. It was not that they could not know, it was because they would not know. They did not want to know. And they had decided that they were not going to know.

God knows the heart, and it is not merely that we are like that. Somewhere, somehow we have taken an attitude: we have taken the attitude, "I am not interested in that, I don't want that; that is not for me, I am not going that way." "Thou wouldest not... thou knewest not...", when you might have known. That is always the ground of judgment.

Let us then look at these people. Whether they were actual people, whether it was a real story from life or what is called a parable, does not matter. The Lord Jesus knew what He was saying. They were not only indifferent, but would, when it came to the test, reject the invitation. And this is where we are found out, you know. When it really comes to it and someone says, "Look here, the Lord wants you, the Lord calls you, the Lord has sent His Word to invite you to come", then we are found out; then the real attitude is disclosed. "And they all with one consent began to make excuse."

EXCUSES. I don't really know how far the Lord Jesus had a sense of irony or of humour. He presents one as saying, "I have bought a piece of land and I must go and see it." Now may I be quite blunt here: that is a thing that not one of you would do. If you did you would be a fool! Who would buy a piece of land without first of all having seen it! That is very lame; oh, no, that won't pass, that is not good enough. But you see, when we are really run to earth it is found out that we have no solid basis. We are just evading, we are trying to get round, we are looking for a back-door way out. It is an excuse, it is not a reason. Another man said, "I have bought five yoke of oxen and I must go and prove them." Well, what would practical farmers say to that! Is that the way of going about business, buying before having seen? You see how empty it is. The third man said he had married a wife, and therefore he could not come, but the Lord Jesus said that that was an excuse all the same. How was it an excuse? Something in the realm of natural affections was accounted of greater value than the Kingdom of God. And that is a poor excuse at best.

The point is, if we face the matter squarely, there is no really solid ground for this kind of reaction. It is a "don't want", it is a failure to recognise the infinite seriousness and value of this Kingdom of God, this gospel of the grace of God. It discloses a state of heart and mind and will which in itself is the ground of rejection. "Therefore... the Kingdom of God shall be taken away from you and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof." And what are the fruits? Hungering and thirsting after righteousness. Thirsting for the living God, a sense of real business, not this prevarication and excuse. These are the conditions of inheriting the Kingdom.

And, of course, these conditions are capable of very far-reaching, widely-extending application. They touch so many things, they are principles. But it is not just the immediate connection, it is that which is betrayed, the attitude of heart.

"Well", says the Lord, "none of those shall come to my feast, none of those shall enter or inherit the Kingdom. Go out", He says to His servant, "into the streets

and the lanes of the city, and call the poor, the maimed, the blind, the lame"; and the servant comes back and says, "It is done, I have brought them in and yet there is room." "Out again into the highways and hedges, compel them to come in, the poor, the maimed, the blind, the lame, the vagabonds, the wayfarers." Jesus said to the Jewish leaders: "The publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom before you." On this principle we see who they are that will inherit the Kingdom, and not only get into it initially, but who will come into all the fullness that the Lord has provided. And what a vast fullness it is! We could profitably dwell upon this feast and what there is in it. Paul speaks much about it himself: "Blessed... with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ" (Ephesians 1:3). How much there is in this inheritance, this Kingdom!

The Contrast - a Consciousness of Need

And who is it that enters in? Those who know their own poverty. These people did not know that: they were independent; they did not need the provision that had been made; they felt they could get on quite well without it. They had no sense of their own poverty. They were in the grip of pride, not poverty. The maimed - those who had suffered in life, whom life had treated cruelly, who on the way had met with hurt, damage; who were marred and marked. The blind who longed to see; from whom a whole world was shut out - if only their eyes could see. The lame - poor people who found it very difficult and very hard going, who were limited in their capacity and were knowing it. And what shall we say about the vagabonds and wayfarers from the highways and the hedges? You see, they are all people who, in some way or another, had a consciousness of need, and that is the great contrasting factor here. You will go a long way if that is your consciousness. You will go a long way in the things of God, if you really have heart hunger, if yours is really a heart set upon the Lord and His things and His church.

Now this is a challenge, a solemn challenge to us all - both to Christians and to those who are not the Lord's alike. He calls; He has made a great provision; He is dealing with us in infinite grace and not in judgment. He has placed everything open to us and said: "Come, for all things are now ready." Oh, we Christians know that little phrase "all things", do we not? Go to Paul's letters again and collect up all the occurrences of that phrase, "all things... ", "all things..." "All things in Christ", that is the great theme, is it not? And what a vast "all things" that comes to be when we look into it. All things! "Come, for all things are now ready." It is a challenge to those who have not come at all. But it is a challenge to us who have come. There is a range and a depth of those "all things" that you and I have never yet fathomed. It is all so much a matter of where our heart is - whether we really mean business, or whether we can be put off, be like these people and make excuses. It is a challenge.

And it is a test of capacity for appreciating the things of God. May I say this as the last word: Blessed be God, when we get there, we shall no longer be poor and maimed and blind and vagabonds. There is a wonderful healing that goes on as soon as we get into the Kingdom: all these things clear up. Now you see, Jesus had taught the Kingdom of God in action. He was teaching the Kingdom of God in action as much as in word. His life and His work were a demonstration of the meaning of the Kingdom. He healed the maimed and the lame, He opened the eyes of the blind, He called the poor and the needy, publicans, sinners and harlots, and cleansed them. He demonstrated in action the Kingdom of God. And that is what happens. When we come, we find that in that Kingdom there is a tree, and the leaves of that tree are for the healing of the nations. He is the tree, and there is a healing that takes place. And when we are in, thank God, humbly we are able to say, "Yes, my eyes have been opened, my faltering steps have

been strengthened, my wounds have been healed, my wanderings in the highways and byways have ceased, my vagabond life has been redeemed." That is what happens, that is the Gospel of the Kingdom. Are you going to make excuses to avoid all that? It is not worth it, is it? It is nonsense. They are mere empty excuses. May God give us to see the tremendous divide made by the invitation.

God's offer can be missed, it can be lost, it can be put beyond reach. Do not forget, there stands in this world the greatest object-lesson that ever God has given to men of this very thing. You remember the place that the Jewish nation once had with God in blessing and prospering, yes, in favour. What a place they had! And then God called them into the Kingdom of His Son, and they began to make excuses; they showed that they were not interested in that. Look at them! For these two thousand years, vagabonds on the earth, without a kingdom and a home, wounded, blinded - Paul says, "Blindness hath happened to Israel" - they are all in these conditions. They are in rejection, and what suffering, and what they have lost! They have lost the Kingdom of Heaven. That is the most terrible demonstration and object-lesson of what it means to lose the Kingdom of Heaven. But mark you, that is only an illustration in the temporal realm. Our peril is of it being in the eternal realm. One does not like speaking like that, but there it is. Here is a tremendous issue.

Well, there was one of their own number who responded and came. His testimony afterward was: "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision." And that man went a long, long way. That was none other than the apostle Paul himself. The Lord incline our hearts to respond. He says: "Come, for all things are now ready." May our heart say, "I am coming, Lord, and I am coming now."

Chapter Five

THE GREAT TRANSITION

"When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed... He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied" (Isaiah 53:10-11).

"But it is not as though the word of God hath come to nought. For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel: neither, because they are Abraham's seed, are they all children" (Romans 9:6-7).

"Now to Abraham were the promises spoken, and to his seed. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ" (Galatians 3:16).

As we come to this further stage in the matter of the divine seed, this fruit of Christ's travail, this new spiritual Israel, I want to make one or two preliminary remarks of a general nature.

God's Dealings Have One Basis

In the first place, it is necessary that we should be quite clear that, in the Bible, there are not two distinct things, as represented by the two Testaments, the Old and the New, or even more, if the Old Testament is subdivided into eras. There may be two, or more, methods of expression, but throughout the Bible, from its beginning to its close, there is only one thing expressed. Our habit of handling the Bible by dispensations, and emphasizing the different characteristics of different times, may have had the effect of making us mechanically minded, just as can a preoccupation with typology and symbolism. I want therefore to underline this anew: that, in these several and varied forms of expression, God is actuated, from beginning to end, by one thought, and one thought alone: *THAT EVERYTHING THROUGHOUT, AT ALL TIMES, SHALL EXPRESS AND BE SUBSERVIENT TO HIS SON.*

HE governs everything, in the realities of His Person and of His redemptive and perfecting work. It is one Person and one Work, from the first book of the Bible to the last. The change from the Old Testament to the New is simply and only the change from the indirect to the direct; from the symbolic to that which is symbolized; from the temporal representation to the spiritual reality. That is all. It is not a change of purpose or object, not a change of basis or foundation; it represents no change of principle in any way.

Perhaps you feel you know all that; but there is very much more in it than any of us have yet realised. For example, all God's dealings with the patriarchs were, in principle, as much upon the basis of His Son as are His dealings with you and me. That was true also of Israel. Israel in the Old Testament was dealt with as much upon the basis of God's Son as we are in this dispensation. God has never, at any time, by any means, worked on any other ground than that of His Son. His creative activities were on the ground of His Son. "In Him, through Him, by Him, unto Him, were all things created" (Colossians 1:16); and from then everything has proceeded on that basis, and will be consummated in Christ. By whatever means, in whatever way God has worked, His ground has always been the same. And on into the ages to come, that ground will be unchanging. It is the ground of Christ. It is very important that we should remember this and be quite clear about it.

A Transition

I want now to return to the point where I broke off in an earlier message in this series (see [Chapter 2](#)), when we had begun to refer to the Gospel by John, especially chapter 3. I was saying that we think we know something about John 3. Is it not the great chapter of: "Ye must be born again...", and of: "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son..."? Do we not know it? Have we not heard it a hundred times, a thousand times? And yet, and yet... what do we know about it?

Now this part of the narrative, marked by chapters 3 and 4, embraces all that could be said about this matter of the transition from the indirect to the direct; the transition from God's old method to His new method. It brings right into view the nature and principles of the heavenly seed, and much more. Let us look, then, at John chapter 3.

The chapter opens with these words: "There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews... Jesus... said unto him, Art thou the teacher of Israel...?" (John 3:1, 10). "A man of the Pharisees", "of the Jews", "the teacher of Israel". Here you have in a person, an individual, the full embodiment, the full development, of Israel after the flesh: a Pharisee. I must push back the temptation to dwell upon details, for half an hour could easily be spent on the history of the Pharisees, and that to great profit. Let us simply note that the sect of the Pharisees represented the very essence, the intrinsic meaning, of "Israel after the flesh" (1 Corinthians 10:18). They gathered into themselves all that Israel claimed to be or was supposed to be. If you met a Pharisee, you would meet the last word in Israelism and Judaism. This man Nicodemus was said to be "a ruler of the Jews", and then "the teacher of Israel". Note the form of the latter phrase, for the definite article is literally there in the text. Jesus did not say, "Art thou A teacher of Israel?"; He said: "Art thou *THE* teacher...?" This man evidently stood out; he was perhaps recognised above all others as the foremost teacher of that time in Israel.

I indicate these things in order to point out that here we have Israel present after the flesh in a very full way - *par excellence*. He is of the natural seed of Abraham, a full-grown son of Abraham after the flesh. Three things are main factors here: he was born after the flesh as a son of Abraham; he was circumcised in the flesh as the seal of the covenant made with Abraham; and his all-absorbing and consuming interest, as a true Israelite, was with the kingdom that was covenanted to Abraham's seed. All the natural seed of Abraham, with all its marks and features, is gathered into this chapter. It is not just Nicodemus - the nation of Israel is present. With this man, there are present in representation all the children of Abraham, "according to the flesh", from the time of the patriarch himself right on to this very hour. He is really a most significant figure. Much more could, of course, be said about him. But that is where the matter is introduced.

Now the Lord Jesus, with a wave of the hand, repudiates the whole thing. He is not listening to it, not opening the door to it, not giving it a moment's consideration or attention. "Verily, verily, I say unto you: You must be born again." "Really to be the seed of Abraham, you must be born from above" - for the phrase can bear that meaning also. The true seed of Abraham, to whom are the covenant and the promises and the prospect and the kingdom, is that which is born from above; not this at all.

Two Great Contrasts

(1) Two Births

The Lord Jesus makes here, either by direct statement or by clear implication, some fundamental contrasts. Firstly, a contrast between two births: "that which is born of the flesh"; "that which is born of the Spirit": that which is born of the earth and that which is born out from heaven. These belong to two kingdoms, two worlds, two regimes, and there is nothing in common between them. The door of the Spirit is closed to the "flesh", and the Lord Jesus is not discussing this matter at all. He is simply saying that the Kingdom of God is so different, so other, it belongs to such a different realm, that there is no getting into it except by way of an utterly new beginning out from heaven. And the rest of the New Testament is built upon that fundamental truth. All Paul's ministry is built upon that. I said earlier that that was the cause of all the trouble where Paul was concerned. It was a most drastic, devastating thing to confront Israel with a statement like that - "You are not Israel after all! You have not begun to see the real meaning of the Israel of God!" "Except a man be born anew, he cannot see..."

"Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." Here is not only the natural birth contrasted with the spiritual birth: here is a fundamental difference between, on the one hand, the Red Sea and the pillar of cloud and fire, as symbolic representations, and the spiritual reality on the other. "Born of water" - yes, symbolically in the Red Sea. "Born of the Spirit" - yes, symbolically in the cloud. They "were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (1 Corinthians 10:2). "But, Nicodemus, you know all about that, or you think you do. I tell you, you have not begun to see the meaning of it. There is a difference between the symbolic and the spiritual, the typical and the real. Being born of water and of the Spirit has a far, far, deeper meaning than you have ever seen, or can see, Nicodemus."

(2) Two Kingdoms

The second contrast related to the Kingdom. Of course Nicodemus had not mentioned the word. But let me remind you of the last words of the preceding chapter. "But Jesus did not trust himself unto them, for that he knew all men, and because he needed not that anyone should bear witness concerning man; for he himself knew what was in man" (John 2:24-25). "Now there was a man...", and Jesus knew him and what was in him, "...a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus." Jesus knew that this man's one interest in life - no doubt an honest, sincere interest, indeed a passionate interest - was the Kingdom. That was, of course, the great hope of Israel. And the Lord Jesus, knowing the man's absorption in that kingdom interest, made it perfectly clear that the kingdom about which Nicodemus was thinking was one thing, but that the Kingdom itself was quite another. The Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, is quite another thing from the kingdom of Israel on the earth.

What is the conclusion that we are to draw from all this? Just this: that the historic was not the real - it did not conform to what the Lord meant by the "truth". We find the same thing in His conversation with the woman of Samaria, in chapter 4, where the Lord Jesus brought in a clear contrast. "The hour cometh, when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall ye worship the Father." Here is coming a change, a transition, a passing over. "The hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth" (John 4:21, 23). With that statement, the Lord rules out a whole order and system, and brings in something altogether different. All that which was historic was not the real thing: to use His word, it was not the "true". "This mountain...

Jerusalem..." - yes, but it is not the true. This birth after Abraham - yes, but it is not the true. This hope of the Kingdom - yes, but it is not the true! This is very searching.

The Principle of Death and Resurrection

The fact is that everything had to be put on to the ground of Christ, and that could only be, and can only be at any time, through death and resurrection - in other words, new birth. "In Isaac shall thy seed be called" (Genesis 21:12). That is a symbolic statement. Why? Because Isaac is the embodiment, in type, of the principle of death and resurrection. Everything had to be put on to the basis of Christ in death and resurrection, and that was no less true in the Old Testament than in the New.

In connection with this, I was recently reading again the fascinating story of Joseph: the famine in the land, the coming of his brethren, and the subsequent removing of the whole family - Jacob and all his sons - seventy souls - from the land into Egypt. The whole story of Joseph is, I think, one of those things that holds you to the end once you start reading it. It is just full of overmastering interest. But I found myself brought up short with a question. The Lord had brought Abraham into the land and given it to him and to his seed, by covenant, as an everlasting possession. Then what is this? The whole seed, every soul of them, is vacating the land, leaving the land of covenant, and moving into Egypt! Now, we know that the Lord had told Abraham that his seed would be in a foreign land in bondage for four hundred years, and would be ill-treated, and so on (Genesis 15:13). The Lord said that it would be so, and here it is. But leave aside for the moment the fulfilment of the prophecy. Here is a strange thing: the whole family, to the last soul, is uprooted and evacuated from the very place of covenant and into *EGYPT*. What is the meaning of this?

I think I see the answer. Look at the seed of Abraham in the land; just look at those sons of Jacob. What sort of people are these? Yes, they are the seed of Abraham after the flesh, the historic line - but look at them! The incident with Joseph alone is enough to betray what sort of people they are. And the whole story of those men, throughout, is not a very nice story, is it? Their behaviour, their disposition, is a poor showing up of the seed of Abraham. Do you think that God is going to allow that kind of person to follow through to His end? Not at all! He will bring them into Egypt and put them first of all upon the basis of the travail of Christ - the cross - and then, when they are there, let the principle of the cross deal with the self-life, the flesh, until they groan. But then, out of that travail, see the mighty energies of God bringing that seed out from Egypt.

The principle, you see, is this same great principle - that of travail unto a new birth through death and resurrection. God is putting them off the ground of nature onto the ground of Christ, and that can only be in death and resurrection. Unless they go through this ordeal, this terrible ordeal, they cannot inherit, they cannot come through to possess the land. God is true to His principles: God is true to His Son. God is not play-acting; He is not just making meaningless history. God is writing, in very purposeful history, the eternal laws of His Son in Person and redemption.

The Principle of Circumcision

Here I must put in a rather long parenthesis on the matter of circumcision, a matter fraught with the greatest significance. Let me turn you to a few passages.

"And he gave him" (that is, Abraham) "the covenant of circumcision" (Acts 7:8).

"For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God" (Romans 2:28-29).

"Is this blessing then pronounced upon the circumcision, or upon the uncircumcision also? for we say, To Abraham his faith was reckoned for righteousness. How then was it reckoned? when he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision: and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while he was in uncircumcision: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be in uncircumcision" (Romans 4:9-11).

You almost hold your breath as you read the next:

"Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing" (1 Corinthians 7:19).

Imagine a Jew saying that! We shall come to that in a minute.

"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision; but faith working through love" (Galatians 5:6).

"For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation" (Galatians 6:15).

Finally, that tremendous statement and exposition in the letter to the Colossians:

"In whom ye were also circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, in the putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with him in baptism, wherein ye were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead" (Colossians 2:11-12).

The Importance of Circumcision to the Jews

Let us remind ourselves of the immense importance attached to circumcision by the Jews. It is something that could hold us for quite a time, and it would be well if the full force of it could come home to us. It was the very sign of their national oneness, of their national existence, of their belonging to the people of God. Anybody without that sign was altogether outside the pale of promise and covenant and hope. It was the door, for them, into everything of value: everything for them rested upon that. No one, for instance, would ever be allowed to partake of the feast of the Passover who did not bear that sign.

We can realise a little of what they placed upon it when we come into the New Testament and consider some of the events after the day of Pentecost. On the one side, think for a moment what it meant for the apostles themselves - Peter, James, John, and the others - to have to deal with this matter and weaken their position regarding it. It was a real battle, for it meant uprooting something from their very being, something that was a part of them; and it was cropping up all the time. On the other side, there were the Judaisers - those men who pursued Paul over the face of the earth, tracking him down into every town and city, on this one issue. They followed him up and said to those to whom he had ministered: "Unless you are circumcised, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). That is a positive statement, and this was the cause of all the trouble.

There is very much, both in the Scriptures and outside of the Scriptures, that shows what a great thing this was. Even today, the celebration of this in a Jewish

home is preceded by festivities and sacred rites. Yes, there is for them something about this ordinance that is big, tremendous. It was rooted deep in their very being as a most sacred thing, upon which everything of ultimate value hung. And here is this man who comes along and says, "Circumcision is nothing!" A Jew of the Jews, "of the stock of Israel", "circumcised the eighth day" (Phil. 3:5), and he says it is nothing! What has Paul seen?

The Significance of Circumcision

Well, of course, he has seen the spiritual significance; and when you see that, the other is nothing. In his letter to the Colossians (among other places), he lays down precisely and concisely what that significance is. Let us read the passage again.

"In whom ye were also circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, in the putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with him in baptism, wherein ye were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead" (Colossians 2:11-12).

Now there are two things here. First of all, we have God's full thought about circumcision and about baptism, and the relationship between the two. And then, secondly, we see what is the real significance of baptism in the life of the child of God.

Circumcision, Like Baptism, Points to the Cross

The relationship between circumcision and baptism is here stated by Paul. In both these words - "ye were... circumcised", "having been buried... in baptism" - we are brought right to the cross of the Lord Jesus. In principle and meaning they are combined as one, and they point to the cross. "Buried with him... raised with him". The whole thing is put on the basis of Christ crucified and risen. Of course, we who are Christians know that to be the meaning of baptism. But what was the meaning of this other sign? Perhaps we may put it like this: that the cross is here brought in as - so to speak - the instrument of circumcision. It does that which must be done - it is the means of actually carrying it into effect - and it is drastic.

If Israel had only seen! If they had only seen, nothing would have been given away. They would not have had to lower their idea or lessen their estimate; they would not have made less of circumcision, if they had seen. For, after all, this *IS* a big thing, it is a great thing. After all, national existence does rest upon it: but it is not this nation, it is the heavenly one. Entry into all the blessings of the covenant, the eternal covenant in His blood, rests upon the principle that is here. The whole Kingdom, as covenanted, is entered into and inherited by this door. Yes, it is a big thing. Nothing has been exaggerated as to its importance. If only they had seen Christ crucified and risen! It was only because they did not see the real meaning of this pre-eminent rite in their own life and history that they lost everything. They lost the Kingdom; they lost their place as a nation, in the purposes and counsels of God, for the time being at least; and all because they separated between a thing and its meaning. Now, in John 3 we see the Lord Jesus taking up the meaning of things for Nicodemus. By nature, of course, he is blind, like the rest. But Nicodemus is of the circumcision - that is the point. He is a Jew indeed; he is a representative, in a very full way, of Israel after the flesh. And the Lord Jesus makes it quite clear to him that - so far as acceptance with God is concerned - he, as such, is ruled out.

What is the meaning of all this? In the life of the true seed of Abraham - which is Christ's seed - what does it mean? It means simply this: that circumcision is, as

Paul says, not a matter of the flesh, but of the heart (Romans 2:28-29). It is a severance that has to take place right down in the inner man, deep down in the innermost being of the person; a radical, fundamental putting of two things apart. You will be able to follow through the implications of this more fully than it is possible for me to do here. There is an encircling of the blood which makes a separation, puts two things apart, and for ever after witnesses to the severance that has taken place, declaring that those two things are no longer together: God has put them asunder. And how much of the New Testament comes in when you say that! That is the spiritual meaning of baptism. You cannot say all this to everyone who is going to be baptized - they would be frightened and run away! - but God means all this. And God does not let us off. If we really mean business, He does not let us off any of His meaning, even though at the beginning we may not see it all - and thank God we do not! But even so, it might be well if we knew a little more than we often do.

The Flesh or Self-Principle

What is it that is severed in and by the cross of the Lord Jesus? From what do you and I accept severance, when we come to the cross of the Lord Jesus and, in the symbolic act of baptism, take our position with Him there? There are various terms for it in the New Testament. It is sometimes called "the flesh". Paul uses it here: "the body of the flesh" (Colossians 2:11). He is not talking about our physical body, our body of flesh. He is using that word "flesh", as he often does, in a symbolic way. A definition that he gives to it in the Corinthian letter is "the natural man". Perhaps we think: Well, "flesh" is a difficult word, but "natural man" is still more difficult - it seems more technical. What do these terms really mean?

They mean, purely and simply: the *SELF*-principle in man. That is at the root of everything. That is where all the trouble began with Adam; that is where all the trouble has gone on; and that is where the trouble is with you and me. It is a protean monster that has awoken, stretched itself, risen up and taken hold of the heart of man. It will assert itself, make itself known and felt, in every conceivable and inconceivable way. We shall never be able to conceive of the unnumbered, unsuspected ways in which this monster will show itself. It is no use trying to track it down. Every hour, every minute, every second, almost, of our life, in some form or other, this many-headed, many-membered thing - the self-principle - will assert itself.

(1) In the Mind

It is found in the mind. It makes use of our intellect and our reason in order to overpower opposition and bring things our way, to argue and to substantiate our own position. And therefore, before you and I can ever get into the true realm of heavenly things, we have got to have a "circumcised" intellect, reason, mind. Is that not exactly what the Lord was saying to Nicodemus? Here is this teacher of Israel, coming to argue, to discuss, and the Lord says, "It is no use. You may have been circumcised in the flesh as a good Jew, but what you need is to have your intellect circumcised". "Except a man be born anew, he cannot *SEE*..." "You have got it all in the mind, all as an intellectual apprehension. If I have spoken of earthly things, and you do not understand them, where will you be if I begin to talk to you about heavenly things? Out of your depth altogether! Devout son of Abraham though you may be, you need to experience a radical severance between your natural mind and the things of Heaven."

That is the trouble with many people. It is their head that is in the way all the time - the one thing that is obstructing their progress is their own head! Their

stubborn-mindedness, or their clever-mindedness; their intellectual superiority, or their argumentative disposition: you meet it all the time - there is no way through. If you try to take them on that line you are simply beating your own head against a wall. The Lord Jesus never attempted such an approach in trying to win souls. He simply said: "You must be born from above".

(2) In the Feelings

In other cases the circumcision needs to take place in the realm of the feelings, the emotions, the desires. That is the part of the being that gets in the way of so many people. They are controlled entirely by the feeling-life, the affection-life - they are in bondage to that part of their being; and they are very difficult people to handle. But a true child of Heaven, the seed of His travail, is one in whom there has taken place, in that very realm of the feelings and desires, a deep work of circumcision.

(3) In the Will

And what is true of the intellect and the emotions is true in the realm of the will. With many people it is their will that is in the way. They have got a position, and they tenaciously hold to it and support it; they have got a grip, and they just cannot let go. They will support their position with Scripture, or even with a "revelation" superior to Scripture! Their will is the cause of all the trouble. The cause of the setting back of all God's purposes in their lives is just there: in their choices, their decisions, their position, their way; in their natural self-strength, that has never been broken. And so it is just there that circumcision must take place.

It applies in so many other ways. The cross, as the instrument of spiritual circumcision, has to be applied to this self-life deeper and ever more deeply, because there seems to be no end to it. But that is the painful side, the dark side. What is happening on the other side? Is it not that room is being made for Christ? The real seed, the seed of Christ, is growing, becoming more and more manifest. The opposite of the characteristics which we have been considering - strength of intellect or emotion or will - is meekness. He said: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart" (Matthew 11:29). Pursue this right through, and you cannot fail to recognise that there was something radically different in the very depths of His being.

I have said that we cannot calculate the whole range of this self-principle, in its myriad forms of self-expression and self-occupation and self-attention and self-pity and self-consciousness and self-satisfaction. Even in our Christian life, in our devotion to the Lord, we are so happy that other people see how devoted we are, and how humble we are! And it is the self, the wretched - may I use the word? - the stinking self, coming up all the time. For a true child of God is oblivious of himself, has lost consciousness of himself in every way. If other people point out something good about them, they had not realised it, they were not aware of it. They are surprised that anyone could say anything good about them; they are not conscious of that. And on the other side, should people be critical and point out failings, well, they only say, "Yes, I know: I had that out with the Lord", or "I have got that before the Lord right now. I am not deceiving myself about that." This is the true child of Heaven.

So we could go on. That is the meaning of circumcision. In the light of that, the true meaning, the true principle, think of a Pharisee - a child of Abraham - saying: "I am better than anyone else", or making long prayers for everybody to see and to hear! A child of *ABRAHAM*! You remember all that the Lord said about

them. Oh, they have missed the point! Ah, but do not let us criticize and blame. It is a very searching thing for ourselves, is it not? Paul says that circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but a new creation. True circumcision is not of the flesh, but of the heart. The Lord give us circumcised hearts, and give us grace to have this severance pursued to finality.

Chapter Six

APPRENTICESHIP FOR THE KINGDOM OF GOD

"And he goeth up into the mountain, and calleth unto him whom he himself would: and they went unto him. And he appointed twelve, that they might be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach" (Mark 3:13-14).

The thought of "apprenticeship" is, of course, something included and implied in the words "disciple" and "discipleship". "He appointed twelve, that they might be with him, and that he might send them forth..." You will notice the very precise terms in which this statement was made. This choosing of the twelve was a quite deliberate, calculated, considered, far-reaching and significant act. At another time the Lord Jesus said: "I know whom I have chosen" (John 13:18). And again: "Did not I choose you the twelve?" (John 6:70). From Luke's account (Luke 6:12-13) we know that His choice followed a night spent alone with His Father in prayer. Yes, it was a very deliberate act, prayed over and considered, with a very large background in His own mind; it was far from casual. These are not just independent comments upon it or statements about it; they are supported by, and are indeed the very teaching of, the Scriptures. We shall see that as we go on.

"And he chose... twelve" (Luke 6:13). What a dangerous thing for Him to do! But what a significant thing for Him to do! That number was a well-understood number in Israel. Were there not twelve Patriarchs? Were there not twelve tribes? Twelve is one of the great, dominant numbers of the Bible, particularly in relation to Israel. Now that is deliberately laid hold of by the Lord Jesus, and brought over as the very beginning of the movement into the new dispensation; and so we have the twelve apostles. And in many other ways that number comes into view, both in itself and in its multiples, in relation first of all to Israel. In the new Jerusalem, at the end of the Revelation (Revelation 21:10-22:5), we have twelve foundations to the walls. The city itself is 12,000 furlongs in each direction. It has twelve gates of twelve pearls. There are twelve angels. In the seventh chapter of the same book the number of the sealed is a multiple of twelve: 144,000 - twelve times twelve thousand. And so we could go on.

Are you beginning to see something more in this deliberate act of the Lord Jesus? I say, it was not casual. He knew what He was doing. When He did this, He was doing, in one sense, the most dangerous thing that He could do. For of course all the nation of Israel, and especially their rulers, would jump to but one conclusion from this that He was doing. In their minds there would at once arise the thought: "Oh, he is setting up another Israel, is he? I see!" **AND SO HE WAS!** That is just the point. With Him, the Israel that has been is set aside and repudiated. With Him another is brought in. To the twelve He said: "You shall sit upon twelve thrones" (Matthew 19:28). Now this number, twelve, in Bible symbolism, as you probably know, is the number of government, of administration. Israel knew that, and so, of course, immediately grasped the implication of choosing twelve. "He is setting up a new government, a new administration!" Yes, He was! - but a very different one, as we shall see.

Twelve is the number of government. Consider its factors - three and four. Three is always the number of heavenly government, divine fullness of government, the very Godhead over all. Four is clearly the number of earthly government: earthly conditions are characterized by the number four. North, south, east and west comprehend the earth; spring, summer, autumn, winter comprehend the seasons; and so we could go on. Heavenly and earthly government are embodied in this number twelve. And that is very significant as to this act of the Lord Jesus.

We recall that, when the covenant was made to Abraham, he was told that his seed should be as the sand on the seashore, as the stars of the heaven (Genesis 22:17). But now we call back the words of Paul: "To Abraham were the promises spoken, and to his seed. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ" (Galatians 3:16). Heavenly and earthly government meet in Christ.

The choice of twelve, then, brought into view, first of all the new Israel, and then the new government by that Israel of heaven and earth; and that new Israel is the church, as represented by the twelve. But this Israel, we repeat once more, is something very different from the old. It is a spiritual posterity, the fruit of His travail, the seed that He should see because of it (Isaiah 53:10-11). It is spiritual, as being a people who inherit, take over, the real spiritual meaning of that nation that was called "Israel" - "prince with God" (Genesis 32:28). There, inherent already in the very name, is the governmental element.

Now, of the "Israel after the flesh" many things were said, as to their pre-eminence, being the head of the nations, "the head, and not the tail" (Deuteronomy 28:13), and so on. As we know, they failed in this. But God's principles do not go when His instruments fail. When anything which God chooses, in order to express His principles, fails to do so, He does not abandon the principles. He may have to abandon the vessel or the instrument, but He will go on with His principles. And so it is in this case: the principle is taken over, and the fulfilment of this conception - a prince with God, the head and not the tail, the head of the nations - is found in the new Israel.

That, then, is the setting. Let us get closer to it. It has two major aspects: firstly, the essential nature of this Israel, and then the essential apprenticeship unto the Kingdom.

The Essential Nature of the Israel of God

We have said that this seed of Christ is spiritual in constitution. We spent some time on that, as seen in John 3, in our last meditation, but let us just touch on it again. In the Israel after the flesh, you have an actual people on this earth whom you can recognise. You can see that they are - physically and in other ways - a nation, a people. Now, however physical features may manifest themselves in us, the constitution of the new Israel is not a physical constitution, a constitution of physical features: it is essentially a spiritual constitution. That is, it has in the first place nothing to do with anything outward at all. It has to do with *CHARACTER*. This Israel is constituted on the basis of another character, and that character is Christ. Its very constitution is Christ.

A New Knowledge

It is a nature constituted, in the first place, with a faculty for *KNOWLEDGE* which is altogether outside of the reach and range of any other kind of person. Here again we come back to John 3. "Except a man be born anew, he cannot see... Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom..." This thing is beyond him in sight, in knowledge, in understanding, to say nothing of inheritance. This Israel is an Israel that has a seeing capacity which the old had not and no other has. It is constituted this way.

This is, mark you, not merely a statement of truth. This is something very searching for *US*, as to our being children of God, being the spiritual children of the travail of Christ. This is not something that is extra to the Christian life, or for those who advance to certain heights and degrees. Right from our new birth, you

and I, every one of us, ought to have a faculty of spiritual understanding and perception and knowledge that is possessed by no other person outside this Kingdom! We could spend much time in pointing out the tragedies that have come into Christianity because of failure to recognise or live up to this. I would go so far as to say that the largest proportion of all the trouble between Christians is due to either a lack of, or a failure to live on, the basis of spiritual understanding, spiritual discernment, spiritual perception, spiritual knowledge. There is any amount of natural knowledge in the Christian world: Bible knowledge, prophetic knowledge, and what not. But spiritual knowledge is a rare commodity; and yet it is supposed to be a constituent of our new birth from above, a faculty that we ought to have.

Now, if you are thinking: "Then woe is me - I don't know much about that!", the Lord is simply saying to you: "Look here, this is yours by rights. It is not some extra thing to which you attain by struggle and effort, or by years of laborious Christian living, or by some specific act, some terrific upheaval in your spiritual life. It is a *BIRTH* thing, it is a *BIRTH* right: you have a *RIGHT* to this!" But it may be that, after all, you *DO* know in this way, although you do not know that you know! You have a new sense, a new faculty, a new "something" in you, that causes you to know - in some measure at least - what is of the Lord and what is not, what is spiritual and what is not. But oh for the increase of that! It is the development of *THAT*, the increase of *THAT*, which is the apprenticeship in the school of Christ. We learn by mistakes, we learn by blunders, but the thing that we are learning is not something objective. We are learning inwardly that such and such is not the way of life and we should do well to avoid it; and that such and such *IS* the way of life, and that is the way for us to go. We learn it inwardly. It is a new kind of knowledge.

A New Power

This spiritual Israel is constituted also with a new kind of *POWER*. This particular kind of seed, or divine progeny, has a power, an ability, a strength, which is quite different. One of the things that we learn in this apprenticeship, in this school, if we are apt pupils, if we are really abandoned to know the Lord, is that the Lord will deliberately undercut and undermine our natural strength. He will bring us to positions where the very best natural strength of any kind cannot cope with the situation; where, if we are to go through, we shall require a strength that is not in us by nature at all, even though we might be the very best specimens of humanity. We come back to Nicodemus. "You just cannot", said the Lord to Nicodemus, "you just *CANNOT*. You may be as willing as anybody could be, you may be as anxious and as interested, but what stands over you is *CANNOT*." The great question, arising again and again from Nicodemus' lips, is: "How...?", "How...?" He cannot. But this seed has something of a strength which is different, quite different from all that. Peter speaks of it as: "the strength which God supplieth" (1 Peter 4:11). It is an ability of another order.

And so we could go on with the constitution. But it will all amount to this - that it is of another generation. It is of the generation of Christ. There are here capacities and possibilities and resources which are from Heaven, which cannot be accounted for on earth at all.

In point of fact, the old Israel was put onto that basis, though in a symbolic or typical way. We pointed out in our last study that they were put onto the basis of Christ, and we saw just what it meant for them to be put onto that basis. When everything went wrong with them spiritually and morally, and they were unworthy of the name of Israel, they were just rooted up from the land. Those twelve sons of Jacob, behaving as they did - putting Joseph in the pit, deceiving

their father, and even counselling murder, and then the exposure of them before their brother whom they did not recognise in Egypt - it is a sorry tale. What breakdown! What failure! And so Israel must be put on to the ground of Christ, through death and resurrection; they must come into the meaning of His travail, be born out of it. Then their life afterwards must be constituted on the same basis, the basis of Christ, so that, for those ensuing forty years in the wilderness, there is no accounting for their bread or their water, or for anything else, on any other ground than that of heaven. "It was not Moses that gave... the bread...; but my Father..." (John 6:32). It was heavenly. You see the point: they were constituted according to Christ, with resources that are not explicable on any other ground than that they are from heaven.

Thank God for that! It is the most wonderful thing to live on Christ - to live on heavenly ground! Perhaps you are thinking that this spiritual life must be a very difficult one. Well, for the flesh, of course it is! For the natural man, of course it is! To the self-life, it certainly is. But the spiritual life is a romance. What the Lord does - oh, it is just wonderful. How my heart went with a brother whom I recently heard speaking about ministry! Would not our flesh always like to have everything well worked out and mapped and planned in advance - have it all there, so that to give the word is really no trouble at all! But the Lord shuts us up and holds us up, and gets us into a perfect travail over a message, waiting so often until the very last minute - and then it comes! That is a personal testimony of over thirty years. It is something wonderful. This is no theoretical matter. It is marvellously real, and really marvellous.

That is the nature and constitution of this new Israel. This seed is a mystery, this Israel is a mystery; everything to do with it is a mystery. It cannot be understood by natural means at all. But do not take that the wrong way, interpreting it to mean that we have got to be very "mysterious" people! There are many people trying to be mysterious, under the mistaken idea that that is spirituality. But this mystery is the mystery of a *LIFE*.

The Mystery of Spiritual Life

Of course, even life in the natural is a mystery. We cannot explain life; we do not know what life is. It is the greatest reality, and yet it is the thing which is most impossible of explanation. But in the real realm of the spiritual there is another life, and this life is an even greater mystery. It is a life that persists in spite of everything that can be set against it. The mystery about the church, about the people of God, is the mystery of this life - how it survives, how it goes on, how it increases. There is nothing in all this universe which is so assaulted, so set against, as this life of the people of God. All the dark, sinister forces of Satan seem to have but one ultimate object - namely, in some way to quench this life. All the experiences through which the Lord allows His people to go (and sometimes takes them), which, looked at naturally, could be said to be death, are only allowed in order to bring out this wonderful reality - that there is a life which, when put to the test, subjected to every kind of trial, survives, overcomes.

The power, persistence, and progress of this life are a mystery. The more the children of Israel were oppressed, the more they grew. Carry that over into the spiritual Israel. It looks today very much as though the evil forces - hell and men - are reducing the church, by putting to death, or by driving out of triumphant faith, many of the Lord's people. Ah, but that is not the end of the story. These blind instruments of evil are fools - they cannot read history. If they could, they would see that what they are doing is the very thing that is going to accomplish what they are trying to frustrate. Oh, no - make no mistake about it: long centuries of terrible ordeal have proved this, that there is a persistence and an

increase here that is a mystery; you cannot explain or account for it naturally at all.

That should be true of every child of God. So take hope, take heart, dear tried one. If you are feeling that your way is more death than life, that the ordeal is tending to be one of total reduction, remember that that is not the end of the story.

The Essential Apprenticeship for the Kingdom

I come now to this matter of the "essential apprenticeship", as I am calling it, for the Kingdom of God. That is, the Lord Jesus chose twelve - and we have seen the significance of His act - "that they might be with him, and that he might send them forth". Here are two halves of one thing, essential halves. "Be with him" - why? That He might teach, that He might instruct, that He might equip, *IN ORDER THAT* He might send forth. All going forth must issue from the closest association with Christ in His school. And all association with Christ in His school must issue in going forth! The Lord does not want people shut up in monasteries and cloisters, and places like that, always studying and learning, accumulating knowledge of things, even though they might be heavenly things. Every bit of God-imparted knowledge is to be for practical purposes. And no practical activity which does not come out of God-imparted knowledge will affect the Kingdom of God. So these are the two things.

Note that all Christ's teaching, instructing, training of the twelve came out of His own spiritual life. It did not come out of books; it did not come out of the schools. This was a thing that baffled the scholars of His day. "Whence... hath this man all these things?" (Matthew 13:56). "How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?" (John 7:15). He was not a man of the schools; He was not a man of the library, of the study. It all came out of His own spiritual life. He had a spiritual knowledge which was unique. It differed entirely from every other kind of knowledge.

The Fatherhood of God

For one thing - and this was the basis of everything else - His knowledge of the Father was unique. Consider this statement: "No one knoweth who the Son is, save the Father; and who the Father is, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son willeth to reveal him" (Luke 10:22). "No one knoweth who the Father is, save the Son". That is a sweeping statement, a tremendous claim! But His unique knowledge of the Father sprang, not out of studying, not out of contemplating, but out of the inward spiritual oneness between the Father and Himself.

Now note this: the Fatherhood of God was not a *DOCTRINE*, preached by Jesus to the general public. You can confirm that from the record in the Gospels. It was a *MYSTERY*, disclosed to His disciples in private. The Fatherhood of God was no doctrine with Jesus, no theory: it was a reality in His own spiritual life and in His own spiritual being. To the twelve He made the Fatherhood of God real - not by argument, nor by much speaking, but because the Father was to Him the supreme reality in His life. All His training of the twelve came out of that; His teaching came out of that. And you note how much there was in His teaching of them and training of them which centred in the Father. How often did He refer to or address the Father! If you are not impressed, look it up again. This was the heart of everything in His training of these men. His teaching on prayer was all based upon that. "After this manner... pray ye: Our Father..." (Matthew 6:9). I repeat: this was not for the general public. It was something on the inside of the

school; it was a mystery disclosed alone to those on the inside. But it was made real.

This new Israel has to be constituted on that basis. Just as the Lord Jesus trained the twelve on the basis of His union with the Father, so all our training will be through our union with Christ - a union as vital as was His with the Father: so that we, in union with the Son, may ourselves come into the mystery and wonder of the Fatherhood. It is a secret within this spiritual seed, within the Israel of God: the wonderful secret of the Fatherhood, not as a title, but as a great reality. How much we should be saved from if that became as real in our beings as it was in His! From beginning to end His reference is to the Father, His deference is to the Father; His appeal is always to the Father. The controlling reality in all His movements is the Father; everything for Him comes from the Father. The last words that He uttered were addressed to the Father: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46). It was this that kept Him strong, it was this that kept Him right. It was the great motive force in His refusing everything that the Devil offered Him; it was His motive power in enduring suffering. The Father was everything to Him, in every way - "all in all"; a deep inward reality.

I suggest that we lack something vital in constitution if we lack an adequate sense of our spiritual union with God as our Father in Christ Jesus. When we get as near to Him as that, or get Him as near as that, we begin to see something. Because, you see, the Lord Jesus sought to inculcate into the disciples, the new Israel, the meaning of this relationship between Himself, as Son, and the Father. It was something of practical account in their relationship with one another. For He was not constituting a kind of *clientèle* or following, a new movement of people of common interests: He was constituting a family

That is made so clear by the writer of the letter to the Hebrews: "He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying, I will declare thy name unto my *BRETHREN*... I and the children which God hath given me" (Hebrews 2:11-13). In effect, and in definite statement, the Lord is saying: "Now, I want you to realise that you are all brethren, you are all of one family, because you are children of one Father in the deepest reality of your constitution. That is the basis on which you should regard one another and behave toward one another. You are to cherish and care for one another, even as I have loved you." You see, this is the same thing: "Having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end" - to the uttermost (John 13:1). That was only making practical in their corporate life the relationship between Himself and His Father, the Father and Himself. It was a training.

Discipline

Mark you, it was a discipline, too, a real discipline: for if ever there were twelve diverse kinds of people on this earth, it was these twelve. Yes, there was something there of every kind. Temperamentally, constitutionally, naturally, they would fly into fragments at any moment. There is nothing here naturally of cohesion, integration. But under His hand, in His school, something is going to happen. At any rate, if the symbolism of the book of the Revelation means anything at all, there is something fairly solid in its last chapters! For we read that "the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb" (Revelation 21:14). Here they are making one solid basis for the everlasting Kingdom. Something has happened.

Now that is what the Lord is trying to do with us. If you feel that you cannot get on with another child of God, just ask Him to move them away, or move you away, and see what happens! You will find that you have got into the realm

where the Lord takes no notice of your prayer - at least until something has happened in you. The Lord lets us go through all the "sand-papery" and difficulty of these contradictory dispositions and temperaments amongst His children. We think: "Oh, wouldn't it be good if only He would take that very difficult person away!" But it seems that the Lord does nothing about it, on the outside. No, He is going to do something on the inside. He may eventually take them away, but not until that something inside has been done. That is a part of the apprenticeship to the Kingdom. How can we rule or reign together in the Kingdom, if we are all in a state of mutual contradiction and conflict? No, the Lord is not going to have a kingdom like that, nor a government like that.

So, their being "with Him" was for the purpose of deep practical instruction and teaching in all this meaning of the Fatherhood of God, that this deep secret and mystery might find its expression in a corporate life.

This matter of training covers a vast amount of ground, and many other aspects than the one that I have mentioned. Let me just point out this. While it is true that the Kingdom came on the day of Pentecost, the New Testament speaks of the Kingdom in three tenses - past, present and future: it has come, it is coming, and it has yet to come. It is with a view to that coming now and yet to come that you and I are being trained. We are in school now for the present coming of the Kingdom. It will not come, except through the discipline of those who are called into fellowship with Christ. And the final manifestation and appearing of the Kingdom is something for which a great preparation is going on, a preparation of us all. Whatever may be involved in this apprenticeship, this training, in relation to the Kingdom, in every one of its aspects, it is of the greatest importance that we recognise this. We are in school with a view to the Kingdom.

No Realisation Without the Cross

Whatever may have been the aspect of the training in the case of the disciples, notice how Jesus held everything to the cross. He leaves the multitude, He leaves the world, and takes these men apart with Himself: He speaks to them of deep things, wonderful things - and then He heads it all up to His going to Jerusalem, being delivered into the hands of the rulers and crucified. (See Matthew 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19; Mark 10:32-34; Luke 18:31-33.) That was something they could not accept, they could not understand; that was the thing that stumbled them. But He held everything to that, as though He would say: "All this that I have been saying to you, all this that I have been holding up to view, all this for which I have chosen you, all this for which you have been in the school with Me, is based upon the cross. Not one bit of it can be realised apart from the cross. You can come into not a fragment of it, except by way of the cross. The cross is essential to your being this Israel. You will be born out of that travail, and before that you will be scattered, every man of you."

How true it was! But out of His travail, out of His tomb, out of His resurrection, they were born as an organic entity. How they stood up together on the day of Pentecost! I do not think they had ever been together quite like that before. This is a new togetherness. They are born on the day of Pentecost. The new Israel is here. It has been spoken about and prepared for; it has had much instruction, much teaching, and much handling; but it required the cross to produce it.

So for the Israel of God the cross is essential. The cross is essential to the Kingdom, the reign; the cross is essential to the service, the administration. I am deeply impressed by something in that part of the prophecies of Isaiah from which we have taken our basic passage - Isaiah 53:10-11. The real beginning of that chapter is, of course, not as marked in our arrangement, but at verse 13 of

chapter 52: "Behold, my servant..." And then we read on about the suffering Servant. But what is said of Him immediately? "He shall be... very high." How? The next verse says: "His visage was so marred more than any man..." A few verses later we read: "He was despised, and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: we hid as it were our faces from him..." "WE did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted." But we were wrong: "He was wounded for our transgressions..." And then on to our passage: "When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied."

Who is this? The Servant of the Lord. "Behold, my *SERVANT*". And He chose twelve who were to be "with Him" in the service of the Kingdom. They were to be the servants of the Kingdom - His fellow-servants. You notice from the margin that some authorities add (as in Luke 6:13): "whom also he named apostles". Here, then, is the whole service of the Kingdom fully in view: but it is only, as in Isaiah 53:10-11, by the travail. It all comes out of the travail - there is no other way. The natural disposition has to be undone by the cross, disintegrated, broken up and scattered. It is a false thing that cannot stand and will not go through; it is proved to be unsubstantial. Another thing must be brought in which is spiritual - that is, of the Spirit - and which can go through. The cross is the instrument of God to bring about the new Israel, the new Kingdom, and the new servants of the Kingdom.

May the Lord say something to all our hearts: show us what kind of people He is after, and why He is taking the way with us that He is. He has in view a service - here, and more so hereafter - which requires a people after this kind. The Lord make us like that!

Chapter Seven

THE OBJECT OF HIS TRAVAIL

In this concluding message, beyond bringing forward a number of fragments from the Word of God, I shall do little more than make some statements, and leave the Lord to speak out of those statements Himself. The message itself will lie deeper than anything that can be said.

First of all, we will recall the passage that has been running through this whole series:

"Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied" (Isaiah 53:10-11).

Then:

"Who hath heard such a thing? who hath seen such things? Shall a land be born in one day? shall a nation be brought forth at once? for as soon as Zion travailed, she brought forth her children" (Isaiah 66:8).

"So the angel that talked with me said unto me, Cry thou, saying, Thus saith the Lord of hosts: I am jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion with a great jealousy" (Zechariah 1:14).

"And the word of the Lord of hosts came to me, saying, Thus saith the Lord of hosts: I am jealous for Zion with great jealousy, and I am jealous for her with great fury" (Zechariah 8:1-2).

"But ye are come unto mount Zion" (Hebrews 12:22).

(Note those two statements: "I am jealous for Zion"; "Ye are come unto mount Zion".)

"And he saith unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful even unto death... And he went forward a little, and fell on the ground, and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass away from him. And he said, Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; remove this cup from me: howbeit not what I will, but what thou wilt" (Mark 14:34-36).

"Christ... loved the church, and gave himself up for it" (Ephesians 5:25).

Its Infinite Value to God

All these passages, in principle and in ultimate meaning, relate to one thing. In them and by them certain things, in themselves altogether inexpressible, incomprehensible, are somehow brought to our hearts. In the first place, you notice that they all have to do with the travailing love of God in Christ, the passion of God in Christ. Therein lies a mystery - the mystery of the infinite value of the object of His travail. There *MUST* be something that justifies it; there must be something of unspeakable preciousness to Him that would lead to this - the travail of His soul. "My soul is exceeding sorrowful even unto death." "I am jealous for Zion with a great jealousy... I am jealous for her with great wrath." Because of this tearing of the heart of God to its very depths, something of infinite preciousness and value must be in view.

Of course this is all centred in the Cross, as we know. The Cross forms the link with that which is of eternal, supreme importance to the Son of God; it links with His inheritance in the saints. It is not some inanimate, insensate "thing"; it is not that God has an objective interest in some *THING*. It is quite clear that a heart-relationship is here involved - the kind of thing that just tears your very being to pieces. It is as though this inheritance were a very part of Himself. That is borne out, as you will see, by these Scriptures. Not to have it would mean that a very part of Himself would be missing. It is a heart matter, a soul matter; it is something that touches all the sensibilities of God. The inheritance is, in fact, a *LIVING* thing. Paul speaks of it as corresponding to the wife. "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself up for it"; and the law that governs the husband-wife relationship is: "And they twain shall become one flesh" (Matthew 19:5). Divide them, and you tear apart and in pieces something that is one thing; and that is the relationship here. But, of course, such a character transcends any human analogy. We are here touching the eternal.

All this, then, about His love, His suffering, His travail, His anguish, at least implies, if it does not declare with a very loud voice, that the object of it all is of infinite value to Him. What is it? "He shall see *HIS SEED*... He shall see of the travail of his soul." It is this of which we have been thinking all through these messages; this that is represented by that phrase, "his seed" - a people for Himself. It is beyond us, altogether beyond us. We might hear it, and have some kind of objective acceptance of it as truth - yes: but the wonder is that this comes right down to us - to you, to me. *WE* are in this. It is a question of the infinite preciousness and value that you and I are to Him. It is beyond us.

Our Difficulty in Believing it

That is one thing - I speak at least for myself over this - one thing that gives the greatest difficulty to believe when it comes to oneself. Is it not so? Perhaps there are two things, in the main, that constitute our difficulty in believing a thing like this.

The first is, just what we are in ourselves. We know something of ourselves - our sinfulness, our worthlessness. When it is really true, and not put on - not just language, not feigned or pretended, but really true - that we know our utter worthlessness, realise how abjectly worthless we are; and then we are told that all this is true, that it relates to and applies to *US*: ah, then we are presented with a problem; we are called upon to believe something that is not easy to believe! But I could take you through the Bible and show you how, after all, it is so. I wonder what you find the most comforting fragment in the Bible. May I tell you which I do? "Faithful is the saying... that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief" (1 Timothy 1:15). It is brought right down to the personal. Yes, there are many comforting things in the Bible, but you cannot get deeper than that, you cannot get behind that. All this infinite passion and travail for such as we! The Bible says it! I said that I would simply make statements, without attempting to define or explain.

That is one reason why we find such difficulty in believing and accepting. The other probably is the mystery of God's ways with us. So often, in the mystery of His ways, we are sorely tempted to wonder whether anything like this can be true. It may be true, we feel, of some people, but His ways with us do not seem to bear it out at all. A love like this? Unto death? An estimate or valuation of a soul to this degree? Is that really borne out by these strange, mysterious dealings of God with us? - by these darkness's, these perplexities, these problems, these

disappointments? Satan is always at our elbow to say, "That is not His love for you!"

I am not attempting to argue that out philosophically, or even from the Scripture; I am simply making the statement: *THE BIBLE SAYS...* Here it is! What is all this - this about the travail of His soul? What is it for? *HIS seed*. Who are His seed? *Those who have believed on Him unto eternal life*. No more than that, no less than that. And they become enwrapped in this unspeakable thing - His soul's travail. Oh, that we could believe it, at all times! - that you and I could believe that, behind all the mystery of His ways, the strangeness of His dealings, the bewilderment and perplexity as to what it is that He is after, there lies such a love as this!

That is the second thing - and, again, it is only a statement. But, oh! the infinite suffering behind our belonging to the Lord, the infinite suffering behind a soul's salvation - a soul that might be yours or mine. What suffering! Peter draws this contrast: "Ye were redeemed, not with corruptible things, with silver or gold... but" - here is the contrast - "with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:18-19). As you know, the word "blood" is a simile for "soul". In biblical symbolism, the soul is in the blood (Leviticus 17:11, mg.). And so, when He poured out His blood, He "poured out his soul unto death" (Isaiah 53:12). His soul is set forth by Peter as something that is infinitely, transcendently more precious than gold or silver; and He has given that for our redemption! Behind your belonging to the Lord and my belonging to the Lord there lies that whole travail.

In saying this, I am trying to redeem this whole thing from cheapness. We have made our salvation too cheap and too easy; we have pulled it down to such a low level. We need to ponder the infinite cost and suffering which lies behind the salvation of one soul.

Christ's Infinite Love for His Own

Further, there is the infinite love which Christ has for His own when He has got them. Paul seems to make some tremendous statements. Sometimes they almost sound like exaggeration. "Who shall separate us from... the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus...?" he asks (Romans 8:35, 39). He catalogues every conceivable thing that might be thought to be capable of doing that, and then, lumping them all together, he says: "Nay, I am persuaded that *NONE* of these things": in them all and over them all the love will triumph. The love that He has for those who are His own, when He has got them, is a tremendous thing, is it not? Sometimes we are prepared to believe, or inclined to think and accept, that the Gospel of our salvation is based upon all this in order to get us; but then, as we go on a bit further, we may sometimes feel tempted to wonder whether He still loves us as much now as He did at the beginning, whether He is still as concerned to have us now as He was then. I trust that that statement will not be misunderstood.

There is a wonderful picture of this in the Old Testament, in that temple that Solomon built - perhaps the most magnificent structure that had ever been built up to his time. The predominant feature of that temple was gold: everything was overlaid with gold: there was pure gold everywhere - gold, gold, over everything. It symbolizes the obtaining by the Lord, at last, of something that He had set His heart upon. At last the Lord has got that toward which He has been all the time working with His people: a place in which He can dwell. Now gold is always a figure of the divine love; and so everywhere His dwelling-place is simply covered and smothered with gold. He has got what He wanted, and it is to Him exceedingly precious; and so He writes that preciousness everywhere, lavishly.

Oh, the lavishness of that gold in the days of Solomon! It is just a picture of God's love for and in something long desired, when He has come into possession of it. No, His love does not change after He has come into possession. It is still the same.

The Infinite Importance to Him of the Church

So we are led to the next thing: the infinite importance attached by the Lord to His church. The word "church" is only another title for that which is elsewhere referred to as His temple, His wife, His bride. They are all in reality the same thing, and they all emphasize the infinite importance of the church in the eyes of the Lord. There are many people, I fear, who think that "church" is "teaching". It is what they call "church teaching". There is nothing that makes me shudder more than to hear people use that phrase, "church teaching"! I have even heard people speak about "the church teaching of Honour Oak" - "church teaching"! The Lord pity us, the Lord save us! The church is not a truth, it is not a teaching, it is not an idea. The church is a Gethsemane - the church is a bloody sweat. The church is a Golgotha - the church is the cry of a broken heart from the Cross, the pouring out of His soul unto death. The church is the great sob of God in this universe.

I am not exaggerating; that is not just words. I could take you to the prophets, and show you from them that all that is true. Oh, go back to some of those prophets and hear them! Do you not hear the sob of God as they speak? "O Ephraim... O Judah... How shall I give thee up, Ephraim?" (Hosea 6:4; 11:8). God is broken-hearted, just broken-hearted; and that broken heart is reflected in the words of the prophets, as they cry and weep over the Lord's people, as an unfaithful bride, a wayward daughter, a prodigal son, a family repudiating the best of fathers. Do not talk about "church truth", "church teaching" - oh, no, "Christ loved the church, and gave himself for it". "I am jealous for Zion" - that is only a title for the church - "with great jealousy... with great wrath".

He loved the church - there is an infinite importance to Him in His church. Again I say, I cannot explain it; but there is the truth. Oh, that you and I might see *THROUGH* the truth and the doctrine and the teaching, to the *REALITY*, might see that *THIS* is the thing involved in that ruptured heart, in that agonized cry, in that sweating as it were great drops of blood. It is the church that is involved. That is not a "thing", not a "theory", not a "line of truth". It is something tremendous.

The Infinite Motive for Our Response

What, then, does it lead to? Surely it leads, finally, to the infinite motive for our response to the Lord. To a first response, yes, for any who have never yet responded to Him: there is an infinite motive for your responding to Him - no less a motive than all this that we have seen. But then, there is the infinite motive for our own response - His own people's response to Him on all matters. Why should I settle any controversy with the Lord, why should I set aside my own personal interests, why should I do this and that? Why...? In the light of all this, *WHY NOT?!* Is there anything that can really be set against this? For going on with the Lord, for responding, being obedient, giving Him everything, we have an infinite motive.

And this is the infinite motive for service. Why should we give Him our life in service? Just for this reason. In the first days of the Moravian Brethren, when everything was so pure, so true, the Lord used them marvellously all over this world. It was a wonderful thing that happened. At the Edinburgh Conference in 1910, John R. Mott said that, if the whole Christian church had proceeded on the

lines of the Moravian Brethren, the entire world would have been evangelized long ago. They had one missionary for every ten members of their fellowship. Yes, it was a wonderful story of sacrifice, of suffering, of giving themselves. What was the secret? They had a motto, which was written on everything and which they took with them wherever they went. It was this: "To win for the Lamb that was slain the reward of His suffering." That is the infinite motive - the reward of His suffering for the Lamb that was slain.

I make the statement - that is all. It is something that is altogether beyond us; but this is what is here. That is the heart of Isaiah 53, and of all these other Scriptures. If this is true, He is not going to give us up easily; He is not going to abandon and forsake His purpose. He is going to return to it again and again. He will say: "I am returned unto Zion" (Zechariah 8:3); He will come back again and again for what He has set His heart upon. But oh, may we have something of this same love of God shed abroad in our own hearts by the Holy Spirit.