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The Angels' Message

"For, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people." - Luke 2:10.

OF ALL the proclamations found in the blessed Book that we so much love, and which is replete with utterances of hopeful assurance from cover to cover, there are but few that sound such exultant notes of unqualified delight as does this announcement made by those angelic messengers that hovered over the Judean fields on that night of almost two thousand years ago. In one respect the message differs from the great majority of those sent through the medium of the Prophets of old and which were for the most part couched in terms of stern reproof, warning, or admonishment addressed to God's typical people of Israel. That such was the case need hardly be wondered at in view of Israel's repeated failure to earn divine approval. The wonder rather is that the Most High, dwelling in those realms of awful purity and holiness, should have condescended to show so much mercy and forbearance through long ages of time towards a sin-stained and rebellious people which had constantly flouted his righteous authority and ignored his repeated appeals to their divinely instructed reason. (Isa. 1:18.) But this proclamation is different. It stands almost alone in its unequivocal expression of joyous satisfaction on the part of the angels at being made the heralds of such a glorious announcement, one that meant almost as much to the messengers as it did to the recipients; for have we not learned of the intense and delighted interest which the angels have manifested repeatedly in every phase and detail of the handiwork of Him that "sitteth between the cherubim." - Psalm 99:1; Job 38:7.

This message may be compared in scope only to that joyous declaration of John, when in prophetic vision he became conscious of the great chorus of praise from every living creature in heaven and earth as they hailed the glorious culmination of the completed plan of salvation: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace." It was as if the Father himself, with all the angels, were breathing a great sigh of relief at the successful completion of this great step in the wondrous undertaking. The great Logos had now been made flesh. The gift of God's only begotten Son had been bestowed upon the world (John 3:16), and the Father was inviting all creation to share in his joy. Ignored for the moment were the long years of trial and suffering that lay ahead for that Infant so peacefully sleeping in the manger at Bethlehem. Ignored were the

obstacles that had to be overcome before the forces of darkness and death would be finally and forever destroyed. Nothing at this time must be permitted to interfere with the fullness of joy that possessed the heart of the Father and that the angels seemed to be striving to communicate to those humble shepherds who were staring in speechless amazement at the spectacle, which was being unfolded before them, scarcely daring to believe what their eyes saw and what their ears heard.

Most of us remember the frenzied joy with which the nation and the whole allied world received the news of the unconditional surrender of their enemies and the end of the war. Over the radio was carried the sound of the shouts of joy and relief which came from every corner of the land, as the people danced and paraded all night in the streets. Forgotten were the years of doubt and fear and suffering that had made the coming of the morning mail a dreaded event. All that was now in the past, and all prospects for the future were joyous ones. Yet that was but a poor, pale reflection of that glorious celebration of the future which the Revelator saw, and which will entail no disappointing aftermath such as has been the case with all human celebrations.

It may perhaps have been the prospect of that universal joy that filled the hearts of the angels with thankfulness and praise that night as they invited the shepherds to share in their rejoicing. It may safely be assumed that their knowledge of the trying events that lay in the future was not any more complete than is ours. We know not what awaits us; God kindly veils our eyes. They could not have known how much suffering had yet to be borne before the prophecy to Joseph (Matt. 1:21) was fulfilled, and that holy Infant, grown to manhood, would complete the task of saving his people from their sins. For the moment they gave free rein to the joy which they shared with the mighty Author of the Plan. Their full confidence in his power and wisdom had been amply justified, and they rejoiced before him in praise and adoration, while we who "see through a glass darkly" are even now able to catch something of the thrill of that moment. For the joy they felt was to extend to *all people*. Not to any one class; not merely to the nation to which by fleshly lineage the Babe belonged; no, not even to those favored ones alone who will share in his glory or to that great multitude whose tears of chagrin will be wiped away as they are led to living fountains of waters (Rev. 7:17), evermore to rejoice. No, the words are all-inclusive and unqualified; the joy is to be to all people. Many of us who have felt disappointment at our failure to touch hearts we have never been able to reach with the message that means so much to us can also rejoice at the certain prospect that every ear will eventually hear those glad tidings of great joy. For "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." Perhaps some may cavil at the thought of the Almighty experiencing anything like a feeling of relief, thus implying that he might have felt at some time what in a human would be anxiety. It is undeniably true that no possible doubt as to the ultimate success of his every plan would ever find a place in the mind of the omnipotent God of the Universe, he who knows the end from the beginning. Yet it seems to us, that he could not be the loving and compassionate Father of whom the Son was an exact mental image unless he experienced a feeling of loving sympathy and compassion for that loved Son in the ordeal of suffering and death, through which he must pass, ere he could redeem our race and become the Captain of our Salvation.

A PICTURE FROM THE PAST

An analogy in the Old Testament which should serve to illustrate what God must have felt is that one which is recorded in Genesis 22 where we read that Abraham was called upon to give up in sacrifice his son Isaac, the beloved heir to all his possessions, the one in whom all his hopes were centered and the one whom he regarded as the medium through which all the divine promises were to be fulfilled. Many of us have discovered that in our experiences with the troubles of life, the anticipation of a coming ordeal frequently bears down more heavily upon our spirits and is a

greater test to our courage than is the trouble itself, when the time comes for us to face it. Our dear Master himself was affected in this same manner, for did he not say, "I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how am I straitened till it be accomplished." The story of Abraham's sacrifice is told by the narrator in plain, unembellished language, with no attempt made to play upon our emotions. Yet one would have to be dull and unimaginative indeed if he failed to visualize something of the anxious strain which must have wrung Abraham's heart as he looked forward in dread to the completion of that terrible three days' journey and the ordeal through which he must pass. (Gen. 22:3, 4.) Abraham may have, and probably did possess, an almost supernatural degree of faith in order to enable him to make that fearful decision, always trusting that God would in some mysterious way overrule the matter for the best. But even that complete trust could not have prevented that journey from being an inexpressibly painful one to the heart of the father. And so likewise it must have been an equally distressing prospect for our Heavenly Father to look forward to, knowing that at the end of those three thousand-year days, he must voluntarily sacrifice his dearest treasure for the sake of sinful man. So, it is our conviction that he must have breathed a great sigh of relief when that first crucial step had been taken, the only begotten Son had left his heavenly home, and had been made flesh in the person of that holy Infant who lay in the manger at Bethlehem.

The immensity of God's love for his estranged children had now been demonstrated to both angels and men, as it is written that, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16.) And a still greater degree of relief was to be the Father's portion when, some thirty-three years later, he received back from the dead that same dear Son with the sacrifice successfully accomplished and the victory won. The joyous relief that Abraham must have felt, when he received Isaac figuratively from the dead (Heb. 11:19), should enable us to apprehend 'something of the Heavenly Father's joy on that glorious occasion, just as the knowledge of that wondrous transaction has brought joy and gratitude to our own hearts.

But at the time of the announcement by the angels of the Savior's birth, all these events were still in the future. For the present it was joy enough for the angels to proclaim the glad tidings to those humble shepherds: "Unto you is born today in the city of David a Savior who is the Lord Messiah." (*Diaglott.*) And then came the full chorus of the heavenly host, voicing their joy and adoration in a great paean of praise to the mighty One who was the Author of the whole glorious Plan: "Glory to God in the highest heavens."

The glad tidings that filled the angels' hearts with rejoicing that night was the announcement that a new way had been found whereby peace could be established between God and man, a peace based upon the justifying work of the One who was to save his people from their sins. Up to that moment the only members of Adam's race who had been privileged to enter into a condition of peace with God were, first, his faithful servants of past dispensations, who in the ages that had preceded the Mosaic era had like Abraham believed God and so were accounted righteous (James 2:23'); and secondly, those Israelites who, by virtue of the yearly Atonement Day sacrifices, had obtained a standing of typical justification before God. All others were regarded as being at enmity with God, aliens and strangers from the covenants of promise. - Eph. 2:12.

But now, in the coming to earth of the Savior, the first step had been taken whereby "he that believeth in the Son" might have peace with God and have the divine good will extended to him that he might continue on and ultimately enter into full family relationship with the Most High, "of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named." (Eph. 3:15.) This is the sense of the message as rendered in the Authorized Version and is to be preferred (in the mind of the writer, at least) to some of the more recent versions.

And what a gracious gift it was! No wonder that the thought of giving characterizes the Christmas season. It is at this time of year, even more perhaps than at any other, that the hearts of those who have learned the old, old story of the Father and his love should overflow in gratitude toward the Giver of every good and perfect gift as they reflect upon his great mercy to the children of men and upon the love that drew us to him.

WHAT CHRISTMAS SHOULD MEAN TO US

How should the "Truth people" regard the Christmas festival? Let us disregard for the time being a chronological fact of which most Bible Students are aware, namely, that the actual time of year upon which our Lord's First Advent, as the man-child of Bethlehem, occurred corresponded more closely to about the first of October than it did to the twenty-fifth of December, a matter which we need not go into at this time, and let us consider for a moment, the significance of the event from the standpoint of the human family as a whole.

If in the esteem of those who through divine grace have been granted power to become sons of God (John 1:12) there be one anniversary in the Christian calendar which more than any other prompts them to especially rejoice, it is that one which commemorates our Lord's birth as a new creature on that resurrection morning which succeeded his three days' burial. In the larger, more comprehensive sense that great event was of equal importance to all mankind, for it was then that he became the first-fruits of them that slept, human and spiritual alike. (1 Cor. 15:20.) But the Easter season is in a very special sense the particular festival of the new creation, of which he was the first-born member, and so his resurrection verified and made certain the hopes of those "who first trusted in Christ." - Eph. 1:12.

However, the Glad Tidings of great joy which we commemorate at the Christmas season, as has been already pointed out, were to be to all the world's people. So, accordingly, we rejoice in company with all the world at the good news concerning the birth of the Savior at Bethlehem. The more we learn of and strive to copy the Master's character, and to become imbued with his spirit, the greater becomes our inclination to rejoice with those who rejoice and to weep with those who weep (Rom. 12:15); in other words the broader and deeper become our own sympathies with the whole groaning creation. We are well aware that the present time is a period of fear and anxiety, which bears down heavily upon the entire world. Ominous signs are pointing to a great judgment upon the whole of Christendom, as every news dispatch reveals. If then we can aid in distracting the minds- of the harmless and well-meaning people of our world even temporarily from these dark portents by joining in the celebration of the anniversary of the birth of the Christ-child, let us participate gladly and thankfully. What better cause for rejoicing could there be than a precious season which gladdens and enlarges the hearts of mankind, and which distributes its genial warmth among those whom he came to save! We remember that the Lord while in the flesh once graced with his presence a marriage feast in Cana of Galilee and contributed to the festivities by performing his first miracle in response to his mother's unspoken request regarding the wine, even though, as he explained, his hour (for relaxation and enjoyment) had not yet come. (John 2:4.) And what an ordeal of suffering he had to endure before that hour would arrive, when with his disciples he would partake of the new wine (life) in the Kingdom! - Matthew 26:29.

Our friends in the great denominations of Christendom also, those who in a sense apprehend something of the meaning of Christmas and the song of the angels as they prophesied of the coming peace and good will to men, these realize but little of the fiery experiences through which mankind must pass before the Sin-offering has been completely made, humanity released from the death sentence, and the work of Him who is to save his people from their sins has been finished. The knowledge of the chronological features of the Plan, that we have been permitted to acquire, gives us assurance that even now the "strong man's house" is being broken up and Satan is beginning to lose the power that he has wielded so long, to deceive the nations. Ere long the Kingdom of the saints of the Most High (Dan. 7:27) will exercise its beneficial rule over mankind so conclusively that men will begin to understand that "the former things have forever passed away." How glorious will be their awakening to the fact that the new Ruler of earth is that same

wise, gentle, and loving Jesus, the anniversary of whose birth they have been celebrating for so long at every Christmas season.

OUR REDEMPTION DRAWETH NIGH

And what of us highly favored ones who long ago discovered what peace with God could mean, we who have found a refuge in the secret place of the Most High? Does that peace which our Lord promised (John 14:27) still possess our hearts and minds? The inspired Psalmist once uttered these words concerning the City of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the Most High: "God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved: ... Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea." (Ps. 46:5, 2.) The indications are that ere long we may witness those conditions of which the Psalmist spoke. Even now men's hearts are failing them for fear of the coming tempest of trouble, and we would unquestionably share that fear had we not laid hold upon the promises of the Word. But praise God, his truth has been and still is our shield and our buckler. (Ps. 91:4.) So then let us at this Christmas season be strong and of a good courage, for the Lord thy God doth go with thee. "He will not fail thee nor forsake thee." (Deut. 31:6.) Let us participate with thankful hearts in the celebration of the Christmas season. Let that confidence and assurance which the Lord has bestowed upon us impel us to speak words of cheer and encouragement to those whose ears have not yet become attuned to an appreciation of the true meaning of the angelic proclamation of "peace on earth, good will to men."

- J. R. Hughes

The Mystery of Godliness

"Great is the mystery of godliness." - 1 Tim. 3:16.

THE universe is mystery upon mystery. From the animalcule in the air and in the water, to the stars that burn in the firmament at inconceivably vast distances from the earth, there is mystery. And that is only another way of saying that we do not fully understand anything. The ancients believed in four elements -- earth, air, fire, and water. But today we have discovered one hundred three elements. For a long time it was believed that the atom was the smallest indivisible particle of matter, but we now talk of atoms being composed of electrons. The mysterious power of electricity that pervades the earth and water has been applied only during modern times. There is a mystery in a drop of water. What binds two atoms of hydrogen and one atom of oxygen together to form a molecule of water? We indeed give it a name, for we call it chemical affinity. But what causes that precise action to take place? And why are not the atoms combined in different proportions from what they are?

Why does a fly have eight thousand eyes? Why does a grasshopper have to have two hundred and seventy horny teeth in his body? Why does a codfish's eyes (formerly supposed to be simply a piece of jelly) have a crystalline lens composed of millions of microscopic fibers held together by millions of tiny hooks? Where does the earthworm get the power to grow a new head if his old one is cut off? Why is it that some plants eat insects and fully digest them? Why does a horse get up front feet first, and a cow hind feet first? Why? Well, we could just ask questions indefinitely, and about the only answer we would receive is, things are the way they are because they exist in obedience to the laws of their creation.

One of the greatest mysteries is that of germination. How do the biochemical elements that compose the embryo of the seed become invested with that wonderful property called life? A poet has expressed this thought in the words:

"Behold the mystery the brown earth shields,
A little sowing, a swift touch of death,
An unseen stirring of some quickening breath,
And young grain covers all the barren fields."

And why does nature never make a mistake? Why do not oats forget that they are oats and come up barley or wheat? Verily, as the Bible says, God made everything after its own kind. Man may make mistakes, but not so the seeds of the earth. And after germination they unerringly grow upward and not downward for they seek the sunlight and must have its benefits in order to fructify in due time.

Great, then, is the mystery that is all around us. No one knows exactly what electricity is, what light is, or what life is. Man cannot create a single gnat and invest it with life. In the exercise of his powers he gets to a certain place divided off from the creation of life, and he has to be content with that.

SPIRITUAL THINGS

Beyond the realm of material things are those things that belong to the domain of the spiritual. And godliness is one of these things, for it is connected with truth, with hope, and faith and love. So, then, it is easy to believe that if there is mystery in nature, there is the same element in godliness or godlikeness. In order to strive after this quality, one should know something about God. At least some of the mystery concerning him should be cleared up. When this is accomplished, there will still be much mystery left. To find out that God exists is the first great thing to learn about him. Next comes the great fact that he is love. The ascertaining of this fact gives our minds a big shove ahead. Then an elucidation of his plan and purpose helps to clarify the Bible and reduce its greatest mystery or secret, that is, "Christ in you the hope of glory," to comprehensible elements. But still we have some mystery left, and the Apostle refers to it when he says, "Great is the mystery of godliness." Paul says, "God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory." - 1 Timothy 3:16.

THE SON OF GOD

Every age of the world has had its great characters, yet, Jesus seems to have been different from all of them. He had an individuality that was invested with mystery. To some of his disciples he said, "I have many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now." Indeed, the world has not been able to bear them from that day to this. To the world the things that Jesus set forth in his teaching are incomprehensible. Our Lord was an exponent of the greatest law in the universe -- the law of love. Had the world received this law from him, what a world we should have had today!

The miracles of Jesus were invested with mystery. How could he feed five thousand persons with five loaves and two fishes? This was not done in obedience to any known law. Neither was the healing of blind Bartimaeus, nor the raising of Lazarus, nor the walking upon the water. Could we have looked behind the scenes, we might have beheld a wonderful mechanism at work. Then we know, too, that angels can do things that men cannot do. The way of Jesus was shrouded in mystery. It was therefore a solitary way for the Master. None could enter into the great secret of his life.

There is mystery in the sacrifice of Jesus. No doubt millions have asked the question, Why did God not devise some other plan for the salvation of the human family? Why did it have to be true that "without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins"? And why were animals slain for hundreds of years to typify the greater sacrifices (Heb. 9:23) that were to come? Why were the first-born saved by the blood on the night of the Passover? Simply because of the fact that in due time the Lamb of God was to die on man's behalf. God arranged it to be that way. Could he have done differently? We do not know. He always does the best. We might ask, could he have made the bark of a tree to grow in the center of the tree instead of where it does grow? Probably he could, but it would not have been so good for the tree. The sacrificial death of Jesus has features of mystery about it, and that is equivalent to saying that we do not fully understand it. We believe that in the divine wisdom it was the best thing.

Then the resurrection of Jesus is something of a mystery. We know *why* he was raised up, but not *how*, except that it was by the power of God. It was hard for Thomas to accept the fact of our Lord's resurrection. It has been hard for others to accept it, and millions have rejected it. When the Apostle Paul preached to the people of Athens about the resurrection, we are informed that some mocked, and others said, "We will hear thee again on this matter." So dead was Jesus,

however, that he could do nothing toward raising himself to life. Peter said, "Him hath God raised up, to be a Prince and a Savior." It was a simple matter for the heavenly Father, the great Source of life, to give life to his beloved Son.

THE TRUTH THAT JESUS PROCLAIMED

And think of the mystery which lay in the truth that Jesus proclaimed. It was mystery upon mystery. His disciples said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" And his reply was, "Because to you it is given to know the mystery of the Kingdom of God, but to them that are without, it is not given.... Therefore I speak to them in parables, so that in seeing they may see and not perceive, and hearing they may hear and not understand; so that in them is fulfilled the prophecy of the Prophet Isaiah,... 'Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy and shut their eyes, lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and I should heal them.'" What a strange thing to say! Did not our Lord want men to become converted? Apparently not. Had he wanted to draw great numbers to a state of conversion, he could have presented the truth in so simple a form and have backed it up with such power, that this purpose would have been accomplished. But Jesus never worked against the divine program. He knew that the time of the world's conversion had not come. So he said, "No man cometh unto me except the Father which sent me draw him." Here was another strange or mysterious thing. Why does God draw some, and not others? Why do some take up with the truth almost immediately, and others fail to grasp its import?

And the parables of our Lord seem simple enough, and yet there is a great depth of meaning in them. There is the parable of the Virgins and their lamps. Some think they know all about that parable. They know exactly when the midnight cry went forth, or will go forth. They know when the foolish virgins will say to the wise, "Give us of your oil, for our lamps are gone out." They even know when the door will be shut. It is just wonderful how clear this entire matter is to them. They surely have been greatly favored of the Lord, that is, if they are right? But there comes the great question. Are they right?

It may be -- and this is what some Bible expositors think -- that every little point of this parable will not find fulfillment, and that the parable was chiefly set forth in order to *prepare us* for what is to come in a general way. The fact was that Jesus was to come back some time, and his followers were to be prepared for that event by having their lamps burning and by having oil in their vessels in order to keep their lamps supplied and thus prevent the flame from becoming extinguished.

Then there is the parable of the Unjust Steward. This man was accused of wasting his Lord's substance. He realized that he was to be put out of the stewardship. This was not a pleasant prospect. So he reduced the indebtedness of the people and thus secured their favor. In a worldly way it was a shrewd thing to do. And commenting on it the Master said, "The children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light." Then our Lord went on to say, "Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness, that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations." And how many are there who fully comprehend the meaning and the depth of this injunction?

It would seem that the parable of the Prodigal Son has a great wealth of meaning in it, as has also the parable of the Lost Sheep.

"There were ninety and nine that safely lay
In the shelter of the fold;
But one was out on the hills away,
Far off from the gates of gold."

"And all thro' the mountains, thunder-riven,
And up from the rocky steep,
There arose a glad cry to the gate of heaven,
'Rejoice! I have found My sheep!'
And the angels echoed around the throne,
'Rejoice! for the Lord brings back His own!'"

Oh, what a story! Oh, what a beautiful mystery is the mystery of divine love! We understand a little of it now, but we shall probably continue to explore its unfathomable depths throughout eternity.

MYSTERY UPON MYSTERY

This coming of Jesus to the world was and is a complete mystery to men. The only ones who can understand it are those whose minds are enlightened by the divine spirit. Godliness was expressed in the life of Jesus in terms which said, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." Verily the Son of God was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not.

Nor does the world know his followers. Nor does the world understand them. To be in the world and not of it is certainly a mystery. To be sure, there is an explanation for it, but not an explanation that men in general can receive. Remarkable are the words of the Master where he said, "Ye are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. If ye were of the world, the world would love its own. But ye are not of the world, for I have called you out of the world. Therefore the world hateth you, and ye know that it hated me before it hated you."

Just how does the divine spirit of truth operate in the heart and mind of the follower of the Lord? Is this all clear to us, or is there a mystery about it? Why is it that one person is spirit-begotten and another person is not, and yet they both have the same truth? Why is it that love is as a deep, crystal pure river flowing in the lives of some professed Christians, and like a small, muddy stream in the lives of others? Why do some persons operate in the power of the living God, and others, again, "have a form of godliness but deny the power thereof"?

One thing is plainly manifest, and that is that in order to impart something to others, we ourselves must have something to impart. And in order to rouse them up to godliness, we must possess this quality in our own hearts. Therein lay the power of Jesus. Whatever he asked others to do, he himself did. He did not say, "Go on," but, "Come on." He took the lead in all matters of godliness. He was humble, meek, pure, strong, fully consecrated to the divine will, reverent, peaceable, kind, active in service, possessed of a great vision of future glory. And if we, like He did, would preach love to others, we must be enriched by it in our own lives.

"Great is the mystery of godliness." In the beginning God made man in his own image, but where is that image today? If the race could be restored to that image, love would reign in the hearts of men. Ah, then there would be no wars, no inordinate striving after power, no worship of the god of gold, no breaking hearts in all the world, no, underpaid labor, no want, no care, no sin, no exploitation, no destruction of the world's produce to keep up the price, no gambling, no

robberies, no graft, no dishonesty, nothing to hurt nor to destroy in all God's holy mountain. And that is exactly what is to come in the eventuation of the eternal plan and purpose.

Godliness or godlikeness! Ah, that is what we need. It is simply to be like God in character. God is not the author of all the strife and confusion we find in the world today. Indeed he has not caused any of it. It has all come through a disregard of his laws. And he is permitting the world to reap the fruitage of its sowing. He does this in the confidence that he can and will make it all right in due time. The human family will enjoy the future all the more in contrast with the past. God is a god of peace and order, not one who favors strife and crime and fear. And likewise, God's people must be peacemakers if they are to be like him. And they must be true lovers of righteousness, and must always stand on its side.

"Great is the mystery of godliness." Yes, it is a heavenly mystery, and great is the mystery of heavenly things. The mighty orbs of space are invested with mystery. Who can gaze upon the starry heavens on a fine night and not realize this great fact? And who can gaze upon a real Christian—one who is strong to do and to dare in the cause of right, and who stands forth calm and serene in the midst of raging elements—and not be impressed with the thought that here is the highest form of true greatness, that here is one truly furnished unto all good works and fully clad in the complete panoply of the truth of the living God!

- *Walter Sargeant*

Thanksgiving

"Oh give thanks unto Jehovah; for he is good; for his lovingkindness endureth for ever." - Psalm 136:11

TO THE Christian, every day is a day of thanksgiving. The Psalmist expresses this attitude: "O Lord, ... we thy people and sheep of thy pasture will give thee thanks for ever." "Giving thanks always," says the Apostle, "for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ unto God, even the Father" - Psalm 79:13; Eph. 5:20.

The appointment by the head of the nation of a special Day of Thanksgiving is profitable to the Christian, however, for it prompts him to an enumeration of his many and infinite blessings. When we attempt this we are impelled to exclaim with Paul: "Thanks be to God for his unspeakable bounty" -- which is just another way of saying, "The half has never been told." "Unspeakable" here means not something which cannot be spoken of, but that which has not been fully spoken or declared.

For the gift of Jesus, our Savior; for the "peace with God" which comes as a result of his sacrifice; for the further "grace wherein we stand" -- the great High Calling to the Priesthood--as a result of which "we rejoice in hope of the glory of God"; for the daily experiences, testings, trials, and for the daily supply of grace which enables us to benefit eternally by these temporal afflictions--all these are but a part of his "unspeakable bounty." Eternity, and the cumulative capacity of "all saints" will be required to realize and to tell the complete story of our Father's munificence - 2 Cor. 9:15; Eph. 2:18.

Not the least of our present and particular blessings is that of living under a civil government that assures to every citizen complete liberty of religious assemblage, worship, and expression--in speech and in print. For such a government we may well heed the Apostle's words: "I exhort therefore, first of all, that ... thanksgivings be made for ... kings and all that are in high place; that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and gravity" - 1 Timothy 2:1, 2.

The Apostle Paul made what might be described as the first general Thanksgiving proclamation, on the Areopagus, or Hill of Mars, in Athens. After gracefully complimenting the philosophers on their regard for religion, he referred to the altar he had observed in passing through their streets, inscribed *"To an unknown god,"* and continued:

"Whom . . . ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you... . He is the Lord of heaven and earth ... He giveth to all life, and breath, and all things. . . . All nations of men ... should seek the Lord ... for in him we live and move and have our being.... And ... he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained - Acts 17:23-31.

The God that Paul declared is almost as "unknown" to the modern world as he was to the ancient Athenians. The Apostle did not attempt to enlighten the Athenians in respect to God except in regard to the three broad generalities about him: He is the Creator, he is the Preserver, he is the Restorer, of man's life. The modern world shares the skepticism of the Athenians regarding the third of these affirmations--the doctrine of the *resurrection*. While the modern religionist, like the ancient, is willing to grant that God (through some partly understood scientific laws) was the Creator, and, in a vague and secondary way, is the preserver or helper of those who "help themselves," when it comes to the future life, he seems to find it easier to believe in something in-

tangible and visionary than in the simplicity of the Scriptural Resurrection. To believe in *that* he must *believe* in God! The idea of man coming back, through a resurrection, to solid earth and veritable flesh and blood is as absurd even to the majority of professed Christians as it was to the ancient Areopagites, who "mocked when they heard of the resurrection of the dead."

Today the true Christian stands, as alien as was Paul in Athens, in the midst of another and greater Mars' Hill -- a world preponderantly committed to reliance for safety and well-being upon force of arms and the god of war. From every direction the winds bring the sound of clanging machinery forging the weapons of warfare, the blare of martial music and the hoarse shouts of the multitude of military hero-worshippers. Few indeed hear the Voice speaking behind them, saying: "Yet have I set *my* king upon my holy hill of Zion. Ask of me, and I will give thee the nations for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. Thou shalt rule them with a rod of iron" - Psalm 2.

Oh sing unto Jehovah a new song:
Sing unto Jehovah, all the earth.
Sing unto Jehovah, bless his name;
Show forth his salvation from day to day.
Declare his glory among the nations,
His marvellous works among all the peoples.

Say among the nations, Jehovah *reigneth*:

The [new] world is established that *it* cannot be moved:
He *will* judge the peoples with equity.
Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
Let the sea roar, and the fulness thereof;
Let the field exult, and all that is therein;
Then shall all the trees of the wood sing for joy
Before Jehovah; for he cometh,
For he cometh to judge the earth:
He *will* judge the world with righteousness,
And the peoples with his truth.

Mercy and truth are met together;
Righteousness and peace have kissed each other.
Truth springeth out of the earth;
And righteousness hath looked down from heaven.
Yea, Jehovah *will* give that which is good.

Praise ye Jehovah! - Psalms 96 and 85.

- H. E. Hollister

Destiny of the Unrepentant

SINCE the Apostles "fell asleep" a number of Christian scholars, particularly those living during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, testified to their belief in a hope which extended beyond the grave—that probation for eternal life does not end for all mankind when this present earthly life ends. While such scholars, in other respects, were not fully aware of the truths in the Divine Plan which have been unfolded in the clearer light of our day they, nevertheless, did see and preached this hope.

Albert O. Hudson, editor of the *Bible Study Monthly*, well and favorably known to our readers, addresses himself to this subject in his new book *Future Probation in Christian Belief*. With his permission, we present below the sixth of a series of seven articles excerpted from that book.

- Editorial Committee

Now if indeed the Divine purpose does include this extended opportunity to hear the evangel and accept Christ before the Last Judgment [discussed in previous installments] the question naturally arises as to the position of those, if such there be, whose hearts are so fully set in them to do evil that even then they fail to respond. What is the fate of the finally impenitent? That there is at least the possibility of there being such is inherent in the fact of human free will; since no man is to be forced into acceptance of Christ, and the appeal of the Gospel, in the next life as in this, is for voluntary and sincere yielding of oneself to Christ or not at all, it may be at the end that some will be found to have lost eternal life just because they will not have it on the terms offered. To quote Petaval in *The Problem of Immortality*, "God will not force an unending life upon beings who reject the normal conditions of existence." It must always be remembered that we have been created and given life for a purpose; we owe our existence and life to God and we have a place and function in his creation which we must willingly and loyally fill if that creation is to continue in its destined course. But some men may refuse to take this, their ordained place, and so they become a discordant and disruptive element in creation. "What we dread," says Dr. Paterson Smyth, "is that the man may not want, and so may have rendered himself incapable of turning to God. We dread, not God's Will, but the man's own will. Character tends to permanence. Free will is a glorious but a dangerous prerogative. All experience leads towards the belief that a human "will" may so distort itself as to grow incapable of good."

Thus the consequence of sin in the face of full light and full opportunity is incurred by the individual's own choice. It is a sobering thought that deliberate continuance in evil-doing can destroy a man's capacity for repentance and conversion to the good life. And the result of that is death, the cessation of life, for the man who cuts himself off from God cuts himself off from the only source of life. Some years ago Prof. J. Alexander Findlay, writing in the *British Weekly*, said, "If a life depends upon fellowship with God, the possibility must remain that the time may come when a man, no longer being capable of fellowship with God, shall die and become extinct, simply because there is no life left in him, because his soul is dead." Now this is exactly what the Scripture says. Jesus told his listeners that God is able to destroy, not only the body, but also the soul (Matt. 10:28). Some of the most apt and cogent expressions of this principle are to be found, of all places, in the Book of Proverbs; the fact does at least show that this truth was grasped even in those faraway days. "As righteousness tendeth to life, so he that pursueth evil pursueth it to his own death. But he that sinneth against me wrongeth his own soul; all they that hate me love death" (Prov. 11:19; 12:28). There is constant insistence in Scripture upon the hardening and

blinding effect of human resistance to the drawing power of God and the cumulative influence of wrongdoing upon the character. Says Farrar in *Eternal Hope*, "It is impossible for us to estimate the hardening effect of obstinate persistence in evil, and the power of the human will to resist the law and reject the love of God ... if a man will not see God because clouds and darkness are round about him, although righteousness and judgment are the habitation of his seat, then we can do no more. He must believe or not believe -- he must bear or must forbear, as seems him best. We cannot argue about color to the blind. We cannot prove the glory of music to the deaf. If a man shuts his eyes hard, we cannot make him see the sun This is the cause and the only cause of that which comes at last upon the man who will not have God. He quite literally dies by his own hand.

"The disease of moral evil," says Row, "willfully persisted in, for aught we know to the contrary, may be capable of destroying man as a personal conscious being. No being that has been brought into existence by the will of another can have endless existence inherent in itself. Inasmuch therefore as man is destitute of self-existence, the period during which he will continue to exist must be dependent on the good pleasure of him who by his all-powerful energy maintains him in being ... (God) has so constituted the moral universe that, under his providential government, the disease of evil will ultimately destroy man's spiritual and moral being, just as incurable physical disease destroys his bodily life."

Dr. Lyman Abbott, a well-known Congregational minister of Brooklyn, N.Y. at the turn of the century, editor of *Christian Union* and writer of many books, well expressed the basic principle in a Conference address in 1900.

"I know that I can choose the good and therefore I can choose the evil. What I find true in myself I believe to be true in every other man; he can choose the good and therefore he can choose the evil. And while I wistfully desire -- yea, and sometimes devoutly hope -- that when the great drama of life here and hereafter is ended, all God's creatures will have chosen the good, I do not know. If I believed that God could make all men righteous, I should be sure that he would make all men righteous; otherwise He would not be a righteous God. But I start from the other pole, I begin with my own absolute freedom. I recognize as a fact, in my life, in my philosophy and in my preaching, that, in the last analysis, the destiny of every man is in his own hands. Father may persuade, mother may entice, influences may environ, God himself may surround with all possible persuasions, but in the last analysis the destiny of every man is in his own hands. And what he will do with it I do not know.

"Why, if God be good, has he made a world in which there is sin? Why has he not made a world sinless? Could he not? Certainly; he not only could, he has. The birds are sinless. But he could not make a world in which are free moral agents able to choose the good without giving them at the same time power to choose the evil. Power to choose the one is power to choose the other; and a world in which there are some men who choose shame, dishonor, sin and death is a better world, I dare to say, than a world made of machines that could choose neither the good nor the evil."

There is, then, a stark reality enshrined in statements such as those of Ezekiel 18:4, "The soul that sinneth, it shall die" and Jeremiah 31:30, "Every one shall die for his own iniquity." Says the Psalmist, "The face of the Lord is against them that do evil, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth" (Ps. 34:14). "They that plow iniquity and sow wickedness," adds Job 4:8, 9, "reap the same. By the blast of God they perish, and by the breath of his nostrils are they consumed." "Whosoever hath sinned against me," God told Moses, "him will I blot out of my book" (Exod. 32:33). Adding to this the vivid allusions of, for example, Peter to the "day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men" (2 Pet. 3:7) and Paul to those who suffer "everlasting destruction

from the presence of the Lord" (2 Thess. 1:7-10) and the fate of the finally impenitent is plain. "The wages of sin is death," says Paul (Rom. 6:23) just so surely as the gift of God, accepted by the one who believes, is life-eternal life. These two stand as opposites; death is the antithesis of life, a condition of no-life, of nonexistence. Thus Charles, "The Pauline eschatology points obviously, in its ultimate issues, either to the final redemption of all created personal beings, or -- and this seems the true alter native -- to the destruction of the finally impenitent. But this destruction would not be of the nature of an external punishment, but subjective and self-inflicted."

Strong protest is sometimes raised against what is called by the protestors the "doctrine of annihilation," but when all is said and done this is the only possible end for the sinner who elects to remain in his sin. Evil is inherently unstable and must one day come to an end. A time must come when the Lord Jesus Christ is universally acclaimed as Lord without a dissentient voice: "at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow ... and every tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:10, 11). Speaking to Moses (Num. 14:21), the Lord said, "As truly as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord." Many Scripture passages tell in no uncertain tones of the final triumph of God's creative work in respect to this earth when all that partakes of or is contaminated with evil and sin is no more, and the entire earthly creation is unanimous in loyal and wholehearted service to, and union with, God.

There is no better comment on this aspect of God's purpose, and no better definition of the underlying principle, than that voiced by David (Ps. 37:19); "For yet a little while, and the wicked shall not be; yea, thou shalt diligently consider his place, and it shall not be."

Be Strong and of a Good Courage

Joshua 1:6.

THE dictionary rendering of *courage* is bravery, boldness; and of the word *strong*, powerful.

"Be thou powerful and very brave" -- is that what the Lord meant?

As the world estimates courage and strength people go to great lengths to prove their skill and stamina in feats of strength and endurance -- climbing great heights, crossing oceans alone and in a variety of difficult ways, -- but that is not what the Lord wants of his people.

Strength of mind and moral courage are the qualities to be acquired. True, his ancient people did have to endure hardship of a physical kind, and as we read the life of Joshua we recall the unpleasant task he had of smiting and subduing the surrounding nations before he could possess the land for the children of Israel, but it was a far deeper and more significant thing that was required of him. As recorded in the last few verses of chapter one, the children of Israel were willing to accept him if he would keep faith with God and give them good leadership.

In keeping with this line of thought let us examine the record of some of the people mentioned in Holy Writ who demonstrated these virtues in their little span of life; -- records that come down to us as examples of how *we* should live today.

JOB

We recall the very severe trial that Job had to endure. Wracked with pain, and passing through a time of mental anguish, he was forced to listen to the arguments of worldly-wise men. His resistance to the admonition, "curse God and die," and his confidence in God in saying, "If he slay me yet will I trust him," prove that although he was unable to combat their arguments, his faith was still strong.

The whole book of job is eloquent with the fortitude of this man of God, showing a picture of the suffering of the whole world of mankind and their final deliverance and inheritance.

GIDEON

Now let us look at Gideon. Recall his strength of endurance and courage, and his implicit trust and faith in God when the numbers were whittled down to three hundred. In judges, chapter 7, we have a wonderful picture of the way in which God ordained which should be the ones that would assist Gideon in the remarkable victory that was his. The seemingly simple test of how they drank the waters had in it the act of being prepared for any emergency. It makes stirring reading even in these days when we take so much for granted, to refresh our minds as to the way God dealt with his servant. We read of the culmination of their victory, how they took up strategic places (one hundred on each of three sides of the Midianites), how they had lamps in their pitchers, and trumpets in their hands; at a command from Gideon they "brake the pitchers and holding the lamps in their left hands, and the trumpets in their right hands to blow withal: they cried, . The sword of the Lord, and of Gideon. And they stood every man in his place round about the camp: and all the host ran, and cried, and fled." Judges 7:20, 21.

There is a very similar Scripture in 2 Chronicles 20:17, which reads, "Ye shall not need to fight in *this* battle: set yourselves, stand ye still, and see the salvation of the Lord with you, O Judah and Jerusalem: fear not, nor be dismayed; tomorrow go out against them: for the Lord will be with you." Surely these passages have a very special message for us at this present time.

DAVID

Coming to David we will take only one example from a life full of incident. The one that stands out most vividly is the slaying of the Philistine giant, Goliath.

Here was a strapping young lad obviously in the prime of youth, but even so no match for such an antagonist. We can well understand why the Philistine hero should have derided him, and poured scorn on those who sent him. In 1 Samuel 17 we read how King Saul clothed David in his own armor and put a helmet of brass on his head, and armed him with a coat of mail. Lastly he got him to gird his own sword on his armor.

Needless to say, David felt most uncomfortable in all this paraphernalia, and of course cast it all off. He then took five smooth stones from the brook and put them in a bag. And he took the sling that he had used so many times before when he had protected his father's sheep from the lions and the bears. You will also remember the confident words of David when he was face to face with his adversary. Verse 45 reads: "Then said David to the Philistine, Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied."

What a marvelous example this is for the Lord's people today -- this is the only safe way to meet *our* Adversary.

ELIJAH

Elijah is another example of tremendous courage and dependency on the Lord. We recall the times he had to go before Ahab and Jezebel to prophesy before them; and also how he had to flee on more than one occasion, as she sought his life. Just picture his steadfast courage as he stood on Mount Carmel and defied the priests of Baal. In 1 Kings 17, we are told of the famine that had been in the land; of how there had been neither dew nor rain for many years; how he was succored by the ravens and the widow of Zarephath. And then in the 18th chapter we come to the wonderful climax, and to the passage where his strong faith was vindicated.

We readily call to mind the assembling of the great multitude of people, "all the children of Israel" and more than eight hundred prophets of Baal and of the groves. How Elijah prepared an altar and had the sacrifice slain. And after it had been laid on the altar he commanded that they fill four barrels with water and that it should be poured over the sacrifice so that it ran over the wood even down to the trench that had been dug around the altar. This he had repeated so that the whole thing was thoroughly saturated -- and this at a time when there had been no rain for years. Then crying on the Lord: "Hear me, O Lord, hear me, that this people may know that thou art the Lord God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again. Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench." - 1 Kings 18:37, 38.

Later Elijah called upon the Lord: "It is enough; O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers." But the Lord showed him that he still had work for Elijah to do, that even at that time there were many thousands that had not bowed the knee to Baal.

JEREMIAH

Jeremiah had a very unpleasant mission to perform, nevertheless he carried on, steadfastly determined to follow the leadings of the Lord. He was called at a very early age to the prophetic office and continued to prophesy for forty-two years. One commentator has said of him: "We find him sensitive to a most painful degree, timid, shy, hopeless, desponding, constantly complaining and dissatisfied with the course of events, but never flinching from duty Timid in resolve, he was unflinching in execution; as fearless when he had to face the world as he was dispirited and prone to murmuring when alone with God. Judged by his own estimate of himself he was feeble, and his mission a failure; really, in the hour of action and when duty called him, he was in very truth a defenced city,' an iron pillar, and brazen walls against the whole land. He was a noble example of the triumph of the moral over the physical nature."

It is worthwhile noting how he was called, as recorded in the first chapter of Jeremiah, verses 4-9 (Jer 1:4-9):

"The word of the Lord came unto me, saying,

"Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.

"Then said I, Ah, Lord God! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child.

"But the Lord said unto me, Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak.

"Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the Lord.

"Then the Lord put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the Lord said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth."

DANIEL

Passing on we come to Daniel and try to conjure up the scene as he was thrown into the den of lions -- an innocent man wrongfully condemned by jealous men-his feelings of complete trust and confidence in the Lord and the courage he showed when actually confronted with the ferocious beasts. His exultant reply when the king went to visit him early the next morning: "My God hath sent his angel, and hath shut the lions' mouths, that they have not hurt me: forasmuch as before him innocency was found in me; and also before thee, O king, have I done no hurt."

THE THREE HEBREW CHILDREN

We also call to mind the three Hebrew children, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego-how they were bound and cast into the fiery furnace. Remember their courageous words: "We are not careful to answer thee in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up."

What a transcendent note of confidence is here manifest and how much it behooves us to try to emulate such a courageous stand. The temptation with us would be to make all sorts of excuses about the weakness of our flesh; whereas really we should be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might.

How do these reflections affect us? Are we being strong and very courageous in our present, everyday experiences? Do we trust sufficiently, are we bold to come to the throne of heavenly grace to get the necessary strength to assist us in our trials and difficulties?

Again, let us think for a moment how we react in times of national and international stress. These upheavals sometimes make us fearful, and as human beings we shrink from them, but should we not rather look on them as additional opportunities to prove ourselves? We are instructed to be more than 'overcomers; if this is to be true of us we shall need to be equipped with the whole armor of God. We shall need to make sure that it is securely buckled on, that it is kept bright and shining, and that there are no cracks anywhere, and particularly, we should keep our eyes ever on the goal set before us, to the end that we shall be overcomers through Jesus Christ our Lord.

What an ennobling thought, that the great God of the universe has called us to be joint-heirs with his son. That just as he dealt with the heroes of faith, whose lives we have briefly touched on foregoing; dealt with them by fighting their battles, preparing the way for them, cheering, encouraging and fortifying them when they lost hope; so does he deal with us if we are willing and obedient.

If we are truly his, and his spirit witnesseth with our spirit that we are the sons of God, then each of us can claim the promise: "In quietness and in confidence shall be our strength," while with joy we are able by the eye of faith to look forward to that wonderful day -- not far distant -- when God shall make wars to cease even unto the ends of the earth. Be still and know that I am God; I will be exalted in the earth. - Psalms 46:9, 10.

- *John Enroll, Eng.*

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