

The Fulness of the Time

“He that hath two coats let him impart to him that hath none. And he that hath meat, let him do likewise” (Luke 3:11)

The life and death we meet weekly to remember is the great central focus and turning point of God’s Plan of the Ages. The previous ages had all been but preparation for this brief vision of ineffable glory: those few short years in which God marvellously manifested Himself in flesh, and the great work of man’s redemption was wrought in the perfection of prayer, and patience and pain.

Of the patriarchs Jesus said— *“Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and was glad”* (John 8:56).

And Paul tells us that the whole Mosaic constitution of things was but a schoolmaster to lead to Christ (Galatians 3:24).

In the fulness of times, Christ came: the perfect man; the embodiment of all the purposes and ideals of Creation; the central axis around which all the meaning, glory and beauty of the Plan revolved.

A great change was bound to follow upon this transcendent revelation. For four thousand years all history had been building up to this climax—

“We were in bondage (Says Paul) under the elements of the world, but when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son” (Galatians 4:3-4).

The fulness of times *had* come. The wine could no longer be restrained in the ancient bottles. That which had been brooding in the womb of the Spirit for forty centuries—first conceived in the promise to Eve, gradually taking shape in covenants and revelations to Noah, and Abraham, and Judah, and David; shadowed forth through Moses’ Law with inexhaustible beauty and intricate detail; and heralded with ever-increasing boldness from prophet to prophet—finally, in the fulness of times, burst into the full view of the world.

Nothing could ever again be the same. The whole relationship of mankind to God was changed because of the transcendent revelation of Himself that God had made in the wonderful life, terrible death, and glorious resurrection of this perfect man.

“The former times of ignorance God winked at, but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30)

—that is, to completely change their way of life according to this wonderful, divinely-provided pattern.

Four thousand years had been devoted to preparing the scene for the brief appearance and work of this one man. God’s values and proportions are quite different from man’s. Time and numbers mean nothing to Him. We must shake off the human perspective as we view the Divine Plan of the Ages. God said to Gideon (Judges 7:2-3)—

“The people are too many for me to deliver Israel by: let all the fearful and fainthearted go away.”

Two-thirds of the host left, and ten thousand remained. God said, “The people are *yet* too many.” And finally the number was brought down to three hundred, just one percent: ninety-nine percent were sent away. And God said, “by this three hundred will I save you.” Three hundred who drank water differently from the rest.

How natural it is to be influenced by numbers—to feel comfortable and assured if we are part of a large group: and to be influenced by the opinions of others, particularly by those who have an appearance of position and prestige, but all Scripture teaches the contrary—

“He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him” (Isaiah 53:2)

—this simple, homeless, unschooled carpenter; this strange, wandering, unsettled preacher, with his devoted little band of unschooled followers. What a stumbling-block he was to those who judged by appearances and surface aspects!

“Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on him?” (John 7:48)

—they asked in derision: and that to them was conclusive.

But this one despised man, forsaken

at last even by his few friends, singlehandedly—by the help and power of God—turned the world’s eternal future from darkness to light. ONE man—

“My strength is made perfect in weakness . . . God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the mighty” (2 Corinthians 12:9; 1 Corinthians 2:27).

“Be of good cheer,” Jesus said, “I have overcome the world . . . Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (John 16:33; 14:27).

And the timeless, changeless comfort of his eternal peace he pours out freely to his friends—

“My peace I give unto you” (John 14:27).

And as one perfect and devoted man singlehandedly wrought this victory over all the evil of the world, and thereby founded and established the whole future course of history; so another man, practically singlehandedly, carried the news of that victory through the length and breadth of the Roman Empire, in the face of every form of hardship and disappointment—

“He is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my Name before the Gentiles . . . I will show him how great things he must suffer for my Name” (Acts 9:15-16).

In this proclaiming to the Gentiles of the eternal purpose of God, the same strange divine pattern is followed: the same complete reversing of all human values and conceptions, Jesus said, applying to himself the inspired words of Isaiah—

“The Lord hath anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor” (Luke 4:18).

Why especially the poor? Why are they so consistently singled out for mention? Because that is God’s way. God is fashioning His glorious Temple—stone by stone through the ages—out of the humble and lowly things of this world. The wise and noble and mighty

and highly respected are of no use to Him. He cannot make anything worthwhile and eternal out of them: they are too deeply impregnated with pride and ambition and the glory of the flesh.

When John lay in prison, struggling against doubt and despair, he sent to Jesus asking—

“Art thou he that should come? Or look we for another? (Luke 7:19).

And the reassuring message Jesus returned to him contained this—

“Go and show John those things which ye do hear and see . . . THE POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED UNTO THEM.”

Paul declares that the apostles at Jerusalem added nothing to him as to the substance of the Gospel, but there was one vital injunction in connection with his preaching they pressed urgently upon him—

“Only they would (he said) that we should REMEMBER THE POOR, the same which I also was forward to do” (Galatians 2:10).

Possibly they feared that this once high-minded and influential Pharisee would overlook the humble class to whom God’s promises were directed, but they need have no concern: Paul saw the picture too clearly, as he manifests in 1 Corinthians 1. This preaching to the poor was the hallmark of the Gospel as it went forth to the Gentiles—

“Have any of the rulers or the Pharisees believed on him?” (John 7:48).

No, it was not for them. Or rather, they were not for it. God in His wisdom hath chosen the weak and simple things; the lowly things. Why must Jesus be of the lowest of the people? —a humble workman, born in a stable. Why? Think of the circumstances of that birth of the Son of God: the smells, the dirt, the insects, the germs! Are we perhaps just a little out of touch with the realities of life?

Why must his parents be too poor to offer the normally-required sacrifice at his circumcision? The Law said—

“And if her means suffice not for a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves, or two young pigeons” (Leviticus 12:8—R.V.).

At the dedication of the magnificent Temple, his royal type and predecessor Solomon offered one hundred twenty thousand sheep. But when this Living Temple was dedicated, the true dwelling-place of God among Israel, his parents were too poor to offer one lamb on behalf of the Lamb of God. What a tremendous lesson! How God delights to reverse all fleshly and artificial standards! Let us get our thinking in line with God, and not man.

As Mary exclaimed in her beautiful, inspired song of praise (Luke 1:48, 52-53)—

“He hath regarded the low estate of His handmaiden . . . He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree: He hath filled the hungry with good things, and the rich sent empty away.”

Why must John the Baptist be clothed in rough skins, and exist on the meagre fare the desert offered him?

“What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? They who are clothed in soft raiment, and live delicately, are in kings’ courts” (Luke 7:25).

Indeed, John was in “King’s courts,” but it was a very different kind of King: one who wore a crown of thorns. What is God teaching us? There was no soft raiment or delicate living for John, a man exalted in God’s purpose as the greatest of the prophets. He was a Voice *crying in the wilderness*—

“Prepare ye the way of the Lord! . . . All FLESH is grass, and all the GLORY THEREOF as THE FLOWER OF THE FIELD” (Isaiah 40:3, 6).

Why must Paul hunger, and thirst, and be buffeted, and have no certain dwelling place, and be as the filth of the world, and the offscouring of all things (1 Corinthians 4:11-13)? Why did not God choose normal, respectable, influential men to carry this great message of the Gospel to the Gentiles? In the answer lies the great secret of the divine way with mankind. These three great men, and those that followed them—terrible and unmovable in their single-minded, seemingly-fanatical devotion to the one needful thing—must be free of all worldly and fleshly encumbrance, because the message they carried was so revolutionary, so transforming, so searching and penetrating to the very roots and foundations of life. The life they preached cannot be venerated onto the surface of a comfortable, worldly, “normal” life.

“The axe is laid to the root of the tree,” proclaimed John, *“Every mountain shall be brought low, and every valley shall be exalted”* (Luke 3:9, 5).

That was the watchword of the new dispensation: a complete reversal of all greedy and selfish human ways and thoughts. It is a call to freedom from everything that is fleshly—

“They that are in the flesh cannot please God . . . To be fleshly-minded is death” (Romans 8:8, 6).

It is a call to freedom from everything that is worldly—

“All that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world” (1 John 2:16).

It is a call to divine holiness and perfection—

“Be ye holy, even as I am holy . . . (1 Peter 1:16).

“Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect”

(Matthew 5:48).

In the sacrifice of Jesus, God held nothing back. There were no half-measures, and He expects none in us. Divine love and human endurance were drawn out to the utmost, to lay the foundation of a new world, free from all the evils of the flesh.

John said many things as the Voice crying in the wilderness, though very little of it is recorded. So what is recorded must be very significant. In the divine summary of his message, what stands out? Stirred to their depths by his terrible warnings, they asked, What shall, we do? In his reply, he went to the very heart of the Gospel—

“He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none. And he that hath meat, let him do likewise” (Luke 3:11).

He was not preaching charity: he was preaching revolution: a wonderful, free new way of life. *“He that hath five coats, let him give one away that he doesn’t need”* would be noble human charity: a generous twenty percent. That would be “Love thy neighbour”—a pleasant hobby. But John’s message was, as was his Master’s (Matthew 19:19)—

“Thou shalt love thy neighbour AS THYSELF.”

That goes very deep: “as”—as much as—in the same way as.

Need we ask, then, why these three great men, our divinely appointed examples, lived as they did, with such a message for the world? Could a man with worldly possessions preach such a Gospel to the poor?

Are we facing and coming to grips with the realities of life? This great offensive which rocked the world, whose banner was mutual love and self-sacrifice (John 13:34-35)—begun by John, centred in and exemplified by Jesus, and carried to the world by Paul—was a divine crusade against all the natural ignorance and selfishness and pettiness of the flesh. It was a campaign of faith against faithlessness, and godliness against greed—

“Sell that ye have, and give alms; provide yourselves bags which wax not old . . . Take no thought for your body, for your heavenly Father knoweth your needs”

(Luke 12:22-33).

Love of neighbour as love of self. Childlike faith from day to day: the only way to happiness and peace. And those who carry this message, how must they live to give their words any meaning? Natural and spiritual things will not mix—

“The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh . . .” (Galatians 5:17).

“The natural man cannot know the things of the Spirit of God” (1 Corinthians 2:14).

And so it is the Gideon story all over again. The thirty thousand of the flesh must be cut down to the three hundred of the Spirit, before they can go forth in the power of God, conquering and to conquer—

“Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith Yahweh of hosts” (Zechariah 4:6).

“His bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible,” (2 Corinthians 10:10) they said of him, this chosen vessel who carried to the world the most revolutionary message ever proclaimed—

“I came not with excellency of speech . . . I was with you in fear, and in much trembling . . . that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God” (1 Corinthians 2:1, 3, 5).

Thus was the pattern set and the foundation laid for the strange work of God during the dark ages of the Gentiles. And so, by the tireless labours of this despised man, the Gentile world was told of the unsearchable riches of God, and of the marvellous divine Light that had

dawned upon the darkness and helplessness of the world. And a few precious jewels were drawn out of the great mass of useless and perishing rubble.

But to all outward appearances, Paul's work was a dismal, heart-breaking failure. Like the two who preceded him, he was in the end crushed and destroyed by the triumphant evil power of the flesh.

"All men counted John to be a prophet" (Mark 11:32).

But where was this multitude when he was imprisoned and brutally murdered? They saved their support and clamour for men like Barabbas.

And when the power of darkness closed in on Jesus, even his closest companions abandoned him; and the fickle people, whom he had ceaselessly laboured to heal and bless, and who had acclaimed him a week before, screamed for his death and revelled in the spectacle of his cruel suffering—glad in their hearts to be free at last from the resented burden of this strange troubler of the national conscience.

And so with Paul— *"The more abundantly I love you, the less I be loved"* (2 Corinthians 12:15)

—simply because he did not correspond to their fleshly conceptions of how love should behave—

"Am I become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?" (Galatians 4:16).

The world is full of Gadarenes, who do not want their evil spirit cast out, nor their swine destroyed.

Paul's second letter to Timothy is the last and most intimate of his recorded writings. The long struggle is nearly over, and he speaks very touchingly to Timothy, who soon is to be left to fight on alone. Timothy was the one of whom Paul said to the Philippians (2:20)—

"I have no man likeminded, who will naturally care for your state. For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's."

To Timothy he wrote from his prison cell, as he awaited execution—

"All they which are in Asia be turned away from me" (2 Timothy 1:15).

The Ephesian ecclesia was in Asia, where for years he had laboured night and day for them with tears, and where they wept on his neck so dramatically when he left them. This had been just a few years before.

And at the end of this last letter to Timothy, he says of his public trial (2 Timothy 4:16)—

"No man stood with me: all men forsook me."

But he continues—

"Notwithstanding, the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me" (v. 17).

Why not raise up a dozen or a hundred Pauls to carry the Gospel to the Gentiles? Wasn't the message worth a much larger and better organised operation? Why the

tremendous load on this one man? God does not work in masses. We are constantly impressed that the work of God is very selective, and intensely individual. In God's sight, one true, zealous, whole-hearted saint is of infinitely more value and use than multitudes of mere individuals. This is apparent in all the records of His workings with mankind.

Such then, in the wisdom of God, were the experiences of the great apostle to the Gentiles. Even the beloved Barnabas—the one who had first befriended and defended him when his conversion was doubted, and who had worked so closely with him in hardship and danger—had to be taken away.

God's Plan of the Ages rested, for the moment, in the hands of these two men, whom the Spirit had expressly selected to go forth together to preach the Word to the world (Acts 13:2). But a strong division of judgment comes between them, and they separate, and Barnabas drops from the record, and Paul goes on alone.

We do not for a moment make a judgment on Barnabas. None of us could begin to compare with this noble and great-hearted man, who true to the Master's call sold all that he had, and cheerfully took up the hard road of the cross. But still it is a deeply impressive lesson in the ways of God. What harder decision could Paul ever have to make than that? Is it possible for us to comprehend how much the companionship of Barnabas must have meant to him in this lonely labour of enlightening the Gentiles, and the heartache this tragic separation would bring upon him?

And on top of it all, rarely mentioned but always present, he himself had that bitter "thorn in the flesh" to harass and hamper his work. Three times he earnestly pleaded that he might be delivered from it, but the Lord replied—

"My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness"

(2 Corinthians 12:9).

How strange and wonderful are the ways of God! How utterly different from the ways of man!

"God hath chosen the base things, and the things which are despised to confound the things which are mighty, that no flesh should glory" (1 Corinthians 1:27).

Fewness and weakness should never be regarded with anxiety or concern. Numbers should never carry any weight in determining divine things. God's true people have always been very few and very weak. Many from time to time have had to stand entirely alone. In his final days on earth, as he faced alone his great ordeal which we meet weekly to commemorate, Jesus said that, in the last dark, deceptive days of the Gentile times, as the sea and waves of the nations lash and toss with ever-increasing frustration and fury—

"The love of the many will wax cold, but he that endures to the end, the same shall be saved" (Matthew 24:12-13).

And what do all these things mean to us? Each must decide for himself. The principles are clear. The message these men proclaimed and exemplified is plain. The application is individual.

The Great Creator of the universe has stooped down to us and given all—in love. Our moment of eternity lies within our grasp. Are we big enough to respond in a way that is commensurate and in keeping? It certainly means a very different way of life from the natural. Let us each wrestle through the night with our own heart—and face the eternal realities.

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