

A
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A FRIEND OF GOD

John 15: 9-17; Genesis 18: 16 – 24; 22: 1-3, 9-14

P.J.M. I would like the help of the brethren to consider the thought of a friend of God. In this chapter in John, the Lord extends the word "friends" to His disciples. It is not a term that we use much and we would always need to use it very carefully and guardedly, but the Lord uses it and God uses it specifically in connection with Abraham. It is predicated of Abraham three times in scripture that he is the friend of God: God Himself says it. It is obviously a privilege and one in which there is a sharing of divine thoughts and intents. The Lord Jesus speaks to His own as their teacher: He had been their Lord and they had been His bondmen. They had been quite clear as to their indenture to Him. The Lord had called them and they had worked alongside Him and had been sent at His direction in service and had always returned to Him. I suppose what is anticipated in John 15 is that the Lord is leaving them, and He speaks to them in view of this.

He says, I am calling you friends. It was a time when they had transitioned – and again one has to use these terms advisedly because down here we always sit at the Lord's feet as those who are learning of Him. He is always the Teacher. But He looked for more from His disciples. He looked for friendship. We know this because of the agony that comes out in the Psalms as the Lord confronted the fact that His friend, His intimate, had betrayed Him – "For it is not an enemy that hath reproached me – then could I have borne it;... But it was thou, a man mine equal, mine intimate, my familiar friend...". Ps 55: 12, 13. We need to be very careful if we speak about equality, but as a man, the Lord was looking for the companionship and friendship of men. It is interesting that there are specific references to John, James and Peter, as though the Lord takes them especially apart for this mark. John describes himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved and he refers to the fact of the Lord's love for His friend Lazarus, for instance. It seems to me that the Lord was looking for those with whom He could commune and whose support He could count on in times of particular exercise. At the mount of transfiguration they were

to see His glory and were to hear Moses and Elias speaking with Him about "his departure which he was about to accomplish", Luke 9: 31.

Of course, other things intervene and the impression they come away with from that time is the voice which they heard from the glory. They came away with an impression of the glory of Christ. But again the Lord was looking, I think, for those with whom He could share secrets, secrets of His heart, His affections. In the garden of Gethsemane we see that Peter and James and John are taken apart by the Lord that they should enter in with Him, keep watch with Him, be there sympathetically in support of Him. We know that the Lord bore there the burden of His grief alone before God. I think we know that we are now in the environment and day of the friends. John uses that term, "The friends greet thee. Greet the friends by name", 3 John 14. We refer to each other as brethren and that is right and proper but let us not forget friendship!

D.B.B. In the Psalm to which you have referred he says, "mine equal, mine intimate" – there is something very choice about that.

P.J.M. Yes. We take it up and think of it in a negative setting because of what Judas did, but I think that was the way the Lord was regarding His own here. What do you think?

D.B.B. I thought it gave some clue as to the way He held all the disciples.

P.J.M. Absolutely. He was opening up the great storehouse, the great treasury of God's thoughts from before time, and He is wanting to share it; yet the frustration, speaking guardedly, that the Lord must have had that they were so slow to receive it to themselves.

D.J.W. Is it a delicate relationship? We cannot break being brethren of Christ – that is an irrefutable bond – but friendship is something that can easily be disturbed.

P.J.M. Friendship is not something automatic, is it? The terms and conditions of friendship are here in the passages we have read. It was to be on the basis, "if ye practise whatever I command you", and the Lord says to the Father later, That is what they have done. In John 17 He is speaking of them to the Father as really having done all

this, that they had not denied His name, that they had kept with Him, persevered with Him, for three and a half years, and He says to the Father, Now, I want you to look after them. But the time is running out here and the Lord, it seems – I think we see it too at the Passover – wants to leave things with them which show His regard for them.

There are times when He had had to say things to them which perhaps had hurt them, which had wounded them, but they never doubted His love and His words of life eternal, the power of them. I think it brings home to us that the Lord was looking for those with whom He could share things on a more intimate level.

D.B.B. Peter, when he denied the Lord, lost that intimacy, but the Lord in His love soon restored it afterwards.

P.J.M. Yes, indeed. Some of us were reading recently of the joy of Peter and John that they had been thought "worthy to be dishonoured for the name", Acts 5: 41. At the time of the Lord's suffering in the court of the high priest, they did nothing to intervene; they were powerless to change the course of events. I thought that Peter, in particular, would have felt that he was unworthy ever to be part of the testimony that was part of the Lord's sufferings, but he rejoices. A load was rolled away for him that he could finally share in the "fellowship of his sufferings" that they were counted "worthy to be dishonoured for the name." He was able to demonstrate his friendship for Christ then.

D.J.W. Would David's three mighty men illustrate this by responding to desire? He "longed, and said...", 2 Sam 23: 15.

P.J.M. I was tempted to look at David, because David had some good friends. I think he was a lovely man and people were drawn to him. He had an interesting assortment of friends, but the three mighty men broke through, just because he had expressed a wish for the water from the well in Bethlehem; those men would do anything to satisfy his longings. We see those who were particularly David's friends who would do anything for him. They would go into the very camp of the enemy. Hushai, for instance, would go right into Jerusalem, into the court of Absalom, in his friendship for David.

David presumed on the friendship of his friends sometimes and took them for granted – poor Mephibosheth, for instance. There were others, Barzillai the Gileadite.

J.G. Do you think Jonathan was a special friend of David's? Does it not say that he loved him like a brother?

PP.J.M. Yes; David reckoned his love greater than women's love, and David had a fair experience of that, but, in Jonathan there was something special. Jonathan almost went all the way in his committal to David but drew back at the last, and that was the test. But David always treasured his love and when we come to Mephibosheth, it is for Jonathan's sake. He says I want to show him "the kindness of God", 2 Sam 9: 3.

D.J.W. It uses the word "knit" as to Jonathan. I was thinking of this expression in this chapter, "As the Father has loved me..." It is a very high quality. "Knit" seems to connect with that.

P.J.M. That is very good. Say some more about it.

D.J.W. I think perhaps all of us feel the necessity of being developed in love; it is our measure – but friendship goes through the good and the bad circumstances, does it not?

P.J.M. I think so and scripture certainly warrants that. Proverbs 18, for instance: "there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother", v 24. I am a bit afraid about the term 'brethren' because we use it so much; we use it automatically. There is something very precious about the brother. Sometimes I think we feel that we cannot do much about the brethren – they are relatives: we come into relationship – but with a friend a certain amount of choice comes into it and what we are speaking of here is the Lord's choosing.

P.J.H. Does the rebuke too come from a friend? – "Faithful are the wounds of a friend", Prov 27: 6. It is something to keep us in that relationship and to help us in judging ourselves.

P.J.M. I think so. They are faithful wounds. The friend can go that little bit further because there is an understanding that the relationship

is valuable. Sometimes you may get a rebuke from your brother and you say, Well, that is his duty; he is responsible for me.

R.D.P. Do you think you look for more from a friend? I was thinking of Ittai who is a very loyal man, the Gittite, but David says to him, "Thou didst come yesterday, and should I this day make thee go up and down with us, seeing I go whither I can? Return and take back thy brethren.", 2 Sam. 15: 20. But he did not say that to Jonathan; he expected Jonathan to go with him. Ittai was more loyal than Jonathan. I wondered if there was an extra mile in the relationship of a friend, something beyond what you could expect.

K.M. In relation to what has just been said, Ittai says, "Surely in what place my lord the king shall be, whether in death or life, even there also will thy servant be. And David said to Ittai, Go and pass over", 2 Sam 15: 21, 22. There were all those who aligned themselves with Absalom (some of them went innocently), but Ittai was a Gittite – and there were Cherethites and Pelethites, and Gittites, the six hundred men that came from Gath – quite an unlikely origin, we might think.

P.J.M. That is good. It is interesting to see, in the type of David, the friends that he had. Even when it came to building the temple in Solomon's day, it was David's friends who rallied round to provide what was required.

K.M. He must have been very attractive for these persons to remember him when he needed it.

P.J.M. That is good and we see it too in the cave of Adullam. They were not a terribly attractive company when they came to him then, those in debt, in embittered spirit – there were other descriptions of them – but he became a captain over them. There was something attractive about David. He became a focal point and when Abiathar comes, he says, you are going to be in safe keeping with me. There is a feeling of safety, of stability, when they were with David. The disciples with the Lord appreciated that fact: "Lord, to whom shall we go?" John 6: 68. There is no-one else. There is nothing to compare, Lord, with what we have with you.

Rem. You referred earlier to the particular place of Peter, James and John. When Peter got into wrong company and said things that he should not have said, according to Luke's account, all it took was a look from the Lord. Would the bond of friendship be underneath that?

P.J.M. We have often pondered that look and perhaps spoken about it in the preaching, but I think it is true that the look was not a look of judgment, not a look of reproach: it was a look of love and concern.

The Lord knew that it was going to happen and knowing it He says, "I have besought for thee", Luke 22: 32. 'I have been before the Father that your faith fails not. I am interceding for you'. That communication in that look reminded Peter that the Lord was still on his side when Peter had not been on His, and that is the Friend, the "friend that sticketh closer than a brother." It is very affecting.

D.E.R. For anyone to be a friend of God necessitates that he has the moral characteristics which are in accord with God Himself – personally, his circumstances, his household – Abraham commanded his household after him – and so on.

P.J.M. I think we will see that in Abraham and we see it, I think, in the disciples. There is never going to be equality there, save in the redemptive work of Christ. His perfection becomes ours. We can never attain to it, but the amazing thing is that God in time, in the Lord Jesus, has reached out into humanity that was away from God, removing the great chasm, the great void, that had come in. The friendship of God is seen in the Lord Jesus, the attractiveness of it, that persons are brought over on to His ground and forsake the things that belong to them in their fallen nature. I hope to speak later about Saul of Tarsus and there was a man who, in terms of his righteousness, was defensible. You could never say to Saul, Well, we can judge you according to the law and you are a failure. He was not, but he still needed to come over on to the side of a friend, one who found that his righteousness was in Christ and not in himself. But still there is that call to moral conformity – you are quite right – and it is implicit here.

P.J.H. Does occupation with friendship bring you through to worship? Here there is occupation with the Lord as the Friend and with His commandments: the Father was seeking worshippers. What particularly impressed me was Ruth and her friendship and love for Naomi. She followed her right through, was led to glean in the fields of Boaz and occupation with the man of wealth, resulting in Obed the worshipper.

P.J.M. That is good and there we see the danger of freezing a relationship at a particular level because Naomi says to Ruth, You are my daughter-in-law. That is our relationship and I have not any more sons and I am not likely to have any more so you might as well go home. But Ruth says, No, there is something more. It was friendship and kinship. She says, Now, I want to be part of your inheritance and she clung to her even though Naomi discouraged it. She "left off speaking to her", Ruth 1: 18, it says. But nevertheless Ruth became the inspiration in that relationship. She became the friend that stuck closer than a daughter-in-law.

B.I. Is the test of friendship how much I am prepared to sacrifice? The Lord made the supreme sacrifice: He laid down His life for His friends. Would that exhort us about how much we are prepared to sacrifice for Him?

P.J.M. It does. "No one has greater love than this," the Lord says, and He demonstrated the supreme love, but His love was greater. It was not just laying down His life; He actually had to bear the whole matter of sin. That was tremendous: but He could hardly share that with them. They were not in a state to receive the true impact of that, but He went further, as the friend does. I think when we come to Christ and finally appreciate Him and receive Him for who He is, we say, Well, no sacrifice is too great for Him.

R.D.P. Does it also extend into the marital side? We are perhaps touching on the testimony, but in the Song she says, "This is my beloved, yea, this is my friend", Song of Songs 5: 16. Perhaps we do not always think of that in the marital side. There was the admiration

and love for the beloved, but she says, "This is my friend." It is interesting to think of it extending to that.

PP.J.M. That is good. I am not able to say much about it, but she runs out of words eventually. She says, "He is altogether lovely." Whatever I am looking for in a beloved, I find it in Him, what satisfies my soul, my heart, my affections.

P.H. In relation to friendship having a moral basis, what do you say about the Lord being a friend of tax-gatherers and sinners?

P.J.M. That was predicated of Him. They said it: He is a friend of tax-gatherers and sinners. It was a judgmental kind of remark, as though saying, He does not pick His friends wisely. The Lord was a friend to all in need, was He not? He showed "God's loving favour to every soul in need". That was His attitude, but it was taken up negatively and they pointed the finger of accusation, but he went where He was needed and where He was received. Wherever He was received, he went; wherever there was an open door, He went through it.

P.H. He is still my friend when I sin, is He not?

P.J.M. I may grieve Him, but he has begun a work and He will finish it. He does not give up the friendship. We need to be very careful about that. The Lord has committed Himself where there is the work of new-birth and the work of repentance. Where there has been evidence of what is of Himself, He does not give it up; He will return to it.

D.E.R. On His side, He always remains faithful to His love and His friendship, but I shall not be in the gain of it unless the moral side is with me. If there is sin with me, His friendship for me remains, but I shall not be in the gain of it. What the Lord is looking for is persons who are intimate with Him, with whom there is no shade of distance because they are morally in accord with Him.

P.J.M. Yes, that is the subjective side in me. If I want to enjoy friendship, there are some claims. We will look at those. There will be claims. If I value it, and appreciate it, I have to consider for it.

D.J.W. That verse says they were coming to Him. There was something attracting them and the three parables are all recovery, are they not? The way it is worded seems to suggest to me that these persons were already affected by the Lord's Person.

P.J.M. Indeed, they were and some of them in spite of themselves. I have recently been pondering on the two who were slow to come publicly to Christ, but they come to Him when He was hanging there on the cross at the time of greatest public exposure. That is when they come: they could stay no longer. I am thinking of Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus. They had wanted to have a friendship with Christ on their own terms but suddenly they are forced out into the open.

R.D.P. So it speaks about bondmen here: "I call you no longer bondmen." Bondman is a very fine relationship. John takes up the thought of bondman and makes no more claim as to his public position. But the Lord here is reaching out to this. I notice it is in this chapter that it is the Lord who sends the Spirit. In the previous chapter it is the Father – whom the Father will send in my name (v 26) – but here "when the Comforter is come, whom I will send to you...", v 26. It almost seems like a further step of this committal, this bond. It has affected me a lot lately at a burial when I was speaking to someone and they said to me that the person had been a friend to them. There is something there that is beyond: it is almost intangible but there is something that you know that is beyond what, you may say, could be prescribed and I think that is Christianity in its fulness. It goes beyond what is prescribed. That is what the Lord is looking for from us too. I think what was said is interesting as to the woman in John 8; the Lord was a friend to her. She stood there when everyone else went, but then He says, "Go, and sin no more", v. 11. There was that side too. But *He* never changed. That is a very fine thing to have in your soul, the changeless, faithful Jesus.

P.J.M. We need to understand the order in which things happen. The first is this marvellous manifestation of divine grace that God from His own side has come out. We have it in Jesus. We see in His face the love of God and the woman was attracted to Him, and love for all

men that was in His heart, "For God so loved the world", John 3: 16, but if she wants to enjoy it and carry on in that environment, she has to do certain things. If God had waited for us to make the move, we would never have made it.

M.M. So that the Lord's death is involved as the basis for this friendship. Verse 13 is very widely quoted when men fall in battle and that kind of thing, but there is something unique about what we have here.

P.J.M. Just read it again for us.

M.M. Verse 13 of chapter 15: "No one has greater love than this, that one should lay down his life for his friends." Should that touch our affections so that the keeping of the commandments, which is the side of being brought currently into the enjoyment of the friendship, is no longer irksome as we view it in the light of His precious death for us?

P.J.M. Yes: if we want it, the commandments are not irksome. The Lord gives His commandments here: "This is my commandment, that ye love one another..." That is conditional. If you want to be My friend, He says, you need to love one another. Do we show it, do we do it, do we *act* as friends to one another? Is it a company of those who are redeemed? Effectively, the Lord says – if you want to be my friends, love one another. The commandments are not irksome. They are simple, straightforward; it is not difficult.

T.M. A real friend is one you can always trust, someone that you can rely on. Whatever circumstances might arise, a friend is a friend, and you can always rely upon that person and trust him.

P.J.M. The best friends are those where you start off a conversation with them and you pick up where you left off last time. You do not have to re-build the bridge or start the lines of communication again. The thing is fresh and ready. That is communion really. To be able to go to the Lord and say, Lord, I am here, on the same terms. I think somebody listened to Mr Darby praying, did they not? and that is what they heard: We are on the same terms, Lord. Communion was being sustained. I suppose in his

spirit he had always been there, but it is renewed on the same basis. You do not have to start from the ground up.

If we could look at Abraham – he was called, favoured of God, to go out and he went out. God valued that and it was counted to him for righteousness: he believed God. But as we said earlier, there are repeated acknowledgements of his being a friend of God and I wondered if we could look at what happened here in judgment in Sodom. Abraham is visited of God and God says, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am going to do?" He could not hide what He was going to do from His friend, not that the word friend is used in this passage, but that is what he was. Again God is looking here for someone with whom He can share confidences, who is going to be on His side and enter sympathetically with Him, even into judgment. We cannot understand why God should want this, why He should desire it, why He should want to take men up for blessing, why God should go out of His way to explain what He is going to do to mere mortal man, but He does.

R.D.P. It is interesting that this conversation is not with Abraham; it is in the background. Jehovah is really speaking to Himself. "And the men rose up thence, and looked towards Sodom." It is one of the conversations of scripture that are above the level of the earth really.

P.J.M. And again we have the moral line, ""For I know him that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of Jehovah, to do righteousness and justice, in order that Jehovah may bring upon Abraham what he hath spoken of him." So here was a man who said, I have received the promise and I want it. I understand what God is offering me, the great privilege and I want it and I am not going to do anything to spoil it. So God says, I am going to commune with him. I am going to tell him My thoughts and My purpose regarding Sodom and Gomorrah because I know he shares my feelings.

T.W. Is affection the basis of friendship, because Abraham was tested as to that?

P.J.M. Yes, in our next chapter.

T.W. You might not say you had affection for a bondman as you could a friend: I will call you friends, no longer bondmen.

P.J.M. The Hebrew bondman is a good example of that. The bondman says, I am not content just to be regarded as a bondman. " I love my master, my wife, and my children, I will not go free", Exod 21: 5. The relationship transcended that of a bondman. We see it in relation to Philemon too, the bondman, and Paul says, in that affecting epistle, You are going to receive him as a bondman, but, much better than that, as a beloved brother. The relationship was going to change; it was going to be one of friendship, and he says, the seal of this friendship and the basis of it is that if he owes you anything, put it to my account. You are my friend, Philemon, and act one. Let us be friends together! And there is a righteous basis for it.

T.F. Do you think affection is the measure of friendship too? I was thinking about what you said earlier as to brethren. The impression I have had for some time about this is that it should be robust and our relations as brethren should be robust, but underlying it, what you are speaking of, helps us as to our whole relationships together and how we are maintained together, particularly when things are tough because that is when you really need a friend.

P.J.M. It is interesting if you analyse it just humanly. You hear some gossip about someone who is your friend and what do you do? You say, Well, I know them and I cannot really believe that of them. If they are your friend, you speak out and you say, I think you have misread them. I think you have misinterpreted them because I know them. That is a strong, resilient bond. There may be things that need adjusting. You may have to go back to your friend and say, Is it true you did so-and-so or that you said so-and-so? You may need to do that but you protect that relationship because it is precious.

T.F. It takes you back to your confidence in them and you take things up on that.

P.J.M. Absolutely, hence Paul and Philemon. And in Hebrews we have, "But we are persuaded concerning you, beloved, better things...", Heb 6: 9. He writes to the saints and says, we have a link,

we have a bond, and I am appealing to that. He uses the levers of friendship.

K.M. I was looking at the end of Job and wondering whether our prayers would enter into this. It says, "And Jehovah turned the captivity of Job, when he had prayed for his friends; and Jehovah gave Job twice as much as he had before", chap. 42: 10. Job would have to have that affection that God was indicating to him that really before I can turn your captivity, Job, you will have to pray.

P.J.M. "Friends", in inverted commas because they were not really friends. They were not a friend to him; they were not a friend to God; they misrepresented God to Job and misrepresented Job to one another and were not able to help him. He prays for his friends and his captivity is turned, but God is angry with Job's friends. But still it is Job who prays for them and his captivity is turned. God works in different ways from ours. You might say, Well, God, perhaps You would have rewarded him when he criticised his friends or when he rejected his friends or threw them over, but he prays for his friends.

They needed him because he had become through those protracted exercises a friend of God. He was not always a friend of God. He says, I knew You by name "but now mine eye seeth thee" (chap 42: 5), now I can understand, You are my friend. You want to bless me.

You are not holding things against me and not holding up my blessing because of me. It is because You want me in a different relationship, on a different basis with Yourself. Job became God's friend and his friends need his intercession. It is a great thing, a brother who is a friend of God, going to God and saying, Now there is a situation in Sodom and Gomorrah and I am afraid You are going to act in judgment there but I *believe* there may be some people there who perhaps are innocent. This is what Abraham does here. He uses his friendship with God to appeal to God for mercy.

R.D.P. You referred earlier to the Lord's prophetic utterance, "mine equal". Clearly there could be no equal to God, but there is something in the relationship of a friend that there is a platform, "mine equal". I wondered, in these verses here, whether you do not see "mine equal". Abraham felt able to conduct this dialogue with Jehovah. In the sense

of the discussion he was His equal. He recognised overall that God was far greater but in the pleading, the intercession, it seems to me you get the thought of "mine equal".

P.J.M. That is good. I am glad you have said it. He remains standing. God was on the way to do something, but he remains standing: he detains God. And the other amazing thing here is that God listens to him and he bargains with God and as he realises that he has won the day, he says, Well, maybe there are fewer than that, and repeatedly it goes down and down until ten when I suppose Abraham felt that he could really go no further.

B.B. Do you think, speaking carefully, that God enjoyed this dialogue with Abraham? We might ask after one thing and then another – I do not know how many times it is – five or six times? It is almost as if God stayed there: I am enjoying this talk with Abraham. Is that what friendship is?

P.J.M. I think He valued it because He saw in Abraham something of what He was going to have in Jesus, a Man who would hang there on the cross and say, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do", Luke 23: 34. In His heart was love enough to reach out to those who had driven the nails in. Such love and such care and consideration extended to those who were in disreputable circumstances as Lot was, that Abraham in his affection reaches out to them and God says, I recognise those feelings, I will listen to that intercession.

Q.P. I wondered if you could help us as to the setting of this because this chapter is spoken of as a divine appearing, but it takes the form of three men. Had you an impression as to that?

P.J.M. It is tempting to say things about it. In our own time we know God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit; we see the Trinity there. We need to speak very carefully about this passage, but we are called to have relationships with three Divine persons, are we not? Jehovah here represents the three, I suppose.

Q.P. We have spoken earlier of the Lord as a friend for the disciples, but then He speaks of the Holy Spirit as taking on that same

service during the time of His absence.

P.J.M. And the Lord says, "The Father himself has affection for you", John 16: 27. Really we are bound up with the three Persons of the Godhead. They are serving us; they are looking after us on this basis if we will have it, if we will answer to it.

D.E.R. Mr Darby is very emphatic that one of the three was Jehovah and Mr Taylor would not link this with the Trinity, although there may be a hint of it, as you say. We need to be careful that *Jehovah* was there and it speaks of three men. We cannot bring into the present dispensation the relationships of a past dispensation, but I think you have covered that.

P.J.M. This is representative, is it not? It is a different dispensation from the one we are in.

D.E.R. Abraham here is an example of one who was on such easy terms with God that he so knew His mind, that he knew how to approach God in this intercessory way, which would be a stimulus to us as to how well any one of us knows God. Do we know His mind? Are we in accord with His thoughts, His thoughts as to judgment, His thoughts as to the saving of a righteous brother or whatever it may be? Here Abraham is so intimate with God that he can intercede with Him.

P.J.M. Indeed, he intercedes powerfully and effectively and we are often reminded and challenged by it, "the fervent supplication of the righteous man has much power", Jas. 5:16. Sometimes we feel very limited in our intercessory service for one another before God. How much do my prayers avail? But here one man is able to change God's mind, apparently. God foresaw this; He knew it was coming; but one man there was able to detain God.

M.M. So before he asks the question, it says, he "drew near". Would there be a moral touch in that?

P.J.M. And the boldness of it all. Abraham says, "Wilt thou also cause the righteous to perish with the wicked? There are perhaps fifty righteous within the city..." 'You would not do that, God. I know You

better than that'. I think it is a delight to divine Persons when they see that we understand instinctively, we know, by the Spirit, what is appropriate in a circumstance, and we can turn to God about it and say, We know that this is not Your mind; and we know what is Your mind. We have that impulse by the Spirit and we lend our prayers in that direction. We are tested. Do we have the mind of Christ?

M.M. Do you think the spirit of this should enter into the preaching of the glad tidings? What an urgent need there is!

P.J.M. Absolutely and what fear would be in Abraham's heart as he saw those two angels going down to Sodom and Gomorrah. Would they find ten? Would there be ten?

R.D.P. I like the boldness, as you say. He says, "Far be it from thee..." I thought of Moses when he interceded as the mediator, and God says, You take them up; and Moses says, This is Thy people: "If thy presence do not go, bring us not up hence", Exod. 33: 15. These are remarkable things – a remarkable level of dialogue. Abraham knew when to stop here. I notice that it is Jehovah who concludes it: "And Jehovah went away when he had ended speaking to Abraham." The divine initiative is always maintained. But it is really striking that these men who were given this accolade, friends of God, could be so bold, we may say, and yet in their right place.

P.J.M. It is very affecting and yet it happened. It is recorded for us. And God is bold with Abraham in the second passage that we referred to in Genesis. I am seizing on that verse, "Shall I hide from Abraham...?" and it seems to me – brethren can help me if I am wrong – that chapter 22 is God saying, Can I hide from my servant Abraham what I am going to do – what He was going to do in the incarnation, what He was going to do in His own beloved Son, and it seems to be emphasised in what God says, "Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, Isaac." Each phrase could be an allusion to the Lord Jesus Himself, the way that he is spoken of, "Thy son ... thine only son ... whom thou lovest ... Isaac".

P.H. Does it involve the sharing of secrets that He would not tell to anyone else? And He would trust the person He tells to keep it a

secret.

P.J.M. Secrets of divine affections: it is coming out here, again a very affecting passage because it brings in so much which we have not time to look at. Even the speaking of Isaac when he says, "My father!", I can see the fire and the wood but where is the sheep? That is the Lord Jesus in Gethsemane as He contemplated that He Himself was the Lamb of God who was to take away the sin of the world. In His perfection, He alone, and the comforters, the friends, were not there although He sought them. He looked for comforters and found none. He alone was the One who was going to become the sacrifice.

R.D.P. Hebrews says that he counted "that God was able to raise him", chap 11: 19. It is almost as if he goes forward here unhesitatingly. There is no suggestion of hesitation or mitigation because his link with his Friend was so great that he counted that what He had said was so powerful and so strong to him, that God was able to raise him again. It is a tremendous section.

P.J.M. It is a test to us to accept what God does and what He says. It may make no sense to us. There is only one explanation of what God has asked me to do, Abraham could have said, and that is resurrection because He has promised me this son He has promised me that in him all the nations of the earth are going to be blest so he must needs be given back to me. And he does not delay, he rises up very early in the morning and sets out. He does not say, Well, perhaps later in the day or maybe I will think about it for a week or two. His trust in God is that he does not put things off. He rises to the challenge.

R.D.P. Yet there was hesitation according to some scriptures, when he came out from Mesopotamia. He waited for a while until his father died but here there is a maturity, there is no hesitation. God speaks and he does it and the counting is like calculation. Paul counts, does he not? "But surely I count also all things to be loss..." (Phil 3: 8). That was deliberate. As you say, it never entered Abraham's thoughts that God had changed His mind.

D.J.W. It is an interesting word in connection with the way you are taking it up: "God tried Abraham." Do you think He was developing the quality of his friendship? In the previous section Abraham keeps asking almost as if he is bringing out a little bit further, you might say, where the boundaries of the divine mind lay in relation to that matter of judgment. In this chapter he is tested and God tells him almost word for word what He is going to do.

P.J.M. Yes, it is worthy of our contemplation. Here the whole of what is going to happen is set out, as you say: "there offer him up for a burnt-offering." There is no doubt about it. This is not some metaphorical offering. This is not some waving his hand over the place and making some statement – "a burnt-offering". There is no doubt about a burnt-offering. Death is involved in it. What affects me particularly in this chapter is that this seems to be a direct communication between God and Abraham, and God says, Go to the place that I tell thee of, as though there was more to come on the way as to the location and the place. So they go to mount Moriah and there the offering is to be made, but the place God alone knew. It had a particular significance, as we know. But at the end when Abraham is about to do the deed and He has drawn the knife, it is not God who speaks to him. It is an angel.

P.H. What is your point in that, that it is not God, it's an Angel?

P.J.M. It seems to me as though the matter is too precious ground, too great a matter, for God to intervene directly at the moment and He sends His Angel who says to him, "Stretch not out thy hand against the lad, neither do anything to him; for now I know that thou fearest God, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from me." Here God is contemplating perhaps the most painful moment in the history of time. He is contemplating the offering up of Christ when He offered Himself spotless to God at Calvary. God hid His face from Him, and here God is hiding His face from Abraham. He sends the angelic intervention, but it is as though Abraham is now in the secret of a very wonderful fact. He had already said, "God will provide himself with the sheep for a burnt-offering", and God did. I find words difficult to express the thought that is in my heart as though here God cannot

trust Himself to speak to Abraham. I am using a human emotion, which is very dangerous in the things of God, but it is notable that here it is an angel that intervenes when it had been God directly who told him to do the thing.

R.D.P. They are very strong words. The Angel speaks a second time, and said, "By myself I swear, saith Jehovah..." It is like the language of Hebrews:... since he had no greater to swear by, swore by himself (Heb 6: 13), and He commits that and extends the blessing as to the stars of the heaven and the sands of the seashore. It is a very powerful section of scripture, it seems to me, that there could be such a link between a man and God, that such a transaction could take place. In John 8 the Lord says, "Your father Abraham exulted in that he should see my day, and he saw and rejoiced", v 56. Was there some impression of Christ, do you think, in Abraham's exercises?

P.J.M. I think so and that scripture seems to indicate that he broke through his own time into another day and this was in consequence of this place, this event, that it was not just to prove Abraham but it was Abraham being taken as though God was saying, If Abraham was prepared to do it in love for me, I am going to do it in love for man.

The love that is in My heart, if it is to be expressed, this is the only way. And Abraham fulfils this role. He steps into the place that God eventually would fill Himself. We need to guard our thoughts and our expressions, but we see divine feelings here and as has been commented, the emphasis with which God commits Himself to Abraham.

J.G. I was thinking of what it says in the Proverbs: "Counsel in the heart of man is deep water, and a man of understanding draweth it out", chap 20: 5. I wondered if Abraham in His friendship with God was taking that place of one who understood and drew out from God these deep feelings, deep counsels, of His heart.

P.J.M. That is a very good allusion. God is looking for those with whom He can share His mind and His thoughts, even the most painful and guarded secret, and here Abraham is brought in to the experience of them. The Lord was wanting His disciples on the mount of

transfiguration to understand that it was not all pain and suffering and loss. Peter had confessed to the Lord, "*Thou* art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt 16: 16), and that was a sign that the Father had revealed something in his heart, and He said, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona. I am going to show you something of the glory. But then that was for a time to come. They were not to go down the mountain and speak about it. It was to be their secret. They had been brought into what had been drawn out, as you allude, from divine Persons, and there were Moses and Elias already in the secret of what Christ was going to accomplish on His departure from Jerusalem.

R.D.P. Do you think, in the way that you are speaking that if we knew more of this we would be calmer in our Christian lives, more settled, less tossed about because things happen which sometimes completely throw us (or some of us anyway, I should say) and this would help us to know something of what was deeper, by way of understanding. So a man like Jacob could say at the end of his life, "I know, my son, I know", Gen 48: 19. These are very great things, are they not, if we could touch more of that?

P.J.M. I am sure that is true. In a circumstance such as Abraham's it is an extreme test and we might say, Well, I do not understand what God is doing, but, looking at Abraham, we can see that Abraham says, I trust God. He is a friend to me. He has been a friend to me, He is going to be a friend to me, He has promised me great things: I am going to trust Him in this. I will do what He says. And it brings a calm and a settled peace.

BIRMINGHAM

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Key to Initials

B.Bodman, Bristol; D.B.Bodman, Birmingham; T.Franklin, Grimsby; J.Gray, Newport; P.Hazell, Preston; P.J.Herbert, Newport; B.Ikin, Manchester; K.Marshall, Rotherham; M.Matthews, Birmingham;

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Birmingham; T.Willetts, Rotherham

“THAT I MAY GAIN CHRIST”

Peter Mutton

Philippians 3: 1-14; Mark 10: 17-22

I have been seized upon by this part of a verse, that Paul counted things that were legitimate, that belonged to him in his former life, as "filth, that I may gain Christ." There had been what men to-day call a water-shed in Paul's life. Things had changed dramatically for him and he moved from an extreme position in opposition to Christ to one where he became the chief proponent of the gospel. What happened in his life was dramatic and sudden and unexpected. But this is a remarkable verse: he says I reckon it all, all that belonged to me in my first life, as "filth, that I may gain Christ."

It is sometimes an interesting exercise to look at other versions of the Bible to see what other translators have made of a verse because after all every verse in the New Testament has to be transcribed and interpreted from the Greek. Now, Young is very close to Mr Darby, Young's literal translation. He says, 'I count it all refuse, that Christ I may gain and be found in Him.' The Weymouth translation says, 'that I may win Christ and be found in union with Him.' So they have used different words. We will stay with Mr Darby; Paul reckoned it all "filth, that I may gain Christ."

Now dear friend, beloved brother, beloved sister, have you gained Christ? Is Christ your gain? Is He the purpose, the driving force and influence in your life? Have you gained Christ? Have you won Him? Are you in union with Him? You may say, Well, who are you to talk to me like that? and you are right. But this verse has laid hold of my soul. Paul says, Whatever belonged to me, I reckon it all as filth, as refuse – the Authorised Version says, as dung – "that I may gain Christ." Paul became single-minded in his pursuit of Christ.

Now, he is quite clear in the passage that we have read that he did not count yet to have got possession, but how close he was! He speaks of having the mind of Christ. He speaks of having received things from the Lord, of having seen Him and heard things in glory in

an apparently out-of-the-body experience that he had. He had seen the Lord on the Damascus road when such a light overshadowed him and suddenly everything that belonged to his former life started to fall away.

Now, what about Saul's former life? It comes out now and again that he was a bit proud of what he was. He was proud of the fact that he was a Benjaminite; he was proud of the fact that he was a Pharisee; that he had got good marks in his exams, he sat at the feet of Gamaliel. He was there, I think, as a star pupil. He took pride in the fact that he was free-born a Roman, and there on the road to Damascus he takes pride in the fact that he has there in his pocket a letter from the high priest giving him apparent authority to strike at the very heart of those Christians who gathered there in fear of his coming. They knew he was coming. They knew all about him, and he was on his way. Paul was quite frank and open later in what he says about himself, I was the chief of sinners, and yet, he says, as to the law I was blameless. He could give you chapter and verse for everything he did. He thought he should do much against the name of Jesus and he did it, casting Christians into prison and causing them to blaspheme. He would torture them until they blasphemed the Name that they had taken up. What a terrible man!

He says of himself, I was "an insolent overbearing man", 1 Tim 1: 13. He was just a young man here. You know what insolence is?

Insolence is when you speak disrespectfully, your whole attitude is disrespectful, to those who are bigger than you are. And he was maybe Gamaliel's star pupil, but he may even have been insolent to Gamaliel. Sometimes maybe as a child, people say you are insolent and you say, Sorry, I was just asking a question. I did not mean it.

Sometimes we do not know when we are being insolent. I do not think Saul knew he was being it but perhaps he was insolent to Gamaliel. Gamaliel says to the Sanhedrim – and I think Saul was there because we have a full account of what was said in secret in the Sanhedrim in Acts – this Jesus, if it is of men, it will come to nothing, so leave it alone; if it is of God, you cannot fight it. That was Gamaliel. He was a wise man. People had respect for him. But where do you

see his star pupil? You see him riding hard to get to Damascus to stamp out the Name of Jesus. He says of himself he was insolent; he was also overbearing. What does that mean? Overbearing: we all know what that is; we have all experienced it, people who make life difficult for you when they are above you. So Saul was impossible to people who were above him and he was unbearable to people who were beneath him. He was a self-made man, committing himself to a life in which he would be the star.

I have repeated something which I came across the other day, a picture in a little tract and it was a representation of me as in self, just as Saul was. It was a circle and inside the circle was a throne and on the throne was an 'S' and the 'S' stands for self. We all have a throne, the throne of our life, but who is sitting on the throne? In this representation it was Self that sat upon the throne. "I indeed myself thought that I ought to do much against the name of Jesus the Nazaraean", Acts 26: 9. I can justify it from the letter of the law. I think for Saul if he looked at that picture after his conversion, he would see the circle, the circle of his life; he would see the throne of his life; but on the throne is Christ and at the foot of the throne is self. Self is given up. The place that self would seek for itself is given up to Christ who becomes his gain. He says, "I... count them to be filth, that I may gain Christ." "Who art thou, Lord?" Acts 9: 5. I do not think he had ever said that before in His life: "Who art thou, Lord?" The voice does not say, I am Jesus the Almighty Creator. It does not say, I am the Son of God. It says, *I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest*", Acts 9: 5.

Wonderful Jesus, who His Person is! How much He gave up to be found here "in figure as a man", and "having been found in figure as a man, humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death, and that the death of the cross", Phil 2: 8. Is He not worthy to sit on the throne? God reckons Him so. But is He worthy, dear friend, beloved hearer, to sit on the throne of your life? Be in pursuit of Jesus! Paul says, I do not see it distinctly yet. I see through 'a glass darkly' – that is the Authorised Version – or "through a dim window obscurely, but then face to face", 1 Cor 13: 12. The whole of Paul's life was

consumed with that desire, to see Christ and to be with Him, "that I may gain Christ."

Dear friend, it is the only way to live, the only way to live in power, and whatever circumstances life may throw at you – if you think life throws circumstances at you – whatever things may happen to you, if you have Christ, it is sufficient. If you do, it is sufficient. If you do not, even the saying of it sounds like a mockery. And we are very privileged to be in the circumstances of hearing the truth day in day out. We are in circumstances of great opportunity, but they can be in our ears "as an idle tale". They can be in our ears as something other people do and seem to get something out of, but for me, I have not seen anything in it yet. As Paul says, there was a change, and the change was when Christ shone into my life. He says before Agrippa, I have not been "disobedient to the heavenly vision", Acts 26: 19.

Festus says, You are mad, Paul, you are mad. You have read too much and it has turned your head, and he says, Oh, no, I wish you were like me. I wish everybody was like me. And then he remembers the chains and he says, but I would like to be rid of these. He remembers why he was there but he used every opportunity to preach the gospel, to preach about the Christ who appeared to him and brought him on to new ground. He became a disciple, became one who had taken up his cross and followed. Even if people thought he was mad, even if people put him in prison and his feet in the stocks, even if he was given stripes, whatever it was, he said, It is worth it "that I may gain Christ."

So Paul was on a journey bringing him closer and closer to the Lord Jesus. And the further he went on his journey, the more like his Master he became, the more he would give over those things that belonged to his former self. You see little flashes of ire in the Acts and elsewhere. Some things of the former life of Saul of Tarsus come out. "God will smite thee, whited wall" (Acts 23: 3), for instance, and then he has to remember that that was not how he learnt the Christ. The voice said to him, "it is hard for thee to kick against goads, Acts 26: 14. You will not prevail against My name, but come across to My side because I want to bless you.

In Mark's gospel, we see another Jew. We see another person who kept the law. There is a moral basis to our lives; there is to be one. We have a moral being and moral responsibility. We will be judged according to the things that we have done in our lives. There is no getting away from that. But the pull and appeal of Christ is one of attraction. We come over on to His ground. We forsake the things that have belonged to us before, even the good things, even the legitimate things. The more we are attracted, the more we are ready to leave them. The more we see Him clearly, the better we want to do it. It does not become a painful struggle any more; it becomes a matter of easy relinquishment.

But we have to start somewhere. And this young man, he was good; he was wholesome; he was attractive. He wanted eternal life and he thought the pursuance of the law would give him eternal life, but it did not satisfy his soul. He was not satisfied. The woman at Sychar's well was not satisfied either, but she had hardly kept the Jewish law. She probably had not kept any law particularly well, but the point of attraction becomes the Person of the Lord Jesus and for him and for the woman at Sychar's well, there was the same need. They both *felt* the need. The woman at Sychar's well had so many questions that remained unanswered, and this young man had one.

He comes to Jesus because he knew that here was a Teacher whom he honoured before God and he kneels at His feet. He is respectful. He comes with the right attitude and he says, What shall I do, what do I have to do, that I may inherit eternal life? Jesus says, Why do you call me good? Why are you here? Had the young man any apprehension as to who Jesus was – the Son of God? He had used that expression, "Good Teacher", but it had not seized hold of his heart that here was the Messiah. Here was the Son of God, God incarnate. He had not received that sense in his soul, so the Lord probes him. Why are you here? Why do you call me good? "No one is good but one, that is God." We come into the presence of supreme goodness in Jesus. This young man knew that Jesus was good, but he did not seem to realise that Jesus was perfect, the holy, sinless, undefiled. He did not seem to realise that here was his only hope of

salvation. He comes for enlightenment. Do not just come to the meetings, beloved brother and sister, just for enlightenment! Come for Christ!

And so he kneels. Jesus says, Do you know the commandments: "Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal..." Jesus knew he knew these things because He knew his heart. He was the discernor of men's hearts. He knew all this. And he says, "Teacher, all these things have I kept from my youth" all these things, and I am still not satisfied. You know it is possible to do all the right things, to avoid all the wrong company and all the wrong parties and to say the right things in the right places at the right time, to give out the right hymns and the right prayers, and you are still not satisfied.

But he had come to the right place because he finds the answer. Jesus says to him, Well, you have a lot of possessions, get rid of them, and come and follow me. Take up your cross. And here was the nub of the matter. This man's life was in his possessions. He wanted material success and wealth. He wanted to get on in this world, I believe, just as Saul of Tarsus did before he met Christ, but he also wanted eternal life, and the two are mutually incompatible, mutually exclusive. It is either one or the other. Jesus says, One thing you lack; you are nearly there. You are a 99% candidate for eternal life, but there is one thing: you need Me! You may be perfect, but you need Me! Dear friend, do not seek after perfection here because you will never find it! This man was nearly there. Jesus loved him. He looked at him and He said, There is someone who stands before God as morally upright and ready for the gospel of grace. Is he ready to receive Me? Because the only basis on which God is going to take people into eternal life is because of the acknowledgement of the work of Jesus. Is this sounding like the gospel? Do not be surprised because it is all bound together. Christ was his hope, his only hope if he was to experience the joy of eternal life and, beloved brother and sister, *now* is the time for eternal life, *now* is the time for the enjoyment of it. That was what the disciples enjoyed with Jesus: it was eternal life conditions – "Thou hast words of life eternal", John 6: 68. It was what kept them close to Him, what

bound them to Him. And this young man threw it all away because he had large possessions.

Now, you may not have large possessions, and I certainly do not, but the Lord says, "It is not because a man is in abundance that his life is in his possessions", Luke 12: 15. You could have a little hovel and it could be everything to you. You can have a job and it is everything to you and it is your life and consumes you at every moment and yet it does not satisfy your soul. There is only one Person can do that, and this man was kneeling at His feet. He was in the right place at the right time, the moment of opportunity. He received the invitation, Take up your cross and follow me. Get rid of what is encumbering you and holding you down! Come and follow me! And he went away grieved.

I think here we have a great contrast with Saul of Tarsus. You may look at Saul's life and say, What a disaster! He had prospects, he had hope, expectations of making a good living, interpreting the law for other people, and now look at him: he is in prison most of his time. He makes testimony, yes, but he is in bonds, in chains, he has been in shipwrecks. How many shipwrecks has he been in? How many beatings has he had? And you look at Saul's life and you say, he died a martyr, did he not? Ah, but he gained Christ! Christ was his gain!

Christ was his life! For him to live was Christ and to die was gain. Every moment of every day he was getting closer and closer in his link with His Saviour. And he preaches with boldness, takes every opportunity to speak of Christ. This young man went back to his possessions. We do not know what his life was like. Outwardly maybe it was very successful. Maybe he became a powerful person in the Jewish assembly. Maybe he took a place in the Sanhedrim, but he lost Christ. He had no gain.

Well, the word has been simple, but think about it! It is worth the sacrifice to gain Christ, to have that sense of joy in your soul that you have that most precious and wonderful person Himself. It does not end there, of course. There is much more besides but time is limited to speak about it, but just let us think about this passage: "I

have suffered the loss of all, and count them to be filth, that I may gain Christ"! For His Name's sake.

BIRMINGHAM

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