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LIVING WATER

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Living Water 152

(March – April 2019)

Recent Ministry

- FILLED UNTO ALL THE FULNESS OF GOD** Philip White 1
An address at Sevenoaks, 7th July 2018

Poetry Selection

- BEFORE THE THRONE OF GOD ABOVE** 11
Charitie L. Smith (1842 – 1923)

Testimony Section

- THE CONVERSION OF ROBINSON CRUSOE** 12
Daniel Defoe (1660 – 1731)

April this year marks the 300th anniversary of the publication of “Robinson Crusoe”. It may surprise many to learn that the book was written by Daniel Defoe after he came to Christ and was intended by him as a way of spreading the gospel

A voice from the past

- THE BEST PLACE FOR LEARNING** 15
J. B. Stoney (1814 – 1897)

A word for today

- THE ABUNDANCE OF GRACE** F. E. Raven (1837 – 1903) 17
Continuing the series begun in issue No 149.

Recent Ministry

FILLED UNTO ALL THE FULNESS OF GOD

Ephesians 3

A little while ago I discovered a Christian organisation which defined its aim as 'Preaching Christ in all His fulness'. It made me think how great everything is that relates to our Lord Jesus Christ. I have read today the whole of chapter 3 of Ephesians so that we might see something of the fulness of Christ, the fulness of the Holy Spirit, the fulness of God and the fulness of the church.

The first chapter of Ephesians shows us what we have been brought into. It is full of wonderful things- we have been blessed *"with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ" (v.3)*. It is all in Christ. Then chapter two tells us how it was brought about – through the cross. We were once alienated by wicked works but now we *"are become nigh by the blood of the Christ" (v.13)*. That is the journey we have each taken to come into these great things.

It seems that Paul in his writings was about to go on to some of the practical results of this, but before he does so the Holy Spirit leads him to speak of the fulness of things, and the journey to them. We are often meagre in our appreciation of Christ, the Holy Spirit and of God and lacking in appreciation of the church. Ephesians chapter 3 is to stir us up and Paul prays that we might have a deeper sense of these things .

The first thing that struck me in Ephesians 3 is what Paul says about the 'mystery', that is, that Jew and Gentile have been brought together. We may struggle a bit with this but Paul is eloquent – he is speaking about what has been revealed to him and what he has come to believe and understand. In the old dispensation God had Israel for His people but the mystery is that there was going to be a people brought out from the nations, that is you and I, and that Jew and Gentile were going to be

formed into one body, the church. But in order for that to take place the gospel had to be preached and Paul was a minister of that gospel. What did he preach? He announced *"among the nations the glad tidings of the unsearchable riches of the Christ"* (v.5). What a gospel!

It is a challenge, whether we preach that gospel. Is that what we are preaching today? I have a burden and I think I am not alone. First of all the gospel needs to be preached. If you do not know what that is turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 15; it will tell you the basics of the gospel: *"that Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures; and that he was buried; and that he was raised the third day, according to the scriptures"* (1 Corinthians 15:3, 4). But there is far more than that. Paul preached the *"unsearchable riches of the Christ"*. Do we hear that every Lord's day? I am challenged, myself. 'Unsearchable' does not mean you cannot find it. It means you will never come to the end of it!

I was down at Worthing seafront this morning; if I dip a bowl into the sea can I drain it? However many times I put the bowl into the sea there is more and more, and that is what Christ is like. The more I know about Him the more I love Him, the more I understand – the more there is to know and you will never get to an end of it - the unsearchable riches of the Christ! I am challenged as to whether I preach that. It is something to go in for. It makes everything else fade into insignificance. The old hymn is right:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face.
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace.

I would encourage you to look into these unsearchable riches, to find them out.

Paul says that this mystery of the gospel was once hidden and now it has been brought into the light, fully revealed. Paul, who

described himself as *"less than the least of all saints"* (v.8), had been given this great ministry. For Paul to describe himself as *"less than the least"* was no false humility on his part; he realised how great the gospel is, how great Christ is and he realised how unworthy he was. That is how we should be. Think of the greatness of Christ, His unsearchable riches, think of who He is, not only what He has done - that forms part of the gospel but the gospel is more than that - it is knowing Christ personally and coming into all that He would share with us.

As a result of this gospel being preached we realise that we are brought into a wonderful new relationship with God and we form part of the church. What does the church mean to you? Is it just a collection of Christians? No, it is not; it is something the Lord has formed Himself. He said, *"I will build my assembly, and Hades' gates shall not prevail against it"* (Matthew 16:18). Sometimes we have rather limited thoughts as to the church. What is it for? Well, Paul makes a remarkable statement here; he says that through the assembly the all-various wisdom of God is to be displayed. We read: *"in order that now to the principalities and authorities in the heavenlies"* (it is not just on earth) *"might be made known through the assembly the all-various wisdom of God"* (v. 10). It is wonderful, is it not? God demonstrates the wonder of what He is doing through the church, to a wondering universe. You might say He is using the church, as a mouthpiece to speak to the whole of the universe. How great that is. In that way the whole universe is seeing, and will see fully in a day to come, the all-various wisdom of God.

So we have the unsearchable riches of the Christ, then the all-various wisdom of God. What does that entail? It is not man's wisdom. If you read the beginning of the epistle to the Corinthians, we see that to a man away from God the word of the cross is foolishness, *"but to us that are saved it is ... God's power and God's wisdom"* (1 Corinthians 1:18, 24). God's ways are not our ways. His thoughts are not our thoughts. But it is

wonderful to think of that company of which you and I are part – for it is not completed yet – in the moment the Lord Jesus returns for His own, it will be complete and perfect.

We may have meagre thoughts as to the Spirit yet how great He is.

It is not perfect at the moment. Yes, in Christ it is perfect, but practically the church is not. We only have to look at our own hearts to see that. But Christ nourishes and cherishes the church (see Ephesians 5:29), so that *“the Spirit and the bride say, Come”* (Revelation 22:17). There is nothing to compare with the church because it is formed by Christ Himself. It is formed to reflect His glory just as the moon reflects the glory of the sun. And it is through that body of believers of which you and I are part that the all-various wisdom of God will shine. Let us not have meagre thoughts as to the greatness of the church.

I just move on to the Spirit. We read of a fulness in the Spirit in chapter 5: *“be not drunk with wine, ... but be filled with the Spirit”* (v.18). We may have meagre thoughts as to the Spirit yet how great He is. He is one with the Father and the Son. He resides in us as a Person, not just a force. He is able to strengthen us. That is part of Paul’s prayer in chapter 3, *“strengthened with power by his Spirit in the inner man”* (v.16).

It is wonderful that as a believer you have – not some ‘thing’ but a ‘Person’ strengthening you in the inner man, in the very core of your being. And we need strength, do we not? Sometimes we feel weak, sometimes very weak. I do not mean physically, I mean spiritually. But the Spirit is able to strengthen us that we can understand these things. Oh, the greatness of the power of the Spirit. As I noted earlier, in chapter 5 Paul says, *“be not drunk with wine, ... but be filled...”*. That is presented as a normal Christian experience. I have to say it is abnormal for me. What about you, dear brother, dear sister? It is open to every

believer. I wonder if we realise the greatness of the One who is in us, who has been given to us. The Spirit is a gift. Think of the greatness of what God has done in giving us of His Spirit.

If we knew what it was to be filled with the Spirit, what a difference it would make to our lives and our meetings. What a difference it would make to our testimony! Of course, if we are to be filled with the Spirit something has to happen first because the Spirit can only fill a heart that has been emptied. And that is the problem. If we are to come into the greatness of these things, there is an emptying that needs to be going on and the only way that such emptying can be brought about is to look at the cross; for it is there that I realise that all that I am has to go; all my pride, self-seeking, self-importance and the like. We need to get rid of the rubbish to make way for Christ to be formed in us.

Now in verse 14 of chapter 3 Paul comes to a full prayer:- *“I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”*. It is a wonderful prayer and it is made up of four requests which have been likened to climbing a mountain. There are two requests at the beginning:

1. *“in order that he may give you according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with power by his Spirit in the inner man” (v.16) and,*
2. *“that the Christ may dwell, through faith, in your hearts” (v.17)*

Then follows, *“being rooted and founded in love”*. That is not exactly part of the prayer. Paul is stating where the Ephesians should be after the first two requests; they were now rooted and founded in love. I have not done much mountaineering but when you climb up there comes a point where you have to stop and take a breather and that is what this really is; *“being rooted and founded in love”* is a kind of pause, a half way point before you go on to the top.

Now the first requests of the prayer are related to what is inward. We have been reading Luke's gospel locally and it is just amazing; the Pharisee's religion was all about the outside and the Lord saw right through it. But then we may be no different – we may do the right things and say the right words. But it is the inner man that counts, because if we are right inside we will be right outside. That is Paul's first prayer request. Let us feel our weakness and cry to the Holy Spirit to be strengthened in the inner man..

The second request is, *"that the Christ may dwell, through faith, in your hearts"*. Now, that is not just when we come to salvation. What a wonderful thing happened when Jesus came into my heart. Yes, it is, we sometimes sing that. But this is not just Jesus coming into the heart. It says that *"the Christ may dwell, through faith, in your hearts"*; that word 'dwell' means 'to abide', 'to settle'. So it is not just that I come as a sinner to Christ and He saves me and Jesus comes into my heart and everything else is fine and I carry on as I am. No, what Paul is praying here is that Christ might abide, might settle there.

In other words, is the Lord Jesus at home in your heart? Does He feel comfortable there? When we are with people we like we feel at home. What about the Lord Jesus? He gave some wonderful instruction in John 15 about abiding in Him and He in us.

Paul says, *"that the Christ may dwell"*. This is the Christ that we spoke of at the beginning when I read about the unsearchable riches – that glorious Person – not only what He has done but who He is, His great power, His grace. Paul prays that these Ephesians and, by extension he prays for us, that the Christ, that wonderful Lord Jesus Christ, may dwell in our hearts. Abide there, live there, be settled there through faith.

Then, as I say, there is a halfway mark, *"being rooted and founded in love"*. That is the plateau. Paul is not praying that they may be *"rooted and founded in love"*, he assumes that

having gone on this upward journey that is where they are. I would suggest that if you have been strengthened by the Spirit and if you have Christ living in your heart you have got to a good place and you realise that it is a wonderful place to be – *“rooted and founded in love”*. Everything in Christianity is built on love – God is love. Do we know what it is to have got to this point, that we are settled, we have this wonderful position, *“rooted and founded in love”*?

Now Paul has two more requests:

3. It says, in verse 18, *“in order that ye may be fully able to apprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height...”* (v.18), and,

4. *“that ye may be filled even to all the fulness of God”* (v.19).

The use of the word ‘apprehend’ is interesting; it means to ‘understand’ or ‘to get the full meaning of’. People speak glibly sometimes, about the love of Jesus but it is a love which can be studied. I think there is a danger these days in Christian circles that things can be very emotional. There is nothing wrong with proper emotion, but it is a wonderful thing that the love of Christ can be studied.

Then we apprehend, not on our own, but with all the saints. We need one another. Some Christians because of their circumstances have to dwell alone and God is gracious: the Spirit is able to lift the believer in spirit out of great trials and isolation. But it is wonderful that we have been fitted together and we need each other to understand these things in a greater way. I, as an individual Christian, cannot apprehend the greatness of what I have been speaking of tonight; I need the help of others. So Paul prays, *“In order that ye may be fully able to apprehend...”* There is everything to go in for; you need not stop where you are. It says you may be fully able to apprehend with all the saints, so that we can learn together.

I think that in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper and the praise

which flows from it we get thoughts of Christ that we would not get by ourselves. I have spoken about fulness tonight: *"the breadth and length and depth and height"*. Well, there have been many commentaries on what that means. Paul does not actually attempt to define it. Some have linked the 'breadth and length' to the Lord Jesus Himself. Think of the breadth of Christ's love. It encompasses all. In the Revelation there is a scene where we see the Lord as the One who *"hast redeemed to God by thy blood, out of every tribe and tongue and nation"* (Revelation 5:9). It is not just the Jews. Paul makes it so clear that part of the mystery is that God has formed something new and it is out of every tribe and tongue and nation. Oh the breadth of God's heart, not willing that any should perish!

The depth of Christ's love is part of His unsearchable riches.

Then there is the 'length'; another has said, 'stretching from eternity to eternity'. If you go back to Ephesians 1 you will see that God had these things in mind before the foundation of the world and in yet another verse in this letter we read of God *"displaying in the coming ages the surpassing riches of his grace"* (2:7). It will go on for ever. It says of the Lord Jesus, *"having loved his own who were in the world, loved them to the end"* (John 13:1). The love of God, the love of Christ stretches from eternity to eternity because He is *"the same yesterday, and to-day and to the ages to come"* (Hebrews 13:8). The breadth and length of God's love, as made known in Christ, is wonderful.

Then we read about depth. Well, we often think about how deep Jesus went. He went to Calvary's cross, He went into the grave. Read Jonah's prayer, he went to the bottom of the sea (see Jonah 2). It is a picture of what Christ did for us. He did that for His church, He went that way. The depth of Christ's love is part of His unsearchable riches.

Now, the height - Christ has been raised, given a name which is

above every name *“that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of heavenly and earthly and infernal beings”* (Philippians 2:10) and we are raised with Him; we are given a place as raised up with Christ (see Colossians 3:1). We read too, in Ephesians 1 that we are given that place in the heavenlies. What a wonderful thing. What a privileged position we are brought to. I wonder if we can encompass these things.

Now, just a word on the fourth request of Paul’s prayer: *“that ye may be filled even to all the fulness of God”*. Here we reach the mountain summit. What does it mean, the fulness of God? God is so great and yet in the assembly through Christ we can touch something of all that can be known of God. In our assembly praise we may just touch that briefly: to know that God is all in all. He is so great and all He does is the outcome of His love!

Paul made these four requests, and I believe his prayers were answered, but this prayer still stands for us today. And my simple desire is that we might have a touch as to the greatness of what we have been brought into. It starts with the gospel. ‘Preaching Christ in all His fulness’. May our preaching be more full of Christ and His fulness. May we have a greater understanding of the church – not just a few believers meeting together in weakness, that is just the outward side, but to see that in Christ they are part of a great body which is formed by Christ Himself.

That vessel, the church, is going to show the wisdom of God in a day to come. Not just to the earth, or the angels in heaven – there are things Paul does not tell us. He speaks of *“the principalities and authorities in the heavenlies”* (v.10). That certainly includes angels. You know what it says about angels? That they desire to look into what we have come into (see 1 Peter 1:12). They do not know the story of redemption like we do. And yet God is going to display to the universe the greatness of what He has done in that very vessel, the church. Man could not think any of this up. God in His supreme wisdom has brought it about.

So, we need to heed these four things:

- *“to be strengthened with power by his Spirit in the inner man”.*
- *“that the Christ may dwell, through faith, in your hearts”.*
- *“that ye may be fully able to apprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height...”*
- *“that ye may be filled even to all the fulness of God”.*

I cannot say more. It is something we should be concerned about. If we were more in the gain of these things how blessed it would

cry to God that He might widen your understanding

be. A meeting like this is to that end. In chapter 4 Paul says that these gifts have been given; evangelists, teachers, shepherds, for the *“perfecting of the saints ... until we all arrive at the unity of*

the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God”. And then what does it say, *“at the full-grown man, at the measure of the stature of the fulness of the Christ”?* (vv.12-13).

One day we will be perfect in Christ. This prayer of Paul’s will be answered fully because God’s work is perfect. All of the practical things that Paul goes on to speak about in chapters 4, 5 and 6 of Ephesians is all with a view to getting us to that point about which Paul prays, that we all must arrive. And one day we will all arrive at that summit - the fulness of God.

Maybe you are depressed tonight and would say, ‘This is way above my head, I cannot understand it.’ Well, there is an encouraging part at the end of the chapter where Paul says, *“But to him that is able to do far exceedingly above all which we ask or think”* (v.20). So you can cry to God that He might widen your understanding that you might come into and appreciate these blessings and grow in your knowledge of Christ Himself and the church; grow in the knowledge of the Spirit and know something of the fulness of God Himself. It is all available to us in Christ.

It struck me today - John in his gospel speaks in a special way of how wonderful Christ is. He says, *“for of his fulness we all have received, and grace upon grace”* (John 1:16). John speaks of that as something that has happened. If you are a believer in Jesus not only do you have the gift of the Spirit and eternal life; you have Christ in you and we have all received of His fulness. What a wonderful thing it is that you and I have received of His fulness! Then, just to add the cream as it were, he says, *“and grace upon grace”*.

Well, if there is just a spark of interest in your heart to know more of these glorious things then the Spirit will have achieved His work. May it be so for His name's sake.

Philip White.

An address at Sevenoaks, 7 July 2018

Poetry Selection

BEFORE THE THRONE OF GOD ABOVE

Before the throne of God above
I have a strong, a perfect plea,
A great High Priest, whose name is Love
Who ever lives and pleads for me.
My name is graven on His hands,
My name is written on His heart;
I know that while in heaven He stands
No tongue can bid me thence depart.

When Satan tempts me to despair
And tells me of the guilt within,
Upward I look, and see Him there
Who made an end of all my sin.
Because the sinless Saviour died,
My sinful soul is counted free,
For God the just is satisfied
To look on Him and pardon me.

Behold Him there! The risen Lamb!
My perfect, spotless righteousness,
The great unchangeable "I AM"
The King of glory and of grace!
One with Himself, I cannot die;
My soul is purchased by His blood;
My life is hid with Christ on high,
With Christ my Saviour and my God.

Charitie Lees Smith 1863

Testimony Section

THE CONVERSION OF ROBINSON CRUSOE

Background

The 'Life and adventures of Robinson Crusoe' was published 300 years ago in April 1719. It is the story of a man shipwrecked on a uninhabited island and having to make the best of living there for several years. The author, Daniel Defoe, was brought up in a Christian home, but he enthusiastically went in for all the pleasures of the world and his life was marked by both dramatic successes and also periods of bankruptcy and imprisonment. For years his Christian upbringing seemed to count for nothing at all.

In his late fifties Defoe had a series of setbacks; he was imprisoned for contempt of court, lost influence with his political patrons and became seriously ill. Suddenly the Christian teaching of his early life began to be important to him. Crusoe's conversion, described in "Robinson Crusoe", is based on Defoe's own coming to salvation through Jesus Christ and recounts his own soul experience. Indeed the book has been described as 'Defoe's most extended exploration of God's relationship with His creatures, but how fully it communicates his experience of

1. "Daniel Defoe: His Life" Paula R Backscheider. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP 1989 p.418

God's love is rarely noticed'¹. Sadly most editions of the story omit the 'Christian' passages but they are worth reading. The extracts below are taken from the Norton Critical Edition of Robinson Crusoe, based on the first edition in April 1719.

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Defoe begins his account by telling us of Crusoe's condition as away from God just as Defoe through his own self-will had been:

'I had alas! no divine knowledge; what I had received by the good instruction of my father was then worn out by an uninterrupted series for 8 years of seafaring wickedness... I do not remember that I had in all that time one thought that so much tended either to looking upwards toward God, or inwards towards a reflection upon my own ways; but a certain stupidity of soul, without desire for good, or conscience of evil, had entirely overwhelmed me...'¹.

On falling sick, Crusoe started to feel his need of God and eventually began to read the Bible. Crusoe's Journal entry for July 4, 1660 reads:

'In the morning I took the Bible, and beginning at the New Testament, I began seriously to read it, and imposed upon myself to read a while every morning and every night... It was not long after I set seriously to this work, but I found my heart more deeply and sincerely affected with the wickedness of my past life... providentially, that very day... I came to these words, 'He is exalted a Prince and a Saviour to give Repentance and to give remission' (Acts 5:31). I threw the book down, and with my heart as well as my hands lifted up to heaven, in a kind of ecstasy of joy, I cried out aloud, 'Jesus, thou Son of David, Jesus, thou exalted Prince and Saviour, give me repentance!'

'This was the first time that I could say, in the true sense of the words that I prayed in all my life; for now I prayed with a sense of my condition and with a true Scripture view of hope founded...

1. "Robinson Crusoe" Daniel Defoe. New York: Norton Critical Edition 1975 p.65

on the word of God... Now I looked back on my past life with such horror, and my sins appeared so dreadful, that my soul sought nothing of God, but deliverance from the load of guilt... And I add this part here, to hint to whoever shall read it, that whenever they come to a true sense of things, they will find deliverance from sin a much greater blessing than deliverance from affliction.¹

Crusoe goes on to recount how as trusting in Christ he began to experience the comfort and encouragement that the Lord provides to those that are His:

‘It was now that I began sensibly to feel how much more happy this life I now led was, with all its miserable circumstances, than the wicked, cursed, abominable life I led all the past part of my days; and now I changed both my sorrows and my joys; my very desires altered, my affections changed... and my delights were perfectly new... I began to exercise myself with new thoughts; I daily read the word of God, and applied all the comforts of it to my present state. One morning upon being very sad, I opened the Bible upon these words, *“I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee”* (Joshua 1:5), immediately it occurred that these words were to me. Why else should they be directed in such a manner, just at the moment when I was mourning over my condition, as one forsaken by God and man? Well then, said I, if God does not forsake me, of what ill-consequence can it be, or what matters it, though the world should all forsake me, seeing on the other hand, if I had all the world, and should lose the blessing and favour of God, there would be no comparison in the loss².

Later on in the book Defoe uses Crusoe’s conversations with “Man Friday”, a native that Crusoe had rescued from cannibals, to make another Christian message:

‘When he (Man Friday) came again to me, I entered into a long discourse with him upon the subject of the redemption of man by the Saviour of the world, and the doctrine of the gospel

1. Ibid p.71

2. Ibid p. 82 & 83

preached from heaven, viz. of repentance towards God, and faith in our Blessed Lord Jesus...

‘Another thing I cannot refrain from observing here also from experience, viz. How infinite and inexpressible a blessing it is, that the knowledge of God, and of the doctrine of salvation by Jesus Christ, is so plainly laid down in the word of God; so easy to be received and understood; that as the bare reading of the Scripture made me capable of understanding enough... to carry me directly on to the great work of sincere repentance for my sins, and laying hold of a Saviour for life and salvation, to a stated reformation in practice... and this without any (human) instructor ...’¹.

Extracted from “Robinson Crusoe” by Daniel Defoe, 1719

1. Ibid p 159 & 160

A voice from the past

THE BEST PLACE FOR LEARNING

The circumstances in which we learn most are those which most expose our weakness.

As a rule, we are placed in circumstances which demand that which we are most defective in. We are set in such and such circumstances, not because we can fill them, or behave in them, better than any one else, but on the contrary, because we need to be invigorated by grace in the defects which they are fitted to expose. They disclose to us *where* we need grace, so that constantly we are failing where we are expected to excel. We are put there to cast us on the Lord, and to teach us that we can do nothing. If we could excel there, we should glory in our own success, but when we find that we are placed in the very circumstances that, perhaps, more than any others expose our weakness, we then see that we have no hope of being able to stand or succeed, unless we obtain grace to do so. I am not placed in the circumstances where I could excel most, but I am

The circumstances we are placed in are the ones in which we can best learn

placed in those in which I can best know my need of grace, and best learn dependence. If I could get on without grace, I should grow elated with myself, but when I find that unless the

Lord is at my right hand I shall fail, then I am humbled as to myself, but I am also deepened in dependence, which the demand of my circumstances has, in a way, forced on me; and having learned the blessing of dependence, instead of regretting the circumstances which made it necessary to seek help, I am the more cheered and encouraged to go on in them.

For learning or service every one is placed where there is demand on them. The child at school is not in the easy circumstances of home or the playground. The horse in harness is not in the easy circumstances of being in the stable or at grass. Nor are the teacher and the coachman in the circumstances where they can relax and enjoy themselves, but where they are tested, and where, unless they have quality, they are rejected or dismissed.

The circumstances we are placed in are the ones in which we can best learn and be most useful. It is not because we have nothing to learn or nothing to do for others. If we had nothing to learn, there would be no difficulty in the lessons required of us every day. The fact that there is difficulty in them proves that we are not proficient, and that it is necessary that we should be subjected to circumstances which disclose to us what we require to learn, or to draw from us what we can render. Your weakness is exposed that you may acquire strength, to render unto others - to comfort others, as you have been comforted of God; so that, whether learner or servant, you are always set in circumstances where there is pressure, and not ease. If the learner were to keep at the same lesson always he might feel his difficulty over, but so would his *learning* be over. If the horse remains at grass always, he is still a horse, but he is of no use to any one.

Are you learning? Are you useful? Whenever you are either, you will find that you are in *exacting* circumstances, and therefore not those where you are most at home and most at your ease; but the more you turn them to profit, the more you are learning of grace, and the more useful you are in sharing what you have acquired. You look too much for 'home', and for being at grass; school and harness are not before you as your daily exercise; if they were, you would find that exactions were the very things that put you in a position to learn more, and to serve better.

The Lord lead you to see that He places you where you are to learn and to serve, and that, unless you receive grace to meet your circumstances, they must expose your weakness.

J. B. Stoney (1814 – 1897)

From a letter published in 1873.

A Word for Today

THE ABUNDANCE OF GRACE

"Then Elisha said, hear ye the word of the Lord... Tomorrow about this time shall a measure of fine flour be sold for a shekel and two measures of barley for a shekel in the gate of Samaria. Then a lord on whose hand the king leaned ... said, Behold, if the Lord would make windows in heaven, might this thing be? And [the man of God] said, Behold, thou shalt see it with thine eyes, but thou shalt not eat thereof.

"And there were four leprous men at the entering in of the gate: and they said one to another, Why sit we here until we die? If we say, We will enter into the city, then the famine is in the city, and we shall die there: and if we sit still here, we shall die also. Now... let us fall unto the host of the Syrians: if they save us alive, we shall live; and if they kill us we shall but die. And they arose up in the twilight, to go unto the camp of the Syrians: and when they were come to the uttermost part of the camp of Syria, behold there was no man there. For the Lord had made the host of the Syrians to hear a noise... even the noise of a great host: and they said to one another, Lo, the king of Israel hath hired against us the kings of the Hittites and the kings of the Egyptians, to come upon us. Wherefore they arose and fled in the twilight, and left... the camp as it was, and fled for their life. And when those lepers came to the uttermost part of

the camp, they went into one tent, and did eat and drink, and carried thence silver, and gold, and raiment and went and hid it; and came again, and entered into another tent, and carried thence also... Then they said one to another, We do not well: this is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace: if we tarry till the morning light, some mischief will come upon us: now therefore come, that we may go and tell the king's household. So they came and called unto the porter of the city: and they told them, saying, We came to the camp of the Syrians, and, behold, there was no man there... but horses tied, and asses tied, and the tents as they were. And he called the porters; and they told it to the king's house within.

“And the king arose in the night, and said unto his servants, I will now show you what the Syrians have done to us. They know that we be hungry; therefore have they gone out of the camp to hide themselves in the field, saying, When they come out of the city, we shall catch them alive, and get into the city. And one of his servants answered and said, Let some take... of the horses that remain... and let us send and see. They took therefore two chariot horses... And they went after them unto the Jordan: and, lo, all the way was full of garments and vessels, which the Syrians had cast away in their haste. And the messengers returned and told the king. And the people went out and spoiled the tents of the Syrians. So a measure of fine flour was sold for a shekel, and two measures of barley for a shekel, according to the word of the Lord.

“And the king appointed the lord on whose hand he leaned to have charge of the gate: and the people trod upon him in the gate, and he died...”

2 Kings 7

Many have noticed how the principle of the gospel comes out in connection with the ministry of the prophet Elisha. He was a remarkable type of Christ in that sense. The ministry of Elisha has its own character; it is evangelical. Israel was suffering great affliction from the Syrians and they had to learn that if they were to have any relief or good from God, it must be by the word of the prophet; it was by the prophet that God would give them deliverance. That was always the case. They were ready enough to have the deliverance, but they did not care for the word through which it came; they had to learn that deliverance would only come that way. No one can read these scriptures without feeling the deepest interest in Elisha.

The first point to which I would call your attention is the character of those who bore the glad tidings, then how the principle of the gospel comes out in a most remarkable way, in that the power of the enemy was broken, and where there had been dearth there came to be plenty; it was not only the dearth removed, but there was now abundance. The same principle comes out earlier in the ministry of Elisha (see 2 Kings 4) in the case of the widow and her pot of oil; not only was the debt paid, but she and her sons were to live of the rest. I only just refer to it, and it shows us the divine way. It is not the way of grace simply to relieve a person of debt, but to provide that on which he may live; it relieves you of the pressure that is upon you, but you are to live of the residue; the word which brings the tidings of the grace of God, becomes the power of life in the believer.

I will now say a word about the bearers of the glad tidings. The important point is that they were not great men, they were not learned men, but they were leprous men, and yet they were the bearers of glad tidings; they were evangelists. We see the same thing in connection with the healing of Naaman; it was not a great man that brought the good news to him, not some priest or general, but a little maid who said there was a prophet in Israel who could heal him of his leprosy (see 2 Kings 5).

Now we have four leprous men. People might be offended with the gospel, because it is irregularly brought to them, not by properly constituted ministers; but what I see is this, that man having departed from God, He will not put any honour upon man in the bearing of glad tidings to him. The first people who preached were unlearned men; I quite admit that later on, God did take up a man of another kind, but the first preachers of the gospel—and they were most distinguished men in the service of Christ—were Galilean fishermen and the like, and they were the bearers of glad tidings (see Acts 4:13). This is important, and no one ought to be offended because of the person who brings to them glad tidings. I would say, look at the glad tidings, not at the bearers of them; that is the lesson to be deduced from

what is before us.

The most difficult thing for man to believe in is the goodness of God

These four lepers were in desperate case; they said: If we enter into the city we die, if we sit still here we

die, if we fall to the Syrians and they kill us we shall but die, so to the enemy they went. But the remarkable thing is that when they were come to the camp, they found not only that the enemies were gone, but that they had left abundance behind them, and they fell upon the prey and took the spoil. Then there comes out the natural selfishness of the human heart; they take and hide for themselves, but after a while conscience begins to work, and they say: *"We do not well: this day is a day of good tidings and we hold our peace"* (v.9); some mischief will befall us if we go on in this way, and so they were compelled by conscience, to go and bear glad tidings to the king of Israel, and glad tidings indeed they were. The closing part of the previous chapter gives you a vivid picture of the dreadful distress in which the people of the city were, and which stirred the heart of the king of Israel to its very depth; they were actually killing their children and eating them, and it was not in the power of the king to help them (see 2 Kings 6:25-29). Then come these remarkable tidings: but everybody was sceptical, the king was sceptical and he could not believe them; he said the Syrians were playing them a trick, he could not believe in the goodness of God. The most difficult thing for man to believe in is the goodness of God; people may believe in the existence of God, but to believe in the goodness of God is very difficult to them, and I will tell you why: it is because the human heart is not privy to pure goodness. The consequence is that it finds it exceedingly difficult to believe in the goodness of God; the king of Israel could not, and so he sent out to enquire, but found it was even so as the lepers had said.

There was one man, a distinguished man, a nobleman, who suffers for his unbelief. One word about that. There are many things that God can bear with, but there is a kind of unbelief that

is unpardonable. I see it in the case of the children of Israel; they made a golden calf and God bore with that, but when it came to not believing the glad tidings concerning the land, that was unpardonable; and God swore in His wrath that they should not enter into His rest (see Psalm 95:3) .

There are three notable instances in the life of Elisha, of men falling under the judgment of God through profanity or unbelief: one is the case of the children who mocked the prophet saying: *“Go up, thou bald head (2 Kings 2:13)”*. The second is that of Gehazi, who sought a reward from Naaman for his healing (see 2 Kings 5:20-27) —these are cases of profanity; the third is the nobleman in this chapter who was unbelieving in the goodness of God, and was trodden down in the gate. God marks all. You cannot play fast and loose with Him, and with His glad tidings; you have to remember that the gospel is the word of God, it is the word of His goodness, and not to believe it, or to profane it, or to refuse to listen to it, is unpardonable. God addresses everyone in grace. God is not now telling you to do this or that, as was the case under the law, but the gospel comes to tell you what God has done and to make light of or to disbelieve what God has done in divine grace and goodness, entails a very serious responsibility. I beg everyone here to take warning. God is no respecter of persons: the bearers of the glad tidings were these four leprous men; and the great man, the nobleman, was trodden down in the gate and died.

I turn now to the great principle of the gospel as illustrated here, that where the enemy and dearth were, it came to pass that not only was the power of the enemy broken, but there was abundance; and that is just what marks the present moment. I quite admit that you cannot see it with your eyes; it is only where God works and the conscience is in exercise, that the grace of God is apprehended.

Turn back to the case of Samaria—anyone can understand the desperate state of affairs there. The Syrians were without, and

dearth within. Imagine London or any great city invested by an enemy; there would soon be dearth there. It was the enemy without, that brought about the dearth within; dearth within is sure to accompany the enemy without. We have seen such a thing in our day. Many can remember Paris being besieged during the Franco/Prussian war in 1870; the enemy encircled the city and the people were shut in, and there was famine; and many other consequences follow on that, such as pestilence and death. I trust we may never be permitted to see it in this country.

Of course, the secret of the scarcity in Samaria was the Syrian without; if they could have got rid of the Syrian they might have provisioned the city. So long as they were kept in, there was no hope, and this is pretty much the state of man's case; the enemy—Satan—is without and there is moral dearth within. It was the case in regard to man when the Lord came here; He found it so. Man is made a sport of by Satan, for Satan carries man far beyond what he himself thinks or intends. If people only knew it, how careful they would be! They do not always intend to go so far in evil, but Satan carries them away. We see it in the case of Judas. I doubt if he intended to go as far as he did, but Satan got hold of him through the love of money. Every man is liable to fall under the power of Satan. I will tell you why, because you are akin to him. There are elements in you to which he can appeal, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life; these are the motives on which he can act.

Satan ministers to you in that way. Satan will help people on in the line of this world. Scripture speaks of him as the god of this world, who blinds *"the minds of them which believe not"* (2 Corinthians 4:4). He will do that for you; he will blind your eyes, he will help you on in the line of lust. Satan will minister to you if you go in for self-gratification. I do not doubt at all that you will get great assistance from him, but then he will carry you much farther than you ever intended to go. A young man begins to trifle with evil; he appropriates some small thing belonging to his employer. In a general way it is at first with the idea of

restitution, but the end is, that he is carried in evil far beyond what he thought at first. That has been the history of the ruin of many a young person in this world, and it is that which is the proof to me that there is a power at work in this world greater than man, the power of the god of this world.

There is the power of evil without, and dearth within. I pity men. I notice everywhere there is moral dearth; men try to live on husks. How often you see men going down in the decline of their lives, feeding on novels, living in clubs and the like; it is all husks, there is no bread; there is famine within, they are not aware of it, but it is true. How can novels and such things sustain the soul when man has to meet sickness or death, and after death to meet God? I pity man, the higher up he is socially the more I pity him; it is not the poor of this world that are most to be pitied, in this respect. You cannot approach the highest in the land to speak to them as to their souls; they are the most to be pitied. The higher you rise in the social scale, the nearer you are to the god of this world. There is nothing to envy in the great; certainly they are marked by dearth—the power of Satan without and dearth within. That is the state of the case with men, but it is not the thought of God for man; the thought of God's goodness in regard of man is, that where the power of the enemy was, and dearth, there should be abundance.

Now, I hope to make it plain to you that the power of Satan has been broken, has disappeared for God, so that it is not necessary that man should be under the power of Satan any longer, and that there is abundance as well. Do you know where the power of Satan was broken, and how it is that abundance has come in? I will tell you: it was in the death of Christ. In the death of Christ I see on the one hand the power of Satan broken, and on the other abundance brought in.

I daresay you may not understand that at first, but I will make it plain to you if I can. If you take man as he is naturally, you find that he has a crooked evil will, a lustful heart, and is subject to the power of Satan, and he is also obnoxious to the

**God is righteous
and “the justifier of
him which believeth
in Jesus”**

righteousness of God; that is true of every person in this world, there is no good point about him for God. I fully recognise what there is of good about man, his natural affections and so on, but

when you come to the source of all his actions, there is no good in him; God’s judgment is upon him as he stands.

I think we sometimes refer the judgment too much to the future; we have to remember that man is under death now. I will show you what God has come in to do by death. In the death of Christ, God has dealt with the whole question from beginning to end; He has condemned the crookedness of man’s will, sin in the flesh; He has broken the power of the devil, and in death the righteousness of God has been vindicated. The fact is that the Son of God has come forth on God’s behalf, to meet the enemy in the place of the enemy’s power, that is, in death; and God’s righteousness has been declared where man’s crookedness was condemned. All that has been effected in the death of God’s Son, so that He could say when on the cross: *“It is finished”* (John 19:20). Everything was effected for God, all evil cleared out of the way, so that His love might flow out—that was the great point: every obstacle had to be removed, His righteousness declared and maintained, otherwise there would have been no security for the eternal blessing of the believer.

God’s righteousness might have been declared in another way; He might have condemned the whole world and consigned all to perdition, but in that case there would have been no love expressed. From time to time God has declared His judgment, and very solemn it is; but the full declaration of His righteousness in the cross was to make way for His love to flow forth. God has declared His righteousness; Jesus is the mercy-seat; God is righteous and *“the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus”* (Romans 3:26). The power of the devil, too, is broken; Christ went into death to annul the power of death.

Now all this has been effected in the death of Christ. It was the purpose of God so to deal with man, that Satan should have no power over him; not only that righteousness should have no claim against him, but the devil no power over him. That is what God came to do in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel comes to speak about what God has done, not to tell people what they have to do; also to speak about God's purpose in it all, that His love might flow forth, because the One in whom all was effected was the blessed Son of God, the One who could declare God's nature to man. It was all done in order that God might be made known. The Son of man was lifted up that whosoever believeth on Him might have everlasting life (see John 3:14-15).

I want you to believe what has been effected; God's righteousness has been declared; He has no demands to make upon the believer, but is the justifier of him that believeth. God's character has been vindicated so that He can clear the believer. What a wonderful position for God to be in! His righteousness vindicated in the blood of Jesus, Satan's power broken, and the state of man condemned—all effected on the part of God in order that He might make known His love; and the love of God is now declared in His blessed Son. *"No man hath seen God at any time, the only begotten Son which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him"* (John 1:18).

Now I want to carry you a point further, the devil's power is gone. Whatever a man might fear is gone. A man might say, I am afraid of the righteousness of God—well the righteousness of God has been vindicated; I am afraid of death—the power of death has been annulled (see 2 Timothy 1:10); I am afraid of my own crooked will—that has been condemned (see Romans 8:3). All these things might come up before the mind of man. I believe it is perfectly right to be afraid of the righteousness of God, of the power of death and of your own evil will, but then in the light of the gospel I see that in the death of Christ all has been met, so that I am no longer afraid. You need not be afraid of the

righteousness of God; if you believe in the blood of Jesus, you are justified by that blood, and not only are you justified, but you become the servant of righteousness. The righteousness of God is no terror, and the gospel not only brings to light the fact that the righteousness of God is vindicated, but there is the blessed testimony to us of His love. The One who suffered upon the cross was the One who could declare the nature of God. He was not simply the righteous One, but down here He declared the Father. He maintained and vindicated the righteousness of God, but there was also in Him the testimony of the love of God to us.

How did God prove Him to be His Son? He raised Him from the dead. He was thus declared to be the Son of God, the One who had come here to effect His will. Another point is that He was raised from the dead, in order that as the exalted Man at the right hand of God He might communicate the gift of the Holy Spirit; this is what has been effected in the blessed Son of God.

I think you will now see plainly enough that what was set forth in the account in 2 Kings is really a picture of what has been effected in the death of Jesus. Death, where the power of Satan was, has now become the witness of the love of God. Death was the power of the devil. Why? Because it was the judgment of God; death is on man, man ought to be and is in terror of death. Let a man have what he may in this life, title and estate and possession, it all goes in death, he is only a life tenant. A man brings nothing into the world, he may come into plenty here and may live to enjoy it perhaps ten, twenty, thirty, forty years or more, but he only holds it according to God's pleasure. God can say to a rich man: *"This night thy soul shall be required of thee"* (Luke 12:20).

It is a most striking thing that while the title and possessions remain, the man goes. It shows the moral weakness of everything down here. A man is far greater than his possessions, and yet the man goes while the possessions and title remain.

Death is upon him, you may attribute it to natural decay, but death is God's judgment upon man, because sin has come into the world, and I believe that man ought to be afraid of it. Man ought not to look at death as a dog might; death is little to an animal for there is no moral question, animals are constituted differently from men. It only shows how debased man has become, that some can die like animals. Death is upon man, and after death is the judgment; the moral consequence has to be faced even after death has been passed through. Death is man's utter weakness; it is to thousands a leap in the dark, but the death of Christ has altered the aspect of everything for the believer, and instead of being the witness of God's solemn judgment upon man, death is the expression in Christ of God's love to him.

The power of the enemy has been broken, the Syrian has left the field, and now there is abundance. Grace has met man's debt, but not that only, the believer is to live of the rest, of all that has been made known in the death of Christ.

I wonder what the death of Christ is to all here. You listen, but not perhaps with much concern. I am not one that can preach to you an exciting sermon, but I can speak to you about the death of Christ. I see that death is the way of divine grace; grace reigns through righteousness; but I see a great deal more in the fact of it having been God's Son who died; death has become the expression of God's love. *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son"*. Here you have the simple statement of it, a simpler could not be, *"that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life"* (John 3:16). Do you know what eternal life is? It is the purpose of Christ's death. It is that the love of God, which is witnessed in the death of Christ, should be life in your soul. You have no lack; you are free of the enemy without, and there is no famine within; that is what has come to pass. The soul of the believer lives now in the light and enjoyment of love. How completely everything is

There is one simple word for you: do not shut out the light

changed! and it is death which has changed all, the death of Christ.

It is a wonderful and yet possible thing for a soul to live

in the love of God, for righteousness has been vindicated, and your soul can live in all the light of what is revealed; the Holy Spirit is given, and the love of God is shed abroad in the heart by the Holy Spirit (see Romans 5:5). The divine way is worthy of God, it would scarcely have been worthy of God for man merely to be cleared, to be relieved of the pressure that was upon him, but in addition to that, it is God's way that he should live of the rest. If you want to know how much you are relieved, the death of Christ will show it you; if you want to know what it is to live of the rest, the death of Christ will also show you that.

Think of the solemnity of the Son of God dying; it was the Son of God who came forth that the love of God might be declared, and the Son of God died; well might the sun hide its light, well might the land be filled with darkness, when the Son of God died, and why did He die? That God might, in the death of His Son, express His love to you and me, His love shone forth there. You can be free from the judgment of God now, and from the devil's power, and you live of the residue; you are relieved of the dearth, and instead of that you have plenty. I ask you, have you abundance in your soul, or does your soul know dearth and famine? Are you trying to live on husks?

There is one simple word for you: do not shut out the light. You have hearts and consciences, do not shut out the light. It is easy to do it. The light reveals all that is in your heart, but the light tells of the love of God, and if it reveals all that is in your heart, it also brings in the light of what is in God's heart. You cannot do better than let the light in, and you will live; you will live on the knowledge of God's love and you will be better off for this

world as well as for the world to come. I have known something of the pleasures of this world, but I am a happier man now without them, for the secret of true happiness is piety; *“godliness is profitable unto all things”* (1 Timothy 4:8). It has promise of this life as well as of the next. I only pray that you may know it.

Accept the blessed witness in the cross of Christ, of God’s righteousness and love; the consequence will be that you will apprehend that the Son of God is risen and is the giver of the Holy Spirit and He will give you the Holy Spirit to be a well of water springing up in you into everlasting life. Christ is the giver of the Spirit; you can get it from no one else. *“Let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely”* (Revelation 22:17). None can give it you but Christ; it is quite right to say, ‘Come to Christ,’ He can give you what you want. You have not far to come; He is the giver of the living water; He died to express God’s love, therefore I say, come to Christ, and you will get living water. Jesus said: *“Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again”*. How true that is of the springs of this world; *“But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst”* (John 4:13, 14). That is what He gives. Oh! that your soul may receive the light of Christ; receive the living water that He and He alone can give.

F. E. Raven

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Scripture references are taken from the Authorised (King James) Version as used in the original in 1897.

Taken from “The Word Proclaimed” 25

In the next issue D.V. continuing this series: ‘The Value of the Sacrifice of Christ’ by J. N. Darby