

A WORD IN ITS SEASON

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ENCOURAGEMENT

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RFW These scriptures may help us to see how we get encouragement. The word in 2 Corinthians 1 is translated in the Authorised Version as 'comfort'; so we could carry that thought with us, so that we may see how in our experience we get encouragement or comfort. I suppose we all need encouragement and comfort, especially at present, when many of our brethren are passing through times of sorrow. I wondered if these scriptures might help us to consider together how we get help in these circumstances. Evidently encouragement or comfort has to come in from some source outside of ourselves. I suppose 2 Corinthians chapter 1 shows us that the source of all encouragement, or comfort, is in God Himself, and that He is the great Rock on which we all rest in our souls.

But I thought we could see in 2 Corinthians 1 that encouragement could come in through persons who themselves have been encouraged. Paul was one such and he says, "that we may be able to encourage those who are in any tribulation whatever, through the encouragement with which we ourselves are encouraged of God". So it is good if there are persons who can bring in encouragement through their own experience with divine Persons.

Then I thought in Romans 15 we might get help to see that there is a source of encouragement in the Scriptures, and that brings in a wonderful resource. The Scriptures are divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit, and we can draw upon them because they give us the experiences of real people, and they become - and I am sure we have often proved it - a source of encouragement and comfort.

In 1 Corinthians 14 there is a reference to what is prophetic which would bring in the possibility of some current expression of the mind of God that He would intend us to find encouragement from.

And then, finally, in 2 Corinthians 7 there is the idea of being encouraged through the brethren, through believers. Paul was encouraged by the coming of Titus, but he said, "and not by his coming only, but also through the encouragement with which he was

encouraged as to you". There are those who are going on and they themselves can be a source of encouragement and comfort.

JDG It says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ". The Father was intimately linked up with Christ here in testimony, was He not? In chapter 11 of Matthew's gospel the Lord addresses the Father.

RFW I was thinking about that this morning. The Lord said, "I praise thee, Father, Lord of the heaven and of the earth" (v 25), and He said that in the consciousness of what the Father's will for Him involved. The Father's will for Him involved that He should go the full way to the cross and all that that meant, but even so He can praise the Father. He sets on that great note of praise, even in such circumstances.

DMC There were circumstances when it says that "Jesus wept" (John 11: 35), He felt the burden of what they were passing through, but He also says, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God", John 11: 4. Is that something that we should look for, something added, not just something removed, but there is something added?

RFW You mean that there is something added for the praise and glory of divine Persons? That is a remarkable expression, "Jesus wept", showing how the Lord felt the pressure of death on the spirits of His own. How deep His feelings were! He was here as Man and He actually experienced the pressure that death had brought in on those whom He loved.

JDG Do you see something in the Lord's life of "the Father of compassions" expressed in testimony here, how He felt for men?

RFW Those compassions came fully into expression in Him. Mr Raven said that 'Christ is the expression of all the grace that heaven could devise', vol 18, p323. That is a wonderful thought. Those compassions were seen in the pathway of the blessed Saviour here below.

DHM It is encouraging in John 14 that, even with all that lay ahead of the Lord, He should think of the need of comfort and compassion for His own in His absence. It is when the Lord speaks of begging the Father for the gift of the Holy Spirit, v 18. It shows the feelings of the Lord Jesus in relation to His own in this very matter.

RFW Yes, He would send them "another Comforter". I have noticed

in a concordance that the word that is translated “Comforter” has an affinity with the word that is translated here “encouragement”. It carries the sense of one who comes to stand alongside of you, and that is a very blessed thought. There is One who comes and takes His place to help you, alongside of you. That is the Comforter, the Holy Spirit. He has come to bring in help from another sphere altogether.

DHM The other sphere is heaven. It is from the heavenly position that these things come.

RFW Yes, it is remarkable that it should be said that the Holy Spirit has been sent from heaven, 1 Pet 1: 12. So Paul had passed through a very great and real experience. He had found help, evidently, in the extreme circumstances in which he and those with him had been placed. So he is able, he says, “to encourage those who are in any tribulation whatever, through the encouragement with which we ourselves are encouraged of God”. It is blessed to be able to find encouragement from persons who have had real help from God.

DCB Would it affect us that the Lord Jesus in manhood passed through, in principle, every sorrow that has affected mankind? He is therefore able to sympathise with persons whatever their circumstances.

RFW Can you say more about that?

DCB If there is the sorrow of death, we have already expressed how He felt it in John 11. You see how His spirit was affected by various afflictions that affected mankind. He was close to man, “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Isa 53: 3), having entered into manhood to take these things on. Therefore He can be alongside persons, as He shows in His ministry, to supply whatever comfort they are needing.

RFW And it is remarkable to think that He actually passed through death Himself. He actually went that way and experienced what it actually was to die and to be buried. He has experienced it in all its power and He has overcome it.

DMC Death is the extreme test, but do you think our younger people go through a lot of tribulation which we may know very little about? Do you think that they should find sympathy and comfort and support in the circle of the saints?

RFW Quite so. The moral exercises that they face - we have all had to face them, and we still have to face them - are not easy, are they? We feel deeply for younger ones in the present course of the world with all that marks it, and all the things that they may have to face that we who are older may not have had to face in the same way. What do you say?

DMC I think the greatest comfort we can find, apart from our own links with the Lord, is to get confirmation amongst the saints and to find support as in a family. We feel at home in the company of the saints and should be able to speak about these things.

RFW There are persons like Paul who have passed through great trials and we can derive help and encouragement from them. That is a great thing, to know that there are persons who have actually been through exercises that we may not have faced ourselves to the same extent, and who can bring in help and encouragement for us.

JDG Paul was taken to Rome in his captivity. He may have been depressed when he arrived in the Roman country, but he saw the brethren, and that cheered him up.

RFW Yes, you are referring to the end of Acts (chap 28: 15). Well, what a source of encouragement it is to find that there are others who are going on in the pathway of faith. He writes to the Romans about that: "mutual encouragement ... each by the faith which is in the other", chap 1: 12.

JDG They walked quite a distance to meet him. It cost them something.

RFW Exactly, and he found persons who had faith, so when he saw them "he thanked God and took courage".

RCT Is this part of the working of the body?

RFW I am sure it is. Just go on.

RCT There are many features of it, but I just wondered if this was part of it, seen working amongst the saints.

RFW Yes, that mutual side, and certain things call it into operation, and you feel the blessedness of it, to touch what is real and vital, and that is what the body is. It is a real, vital and living organism. We can touch what is vital in one another in that way.

TDB Could you say more about God being the source of it? It says He is the “God of all encouragement” in the first scripture you read.

RFW What do you think about it?

TDB I was just thinking it was a remarkable feature to mark God.

RFW The “God of all encouragement”: it is remarkable that Paul had a fresh sense of it, and he is able to write about it here. It is blessed to think that divine Persons take account of us in our need of encouragement and they are prepared to provide it Themselves. So it is something outside of ourselves; something comes in that is from God.

GAB The word that is used for Comforter, applied to the Holy Spirit here, is the same word used as to the Lord where He is in heaven; so we have a Comforter in heaven as well as One down here. I understand the word “patron” (1 John 2: 1) is the same word: so there is not only our best Friend here on earth, as has often been said, but we have a Friend in heaven who is able to encourage and comfort as well.

RFW That is not just theory. I think for myself there are a lot of things that we may accept in theory, or accept objectively, but this is more than that, is it not? Paul had come through a real experience. He had found something that actually worked. He had found comfort or encouragement, and therefore he is able to help others. You have had experiences in your life and many of us here, the older brethren especially, have had real experiences with divine Persons, and if there is any advice those of us who are a bit older can give to younger ones, it is to get the benefit of the experience of older brethren. How did somebody get converted? How did they come to know the Lord as their Saviour? How did they get on in their soul, in their exercises? What has come into the lives of older ones? These are things that are real, are they not?

DMC “Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?”, 1 Cor 9: 1. Do you think that would colour Paul's life?

RFW He was never the same after that. He could not be the same person.

GB Would strengthening be a parallel thought? I was thinking of King David when he was betrayed by the citizens whom he had delivered. It says, “Jonathan ... went to David into the wood, and

strengthened his hand in God", 1 Sam 23: 16. It really took David out of his circumstances and enabled him to see One that was for him.

RFW It is fine if we are able to do that for one another. At another time of trouble, at Ziklag, "David strengthened himself in Jehovah his God", 1 Sam 30: 6. The people spoke of stoning him but David found resource in God.

RCT That is when "David's spoil" (v 20) comes out; so there is a result.

RFW Do you think this was like "David's spoil" here with Paul, in principle? Out of the experience came something that was useful for the help and encouragement of others.

DHM The believer as being set in a local assembly is placed in an environment where these things, potentially, can be a reality. Would you go with that?

RFW This is why we are set together. To these dear saints in Rome, Paul could say, "But I am persuaded, my brethren, I myself also, concerning you, that yourselves also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another", Rom 15: 14. That is what the local company is for, is it not?

DHM We all know the scripture in Luke 10 that the man was placed in the inn. It was an environment where there was not only safety, but comfort would be there, encouragement would be there. Our local assemblies should mirror that.

RFW He still needed care. It was a place where he was to be cared for.

SCL Do you think it is quite encouraging to consider that no matter what tribulation or test we are going through, whether it be pain, stress or grief, we are not the first ones to be going through it? Even if we cannot necessarily find another brother or sister that is going through it, the Lord went through every possible temptation and He overcame every possible temptation.

RFW "For we have not a high priest not able to sympathise with our infirmities, but tempted in all things in like manner, sin apart", Heb 4: 15. It is a remarkable thing. It says as to Him, "And the devil, having completed every temptation", Luke 4: 13. Every single one that was in his armoury was brought to bear on the Lord. He may not have to bring

too many temptations to bear on me before he can overcome me, but he brought every one that he had to bear on the Lord Jesus.

SCL And so when we get down on our knees in prayer we are really praying to Somebody who fully understands what we are going through, each and every one of us.

RFW There was a blessed Man here, Himself a divine Person, God manifest in flesh, who went through all these experiences in utter dependence, sin apart. So He understands what you are going through at any stage of your life, does He not?

PEH I was thinking that encouragement has in mind continuance. There are certain times in our lives when we have to come to something. I was thinking of what it says in 1 John: “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren”, chap 3: 14. That is someone who has come to something solid in their own experience with God and the result is that they know that they love the brethren, and they are willing to continue. They have been encouraged in that way, do you think?

RFW Encouragement is in view of continuance. That would link with what we read in Romans, does it not? It says, “that through endurance and through encouragement of the scriptures”. Encouragement comes in so that we might endure. It is those who desire to endure, those who desire to go on, that divine Persons would encourage. Endurance is a great feature. It is something that we may not think too much of, but yet it is a wonderful feature in the believer, the ability to endure, just to go on patiently. The Lord Jesus endured. He is a model in that as in everything else.

DMC We should read Scripture. It is important to take it up as a habit, to read the Scriptures, which is a good habit, but do you think we should read it as getting help by the Spirit to get a word? “Every scripture is divinely inspired”, 2 Tim 3: 16. Scripture as a whole speaks of Christ.

RFW It does. We were just reflecting at home recently as to the blessed service of the Holy Spirit in having the Scriptures written. As you say, “Every scripture is divinely inspired”. What would we know about the life of Jesus if we did not have the gospels, for example? And the Holy Spirit inspired those persons to write of Jesus - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. How do we read the Scriptures? You find you cannot read very much before something makes an impression on you. It is

intended to be that way, do you think?

DMC It says as to the Lord, “He wakeneth morning by morning, he wakeneth mine ear to hear as the instructed”, Isa 50: 4. Do you think there should be that spirit with us too?

RFW Yes, indeed.

JDG It says in verse 4, “through encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope”. It must be related to One who is living above. It involves an organic link with Christ.

RFW You mean, as we read them, we are put in touch with Him? In this section it has often struck me that hope comes in in relation to the brethren too. The context is “to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each one of us please his neighbour with a view to what is good”, v 1, 2. It has often been said our neighbours are our local brethren, those who have been put beside us. The scriptural injunction is to love thy neighbour as thyself: that is, those who are next to us. Well, how important the Scriptures are! We have hope because we are put in touch with the One who is above, and then the Scriptures tell us about the experiences of persons who have been with God in their lives.

JDG It says “that ye may with one accord, with one mouth, glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”, v 6. We used to be reminded that this is about the highest point in Romans.

RFW It is almost an Ephesian touch, “one mouth”. It really touches on the service of God.

TDB Jehovah says to Moses about Aaron, “and when he seeth thee he will be glad in his heart”, Exod 4: 14. I was thinking really about what you were saying about seeing the local brethren, especially in the times in which we are living. Our brother referred to Paul meeting the brethren. They found him and encouraged him.

RFW Exactly. You find that there are resources there.

DCB Where you began in 2 Corinthians 1, there is the reference to “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”. It is that same Person who is to receive the response from persons who have had this encouragement, is it not?

RFW The result is to be this buoyant response, “with one accord,

with one mouth, glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ". All these experiences that we have, all these things that enter into our lives, are all to lead to enrichment in the service of God, are they not? What have we learned in the things through which we have passed? Have we learned something that enriches the service of God? That word in Matthew 11 has been referred to already. The Lord says, "I praise thee, Father, Lord of the heaven and of the earth ... **for** ...", v 25, 26. There was a reason for His praise. It is not abstract; there is some reason for it, and that note of praise that the Lord Jesus set on as Man has never really ceased, has it? He continues it in the midst of the assembly. He has a vessel that He can use to carry on the great service of praise.

DCB Could you say more about this, that it is not 'our God and Father'? It is "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ". The One who has provided the blessing is the One to whom the response goes.

RFW I am not sure that I can say very much about it. "The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" is that blessed Person, made known through the only One who could reveal Him. The Lord could speak to the Father as none other could, He is "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ". There was a Man here who could speak to His Father in perfect confidence and to whom the Father could speak in perfect confidence.

GAB I was wondering if you could say a word as to the matter of God being "the God of endurance and of encouragement". I suppose it must involve the fact that the Lord Jesus was here, a divine Person. It is such a One who is able to encourage. It is all coming from God Himself, but it must involve the fact that a divine Person has been here and been through all these things.

RFW Do you think that what endurance and what encouragement really mean could not be fully known until the Lord was here? There was that which came into expression which was directly of God, His God and Father, was there?

DMC Following on from John 11, in John 12 you get, "Mary therefore, having taken a pound of ointment of pure nard of great price, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair, and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment", v 3. Was that a blessed, positive result from sorrow that she had passed through, and her experience with the Lord?

RFW Quite so, something positive came out of it. It has often been pointed out that it was as the ointment was put at the feet of Jesus that the house was filled. It is as things are put on Christ that they acquire a distinction that is capable of filling every soul that is there. I am sure you have often had the experience during the morning meeting that, as someone says something to magnify Christ, the hearts of the saints are filled with a fresh sense of His glory. The ointment was always there, but then it was brought out and put on Christ, and that is the great matter: "the house was filled with the odour of the ointment".

SCL In order to encourage do you think it requires a spiritual mindset? At the end of verse 5 it talks of being "like-minded one toward another, according to Christ Jesus". It seems to be a spiritual mindset here, not something of a natural mind.

RFW It is a lovely expression, "according to Christ Jesus". What does the Lord think of your brother, your sister? Can I be "like-minded ... according to Christ Jesus"? Can I, in some sense, embrace the Lord's thoughts as to my local brethren?

SCL Judging from the size of such a task, it would be a daily thing, do you think? It would not just be at a time when our fellow saints need us most. It would be throughout our pathway down here, do you think?

RFW When you think of your local brethren, what do you think about them? But to be "like-minded ... according to Christ Jesus", how one would desire to have some sense of that! What does the Lord think of that brother or sister? Can my mind in any way embrace the Lord's thoughts as to those for whom He has died? "For the Christ also did not please himself", v 3. Think of that! He came into conditions in which He did not please Himself or do His own will. I have thought recently of the life of Jesus, that, in one sense, it was a simple life. He came to do the will of Another, and that is what He did. He never deviated from that.

TDB Paul would be thankful to have someone like Timothy, "I have no one like-minded who will care with genuine feeling how ye get on", Phil 2: 20.

RFW It is remarkable that even in these early days he had not other "like-minded" persons. You might have thought there would have been plenty such available to Paul, but he did not have anybody like Timothy.

DHM We get the opportunity to have that view when we come together to remember the Lord Jesus. We come as individuals with an

individual exercise, but it is a great cause for encouragement that there are others, brethren that we know, brethren that we love, local brethren, that we have links with in the Lord.

RFW We come with that desire, to remember Him. We have one thought before us as gathering, so the first thing is that we assemble. Assembling involves that we fit together and we are easy, as it were, in one another's company, and that makes way for the service of God to proceed, does it not?

DHM It is relatively easy to look at these things theoretically or objectively, but practically we are challenged, and yet it is from the practical gain of it that the enjoyment springs.

RFW Painful and sorrowful things happen to us. They have happened in your circumstances recently and these things bring their test. We have to find a way to prove encouragement in spite of these things, and our experiences together tend to bring out what is real in one another.

PEH Does it bring out divine workmanship? I was thinking that we have to see beyond individual personality to see divine workmanship in each other, really looking for features of Christ in each other. If all we see is each other's personalities, we will get discouraged, but if we see something of Christ in each other, we are sure to be encouraged.

RFW "Each by the faith which is in the other", Rom 1: 12. Where did that faith come from? There has been a divine work that put it there. Somebody said recently, 'If I cannot see Christ in my brother, can I see my brother in Christ?'. There is that which has been secured at such a cost for every one of us.

RCT We have just had another care meeting. I wondered if our administration would have this in mind, the thought of encouragement.

RFW Yes, indeed. So you have arranged to give gifts to various ones and the gifts are of value practically, but it is what is behind them that brings the encouragement - the love, the consideration, that is conveyed through the giving of the saints. I am not seeking in any way to belittle the preciousness of assembly giving or, I suppose we have to say in our day, what bears the character of assembly giving, but what led to it being given? It was the work of God. It was the feelings of Christ in expression.

GAB As we gather for the Lord's supper we take account of the brethren first, then we look at the loaf; they represent one body in Christ: "we, being many, are one loaf", 1 Cor 10: 17. Is there not something to focus our affections on? We take account of our brethren and say, 'Well, in that loaf I see something that is a divine conception really'. I am not speaking of the other idea in that verse of the one loaf as the Lord's personal body at this point, but the secondary view we have there of that idea. There is a correspondence between what the saints are as sitting down practically, knowing one another, and what you see in the loaf.

RFW "We, being many" - our hearts and minds are to be enlarged as we take account of that one loaf and think of what it means.

DMC Would you say in the company there is a practical expression of what is in the body, but there is a much wider thought in the "one loaf" that you carry in your affections. There are many that are included in that loaf that we carry in our affections.

RFW We do, indeed, and yet we are thankful for those available to us. There is some practical expression of it there, of what the one loaf conveys.

JDG "He that speaks with a tongue edifies himself; but he that prophesies edifies the assembly", 1 Cor 14: 4. I think that is a very fine thought in chapter 14 of 1 Corinthians. What is our objective? Is it "edification, and encouragement, and consolation"? It is related to the expression of what is of Christ here.

RFW Edification is the building up of what is for Christ here. There is something very precious to Christ here.

JDG The object in speaking is to communicate "spiritual things by spiritual means", 1 Cor 2: 13.

RFW And that is really the only thing that edifies the assembly, the conveying of what is spiritual by spiritual means. So it is an interesting thought that there might be something that would come in freshly on this line that would bring in "edification, and encouragement, and consolation". We would look for that as we come together, would we not, the idea of what is prophetic? I suppose one outstanding example of it, often quoted, is 1 Thessalonians 4 where Paul writes of the rapture, as we speak of it, and it is a prophetic word, really. "So encourage one another with these words", v 18. You get an

outstanding example of a prophetic word that brings in encouragement.

SCL Do you think as well when we seek to encourage our brethren, we were speaking about endurance and continuity before, but it is really to ensure that God continues to get His portion from each and every one of us?

RFW The Lord may give you something to say. I suppose you would never come to a ministry meeting without having something to say, would you?

TWL I was wondering whether this line of encouragement comes about by persons that are “taught of God” by experience, 1 Thess 4: 9. Would that be right?

RFW That was our first scripture really. Paul had learned something from God directly, had he not, in the way of encouragement?

TWL The scripture in Isaiah 50 has been going through my mind: “The Lord Jehovah hath given me the tongue of the instructed, that I should know how to succour by a word him that is weary. He wakeneth morning by morning, he wakeneth mine ear to hear as the instructed”, v 4. Paul was “taught of God”, consequently he knew God, and so he was able to impart something of God in Christ to encourage persons. Is that how this all works?

RFW “The tongue of the instructed”: how we would long to know something of that!

DMC At the end of the chapter they went out of the meeting encouraged: “the secrets of his heart are manifested; and thus, falling upon his face, he will do homage to God”, 1 Cor 14: 25.

RFW The person who came in was searched, but it was in view of his being encouraged. He was in the presence of something that he had never experienced before. What do you say?

DMC I think the question would be whether we are able for these things. Do you think it should exercise us that we are looking for persons who may be exercised? I am sure there are persons like that. We feel it greatly when persons turn aside.

RFW We do indeed. The reality that there is such a thing as the prophetic word that can bring in the current mind of God is a great matter. It is a wonderful thing if persons then listen to that and are

adjusted.

DHM The two on the way to Emmaus were peculiarly encouraged by the Lord as to what was taking place at that very point in time, and that was what they were restored to.

RFW It is wonderful the way the Lord drew near to them, was it not? He asked them what they were talking about and listened to what they had to say. He took them up from that point. It is a great matter to be able to enter into what somebody is actually going through and to bring in a word of encouragement, do you think?

DHM He knew what they were feeling and how they were feeling about things and He was able - you would be careful what you say - to identify with that.

RFW He could take account of the fact that they were downcast. How blessed it is that there is One who can take account of us when we are down, and lift us up!

JDG That is what you have in your final scripture. It says, "For indeed, when we came into Macedonia, our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted in every way; without combats, within fears. But he who encourages those that are brought low, even God, encouraged us by the coming of Titus". It must have been a cheer to Paul to hear something good about a local assembly.

RFW Yes. He brought him good news about this local assembly, about Corinth. It is wonderful to get information like that about persons who are going on. It is fine to find encouragement from that source, the fact that we have heard of others who are going on.

PEH So does that have in mind, as it says in Ephesians, "until we all arrive at the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, at the full-grown man", chap 4: 13? So rather than turn aside, as has been mentioned, we should go on. Is it in mind that there should be full growth?

RFW Yes, it is the idea of endurance that you drew attention to earlier: "until we all arrive". There is a process continuing, is there? We have not got there yet, but we are going on.

GAB Encouragement must necessarily lead to movement. The two in Luke 24 have been referred to. The Lord met them where they were and enlightened them, encouraged them, but then He disappeared

from them. His service to them led them into movement, to return to Jerusalem and those who were there. They came back with burning hearts, no longer downcast.

RFW It is a fine thing if somebody is on fire, as it were, and is able to bring that amongst the brethren! Well, it speaks here about “through the encouragement with which he was encouraged as to you; relating to us your ardent desire, your mourning, your zeal for me”. That was the fire, was it not? It had not been set on through human means, but had its origin from God.

DCB I thought it helped us to see as well that even Paul, a great apostle with his links with the Lord, went through times and periods of discouragement. No one in this present condition is exempt from these things, but there is the resource in divine Persons in what you have been bringing before us.

RFW Yes, “without combats, within fears”, “the burden of all the assemblies” (2 Cor 11: 28) resting on him. What things he sustained, what sorrows he carried, and yet he is able to encourage others. Paul is able to encourage us today because he would direct us to divine Persons as the source of all encouragement.

Edinburgh

6th January 2013

Key to Initials (Edinburgh unless otherwise stated):-

G Bailey; T D Beveridge, Kirkcaldy; D C Brown;
G A Brown, Grangemouth; D M Crozier, Warrenpoint; J D Gray;
P E Hogan, Grangemouth; S C Lock; T W Lock; D H Marshall;
R C Trotter; R F White, Londonderry

“KEEP YOURSELVES IN THE LOVE OF GOD”

Robert Taylor

Jude 1: 20, 21

Romans 5: 8-11

Romans 8: 31, 32, 38, 39

1 John 4: 9-14, 19

I seek help, beloved brethren, to speak of what Jude refers to, “keep yourselves in the love of God”. Jude was diverted to write about the increasing powers of darkness. I do not know what he would say of the evil, satanic powers working in this world today, attempting if possible to undermine the faith of the saints, and seeking to disturb them in their happy relations with God, that God may not have His full portion. Jude sums up in those words, “keep yourselves in the love of God”.

You might think that is hardly necessary. It is all around us, “the love of God”; man could not breathe without the love of God being active. If God withdrew His breath all flesh would expire.

The love of God is all around us, and yet we are exhorted to keep ourselves in it. The two and a half tribes did not do it. You may say, if speaking in our time, that they were like Christians, but the two and a half tribes did not keep themselves in the love of God. What happened? They built a memorial, distance came in. That good land that had been preached to them - I like those words of Moses: “the good land that is beyond the Jordan”, Deut 3: 25. Moses told them about it; he had never been in it, but he had told them something about it, because he kept himself in the love of God through that wilderness journey. He says, “*thou* hast been our dwelling-place in all generations”, Ps 90: 1. I often think of that; Moses was a busier man than anybody here, carrying the troubles and anxieties of all those people, and at the end of the day there he is in his tent keeping himself in the love of God, “*thou* hast been our dwelling-place in all generations”.

I seek, dear brethren, that we might be encouraged to keep ourselves in the love of God. That is why I read in Romans. “God commends *his* love to us, in that, we being still sinners”. He commended His love to you, at the very worst time in your history, when you were a sinner; by pointing you to Jesus. Nobody else could help

you. We need to be reminded about it; we are apt to forget. Paul says, even to the Ephesians, “that ye were at that time without Christ ... having no hope, and without God in the world”, Eph 2: 12. At that hour He commended His love to you in pointing you to Jesus. It says, “in that, we being still sinners, Christ has died for us”. May I just address some of the younger ones for a moment? There will never be a time in your life when you are worse than when you were a lost sinner, and that is when God took you up. Through your history Satan will remind you that you were a sinner; but you can say Christ died,

My sins - O the bliss of this glorious thought -

My sins - not in part, but the whole -

Were borne on the cross, and are gone evermore.

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul! (Hymn 238)

Tell Satan that when he tempts you. He brings them up to disturb your soul, but God knew how bad a sinner you were and He commended His love to you in sending His Son. “We being still sinners, Christ has died for us”. The only way the matter could be met was that “God sent forth his Son, come of woman, come under law, that he might redeem those under law, that we might receive sonship”, Gal 4: 4. Think of God having those glorious thoughts in His mind for you, and the way He moved in His love to bring you to Himself. It says, “Christ has died for us”. That has ended the matter of your sins. If you know that Christ died for you, the matter of your sins before God is settled. May it be kept before us that Christ has met once and for all this question of our sins.

It is not only has He died for us - many people will tell you that Christ died for them - but the reason I read this scripture is that He not only died for me but He lives for me at the right hand of God. I can look at any time and see myself presented before God in Christ. He lives for us. Not only has He died to justify us, that means He has cleared us entirely in God's sight, you are set up a new man, “having been now justified in the power of his blood, we shall be saved by him from wrath”, but then it goes on, “saved in the power of his life”. That means today that He is living for you at God's right hand. If you care to look - it is a wholesome study to look at John's gospel, chapters 13-17 - you will see the Lord Jesus leading His own to the Father, and reminding them of “the power of his life”. It says of Jesus “having loved his own who were in the world, loved them to the end”, John 13: 1. That does not just mean the cross. It means He loves them through and through, the

entire journey through. There was an old brother where we were who used to thank the Lord that He was an 'all the way home Saviour', a beautiful touch. He is going to take us all the way home; that is what He is doing in these chapters in John's gospel: He is taking them home. He says, "I will not leave you orphans" (John 14: 18); there is "the power of his life" coming into expression: He sent the Holy Spirit to be in our hearts. It says, "the Father himself has affection for you", John 16: 27. In those chapters He is introducing us into a whole economy of love of which He is the blessed Centre, "the power of his life". That is how the testimony has continued through the ages, through the Holy Spirit being here and Christ at God's right hand in glory serving us in "the power of his life". That came into an old man's mind many years ago - Jacob - the way he was living where there was a lack of food. There was certainly a lack of enjoyment. The brothers were arguing with one another but Joseph came into Jacob's life. "Joseph my son is yet alive; I will go and see him", Gen 45: 28. Will you go tonight? Is there a troubled heart in this room? Will you arise and go and see Him? Jacob did and spent the best of his days: "Joseph is still alive", chap 26. There he was through his own obsession, perhaps with his history, perhaps as it were with the troubles in the meeting; he had got under a cloud, and he was a man that was just looking to dying in his sorrow, but that is not God's thought. Joseph sent a message to him, he sent the gospel to him: "Joseph my son is yet alive; I will go and see him before I die". What power flooded his soul, and he died a worshipper. God would have great sorrow in seeing persons dying without being in the joy of the power of that life. So Jacob, there he is going out in full sail, "saved in the power of his life". I say these things to impress our hearts; God is commending His love to us. Why should it not be, dear brethren, that we strive to keep ourselves in the love of God?

In Romans the apostle who was writing there was certainly kept in the love of God; he kept himself in it. They put him in prison: what did he do? He wrote the epistle to the Ephesians, keeping himself in the love of God. Can any other creature separate us from it? From God's side, no. From our side we get occupied with so many things and, alas, like those two and a half tribes we get out of the present enjoyment and liberty of keeping ourselves in the love of God.

Jude was concerned about that. He says you are to build yourselves up, "building yourselves up on your most holy faith". There is the foundation. If you are going to build you need a solid foundation. What I have been speaking of brings us to a solid foundation, my sins

are gone. Everything as to myself and my history is settled in the cross of Jesus. It has all been met in the power of His blood. His blood was the price. God sent Him forth first of all but then it says, "He who yea, has not spared his own Son". That Man who was sent forth was the Friend of sinners. When Christ was here His holiness would have set Him apart from the race, but in His grace He became the Servant of all, how beautiful. That was the Man that God sent forth. He fed five thousand (Matt 14: 21), cleansed the lepers and raised the dead (Matt 11: 5), commended God's love to us - and yet what did they do? "Away with this man", Luke 23: 18. Dear brethren, these things are not far from our hearts; accepting the blessings, but not keeping ourselves in the love of God. We have got to start building. The foundation is that our sins are all met, the price has been paid, and God has been satisfied. Let Satan say what he will, God has been satisfied and He has commended His love to me as believing in the foundation of Christ's finished work. The building is to go on. It says, "building yourselves up on your most holy faith". That refers to what has been founded, what we have come into. We have come into a system that is called our "most holy faith".

As things get scarce they take on a peculiar glory and beauty. Peter speaks about the "precious blood ... of Christ", 1 Pet 1: 19. The faith is "most holy faith". It is a reference to what has been founded in the apostles. It is referred to in Acts as "the teaching and fellowship of the apostles, in breaking of bread and prayers", chap 2: 42. These are all things that are in the foundation and they are going through. They may be assailed and they are assailed but they are going through. That is something to start and build your soul upon; the apostles' teaching. Men will say it is only Paul, only Peter, it was written a long time ago, they will tell you times have changed and you cannot work them out now, and so they go for something inferior; but that is a shaky foundation. God has founded something in the apostles' teaching, and He has founded it to go through; and the glorious effects of it will be seen one day in the bride in glory, coming down graced in all the glories of divine love. Today we are to be building ourselves up on our most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit. Here is an elevation to your prayers that maybe you never thought about. We pray in our need; that drives us to Christ, but here it is "praying in the Holy Spirit". It is good if you say things in your prayers that you had not thought about when you started, there are examples of that in Scripture. We sometimes try and rehearse what we are going to say and we have our sorrows and all

these things that we may not get past. Praying in the Holy Spirit will take us perhaps a little past our own needs and thoughts.

It is very fitting that John should write about love so much because he kept himself in the love of God. How? By leaning on the breast of Jesus (John 21: 20), and in His bosom (John 13: 23), he kept near. Peter was a little bit further away, he was not too sure about things at times; but there is John leaning on His breast and knowing the answers because he was keeping himself in the love of God. He says, "he has given to us of his Spirit", the power to go against the stream. If you look carefully at the Scriptures you will see that power is connected with the Spirit. It is a great feature of the Spirit being here that there is power in the believer to go against the stream, to keep himself in the love of God. That beautiful passage in Ephesians, speaks about coming into what is eternal. It says "according to the power that works in us", Eph 3: 20. Not only is the Spirit a divine Person to be worshipped but there is the power of the Holy Spirit working in the believer to keep themselves in the love of God and go against the stream. Through the power of the Spirit we have a real experience of how things are going through and we are kept in the joy of divine love. John says, "Beloved, if God has so loved us". What is the effect, if God has so loved us? He is looking for results of these features of Christ coming out in the saints. It says, "if God has so loved us, we also ought to love one another". There is deliverance, we love ourselves so much but if God has so loved us, does that not take us beyond ourselves and what we are? It gives us to appreciate what God has done in others; "we also ought to love one another ... if we love one another, God abides in us". The power to love one another is by the Spirit. If we look at one another without God's viewpoint we may find it difficult, but the saints are God's possession. They are His workmanship and there is something to be seen today in them that would draw out our affections and give us a bond together to love one another. God is grieved by these difficulties that come so often among us. If we abide in Him there is power and grace, developing the features of the heavenly Man to be able to love one another. That is how things are going to continue. The experiences we have had of breakdown would never have happened if we had been kept in the enjoyment of the love of God. We begin to envy, these things came in early, envy and strife and discontent. Naphtali is a beautiful man to think about, it says, "Naphtali, satisfied with favour, And full of the blessing of Jehovah" (Deut 33: 23) - there is a man who kept himself in the love of God. Dissatisfaction, if you care to

look at it in your own heart, is the cause of much sorrow that comes in and crops up in our lives and histories. If God has so loved us there is to be some outshining, some fresh expression of it as I have said already for that to be so, He has given to us of His Spirit. That means there is an expression of Christ working in the hearts of the saints but there is something being worked out that has a divine stamp and character about it. These things are to encourage us to build ourselves up on a sure foundation. In the exercises that we face in proceeding in the building, we are to keep ourselves in the love of God, “awaiting the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life”. That is the enjoyment now of what will soon be our heavenly portion in bodies of glory. Eternal life is presented as enjoyment now of what will soon be our eternal part, as keeping ourselves in the love of God.

I would like to speak just for a moment of some persons who did that in a remarkable way in Scripture. I would speak firstly about Abraham. Abraham was a man who was called out from a system of darkness and it says, “Abraham, being called, obeyed”, Heb 11: 8. That is one step in keeping ourselves in the love of God; we are obedient to His word. It says, “God’s word abides in you”, 1 John 2: 14. That was Abraham; Lot, alas, did not keep himself in the love of God. A believer no doubt, but he vexed His righteous soul through not keeping himself in the love of God. Do not look beyond the circle of the fellowship. God has called us into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Do not put yourself outside of the enjoyment of that fellowship. Lot did and he had sorrow upon sorrow. We hear nothing much about him again. Peter must have known more than we do about him; he says, “he tormented his righteous soul”, 2 Pet 2: 8. There is Abraham who “being called, obeyed”, and what did he do? He continued his pathway here in the enjoyment of divine appearances. In the love of God, you get communications. There was Simeon; he was a man who in that dark day had kept himself in the love of God and it says, “it was divinely communicated to him by the Holy Spirit”, Luke 2: 26. Living, divine communications come as we keep ourselves in the love of God. Abraham got light for his pathway through keeping himself. He was called, and obeyed, and went step by step; that is how Scripture speaks about Abraham’s path, “walk in the steps of the faith ... of our father Abraham”, Rom 4: 12. That was his own faith working, attached to the foundation, attached to what God said: “the faith once delivered to the saints”, Jude 1: 3. Abraham’s own faith was building on that; if we put it in our day, building on what God had founded, and what he found

was that each step God grew increasingly precious to him. Later in his life he speaks of God as, “the Eternal God”, Gen 21: 33. What touches come into his life as he is obedient, walking in faith.

Thy refuge is the God of old,
And underneath are the eternal arms (Deut 33: 27)

- a God that has come into time, has come into the histories of His people and the support of those eternal arms are there to hold us and keep us in the love of God.

We referred in the reading to Daniel praying, and I would just like to comment on how Daniel kept himself in the love of God in a very dark day. In Daniel 9 he speaks of a dark time in history when he could not quite understand how things were going. He had been taken away captive, as God's people had been given over into captivity through their failure of keeping themselves in the love of God, and Daniel looking abroad could hardly understand it; that is like many of us. It is difficult to understand how things are like they are; so he prays. I would suggest he was praying in the Holy Spirit; these things pressing on his heart, the people that God had spoken so well of as His own possession, there they are in their troubled circumstances. “In the first year of Darius ... I Daniel understood by the books that the number of the years, whereof the word of Jehovah came to Jeremiah the prophet, for the accomplishment of the desolations of Jerusalem, was seventy years. And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes”, v 1-3. There was a man who was keeping himself in the love of God by prayer. Jude speaks about that: “praying in the Holy Spirit”. In the ways of God many things distress us but there is one comfort, as another has said: we may not understand them but we know the God whose ways they are, and that makes a great change. That is what was happening here with Daniel; he knew the God whose ways they were; and what did he do? He read the books. The book of Jeremiah was not too attractive a book to be reading in such a day, but there it was, he understood by the books that God had everything in hand. It was all measured: so in the midst of dark troubled times, he kept himself in the love of God.

Understanding by the books: there are many books abroad today, dear brethren, that would seek to try to explain things, but there are books that have divine authority about them; they are the Scriptures. They have divine authority: “they persevered in the

teaching and fellowship of the apostles, in breaking of bread and prayers" (Acts 2: 42), and these things all have divine authority about them. We will understand if we read the books, if we take them to heart, if we walk in the instructions. It says, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path", Ps 119: 105. If we allow the power of the Scriptures, and the authority of the Spirit behind them, we will be helped through the ways that we do not fully understand because of our attachment to the God whose ways they are. Daniel understood by the books that things were all in hand. I never look at Daniel without looking up that verse at the end of the book: "go thy way until the end; and thou shalt rest, and stand in thy lot at the end of the days", Dan 12: 13. What a word to a troubled heart, God says, you can see Him just putting His hand on a praying man, "go thy way ... and stand in thy lot at the end of the days".

I would like to speak about another man, Caleb, a man who kept himself in the love of God, when all were against him. In Numbers 14, the people were saying that God had proposed what He could not accomplish. That is how we get if we do not keep ourselves in the love of God; we begin to think that things are impossible; and if you only look at the breakdown you may well think like that. If you look at what things are in man's hand you may say, 'How could it be?'. Caleb knew how it would be. Why? He got a sight of the land. That is a wonderful stability to the soul. He was a man who kept himself in the love of God by embracing the purpose of God. We may not understand His ways but His purpose is unchangeable. His purpose was to bring them into the land and Caleb laid hold of that. It says that he "stilled the people before Moses, and said, Let us go up boldly and possess it, for we are well able to do it", Num 13: 30. What a word; a man standing against all these others, all that they were saying, says, "we are well able". "The land, which we passed through to search it out, is a very, very good land. If Jehovah delight in us, he will bring us into this land, and give it us", Num 14: 7, 8. Dear brethren, do not have any doubts about that. The breakdown that we see will end in glory: the saints will come through it, out of the breakdown into that good land that Moses spoke of. He must have heard Moses speaking about it too. Moses heard Caleb speaking about it. "The land, which we passed through to search it out, is a very, very good land." It was becoming more precious to him as the days went on, so that further on in that chapter it says, "Joshua the son of Nun, and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, lived still of the men that had gone to search out the land", v 38. Where were the others? They had

not kept themselves in the love of God. Here is a man who is embracing God's purposes, which are all centred in Christ. "In him is the yea, and in him the amen", 2 Cor 1: 20. Whatever promises of God there are, He is the Yea and Amen. Not what man is going to do, or how man is going to do things, or what they think about things. The whole purpose and promises of God are centred in Christ. "God has made him, this Jesus whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ", Acts 2: 36.

Dear brethren, may our hearts be encouraged to keep ourselves; God has commended it to us in Christ. There is no one else; He sent His Son and He has put Him there in a position to carry the whole thing through according to His mind, to carry us through as we keep ourselves in His love. May we be encouraged to do so for His Name's sake.

Birmingham

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“STRETCHING OUT”

Robert W McClean

Philippians 3: 13-14

Genesis 13: 1, 8-18

Hebrews: 12: 1-2

The expression that I have in mind to speak of, dear brethren, is in chapter 3 of Philippians; in verse 13 it speaks of “stretching out”: “stretching out to the things before, I pursue, looking towards the goal, for the prize of the calling on high of God in Christ Jesus”. I would like to encourage us to stretch out. I need encouragement; we all need encouragement: the apostle Paul liked to build up the saints. We see that in these epistles, in the way that he speaks to them. It is available for all of us; we are not too old, and we are not too young, to stretch out to the things that God sets before us, and that is the great thing here in this verse in Philippians: it is the things that *God* is setting before us. It is not the things that we might set before ourselves; it is what God sets before us, if we could stretch out for them. Stretching out! There have been the Olympic Games and no doubt people have stretched themselves, they have done their personal best, probably come away only with something to say they were there. A few have come away with medals; this is different, but the idea is the same, that you are stretching yourself. If you want to compete in the games, as Paul speaks about them, (2 Tim 2: 5) you have to involve yourself; there is training, there is patience, and there is perseverance; these things are required.

Of course, in divine things nothing depends on any physical, or even mental, prowess that you might have. These are heart matters and God would appeal to your heart and mine that we might stretch out; stretch out for the things that He would set before us. Paul says, “I pursue, looking towards the goal”. There is the prize in mind, but it is not exactly that you have your eye on the prize; you have your eye on the goal. What a prize indeed it is, “the calling on high of God in Christ Jesus”. It relates to the purpose of God for you, divine calling; these are great things, and God has in mind that you would stretch out for them. This is available for all of us, the same as we touched on in the reading; burden bearing is available for us all, young and old. I have on my heart particularly the desire to encourage the young ones in stretching out, but you will understand when I say that really we all need it. It is not that

we are picking on anyone that is young, we all need it, we all need the word because there is so much that the devil would seek to bring in to divert.

In Genesis, we have Abraham and his coming up out of Egypt. Abraham had moved in faith. God had spoken to him, and he moved in faith from the land where he lived, his nativity, where he was brought up. He moved so far - you can read about the steps of faith of our father Abraham. He moved so far, and then his father died and he moved further on, and Lot is with him, and he comes down into the land. Then he moves a bit further, and finds there is a famine, and he keeps going. Instead of staying there where God is setting him, he goes on down to Egypt, and we are a bit like that, I think. There is a famine in the land, and it is testing, and we go on a bit further because it seems a little easier in Egypt. But there are legacies from Abraham going down into Egypt, and they are not good ones: he brings up Hagar as Sarah's maid servant, which brings in problems later; and Lot gets a taste for Egypt.

This is a very sobering thing, because we all have influence and Abraham was an influence on Lot in going down into Egypt; and that was not so good. Where we read, it comes out, as these things do - they have a habit of coming out, and it is good to be humble about them. Abraham gets the benefit of the exercise because he is moving in faith, but Lot does not. We read, "forgetting the things behind ... I pursue". Lot did not forget the things that were behind, and it meant he lost almost everything. He came away with his life, and two daughters, and that was it; that was all Lot was left with, that was the culmination of this. But what it says of them was that Abraham was rich in cattle, and Lot also, he had flocks, herds, tents and so on. There was contention between them, and Abraham says, "let there be no contention between me and thee". Abraham takes the position of faith, and he says, 'If you choose to the left, I will go to the right; and if you choose to the right, well, I will go to the left'. He leaves it, not in the hands of Lot exactly, but in the hands of God. Then Lot lifts up his eyes, and what he saw, no doubt, was wonderful - it was the plain of the Jordan. If you look at it now it is maybe not so choice as it would have been in the days we are reading of, when it speaks about the thoroughly-watered plain. He sees all of that, and it looks good, and he thinks: 'I will have that, I will choose that'. It says, "Lot chose for himself".

It is a great danger, dear brethren, choosing for ourselves. It is very easy to do; we can very easily succumb to it. I am not pretending

to speak as clear of all these things. We might tend to choose for ourselves, and it looks very good. Lot chose the best from his view point and it reminded him of Egypt: "as the garden of Jehovah, like the land of Egypt, as one goes to Zoar". You may say, 'This is wonderful, this is good, and I am making this good choice for myself and for my future', and so on. "He chose for himself", and before the paragraph is ended you can see the direction he is going, can you not? It is not heading in a very good way, it says he "went towards the east", and "dwelt in the cities of the plain". He would have had to go down. If you think about the vantage point that they were at, they could see the Jordan; it must have been a good vantage point. He could see that it was well-watered, it was green, there was life there, and he headed for that; but then it says, "Lot dwelt in the cities of the plain, and pitched tents as far as Sodom". We know what that means; the note shows that Sodom means 'burning' and Gomorrah means 'submersion'. They show God's judgment on the principles that come out there. They are prevalent in the world, something that we are to be preserved from; I will not mention or name the thing, but it is something that is prevalent: even in the newspapers these corrupt features of Sodom and Gomorrah are mentioned. And Lot found himself surrounded by these features, as many do.

But then Jehovah says to Abraham, "Lift up now thine eyes". Lot had lifted up his eyes, but he had not brought Jehovah in. Abraham lifts up his eyes, Jehovah tells him to, and He says, "look from the place where thou art, northward and southward and eastward and westward". God was going to give to him all that he could see. What blessings God conveys to Abraham, the father of the faithful, wonderful blessings! In the day to come, when the Lord shall reign, those blessings will come to those who are direct descendants of Abraham. So he looks; now he is looking towards the goal that God is setting before him: that is the great thing. Lot chose for himself: Abraham let God choose for him, and he looks up and he sees towards these four points of the compass, and wherever he looked God was saying, 'There is blessing for you if you are going to move in faith, if you are going to stretch out for what I would set before you; you are going to get it, it is going to be for you'. And then Jehovah says, "Arise, walk through the land" - he had to walk through the land, the length and breadth of it. These dimensions, these points of the compass, help us to see the immensity of what God has in mind for us. When it comes to knowing the love of the Christ (Eph 3: 18), it mentions four dimensions, does it

not? There is the length and breadth, and depth and height. This is what Abraham was touching on, what God was setting before him that he might stretch out to, and then it says he moved his tents - you might say he moved house. His was a nomadic existence. These people lived in tents, everything was there, their whole life was in these tents. So he took down his tents, and he moved his tents, and he came and dwelt in this place that has been spoken of as a place of stability, "the oaks of Mamre, which are in Hebron". The fruitfulness of these oaks of Mamre! Mamre speaks of a place where there is communion, where there is company, in Hebron, and this is what God has in mind. "And he built there an altar to Jehovah"; he is moving in this direction, he is stretching out to the things that God has set before him.

How blessed the things are that God sets before us; they are worth stretching out for. The world might not set much store on them, even Lot did not, though we know he was a righteous man and he "tormented his righteous soul", 2 Pet 2: 8. Even Lot did not stretch out for them; so it seems to me that it requires more than just believing on Jesus, more than just having Jesus as your Saviour. How essential that is! The gospel is preached that you might come into the knowledge of that, Jesus as your Saviour. John says that in his gospel, "these are written that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing ye might have life in his name", John 20: 31. But then if you are set on that ground, if you have life in His name, you love Jesus, are you going to stretch out for the things that God sets before you?

In Hebrews the writer speaks about the race, "run with endurance the race". You are not going to do very well in a race if you are looking behind, or if your eye is not focussed on what is before you. And what does the writer say we should be looking on? He says, "looking stedfastly on Jesus". If your eye is on the goal then that is who you will be looking at, and He will be the motivation in your soul to stretch out for these things. It is not that you are doing it because it is the right thing to do, or because somebody told you to do it, or even just because you want to do it, but it is because Jesus is set before you, that "prize of the calling on high of God in Christ Jesus". It is a wonderful thing, a wonderful prize, there could be no better, to have part in your calling in the purpose of God, to have part with Christ in glory. And so he says "having so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, laying aside every weight, and sin which so easily entangles us".

We spoke about burdens in the reading, and we all carry

burdens, but sometimes we carry burdens we ought not really to be carrying, caused by something we have done. Because of the things that we have set before us, something we might have chosen for ourselves, we might carry a burden. I am not intending to open that up, but you can imagine it, can you not? If you set yourself on something, worldly goods, something else, that becomes a weight. If you are running a race the last thing you want is something that is dragging you down and holding you back. Then, “sin which so easily entangles us”. How much we know that! We know that we do not have to be very far in the pathway to realise that we are still susceptible to sin; it entangles us, it is like a net round your feet. How can you run when these things are catching you and stumbling you? That is what the enemy would do; he would seek to stumble you and catch you and entangle you with sin. How we need to be so careful! The enemy is a very determined foe, and he does not really care about you; he wants to rob God, and he does not care how old you are, whether you are young or old; he wants to entangle you, and he will use all the many departments of the world to do so. Maybe some things catch us out when we are younger, and as you get older there are other things that catch you out. I am sure that continues; we need to be watchful, but it speaks about “laying aside”. The death of Christ has met all that; we are entitled to lay it aside, and then it says “to run with endurance the race”. It is not going to be easy. If it was easy to run the race, then what credit would it be? It requires endurance. Christianity is not a sprint; it is more like a marathon; it is the whole of your life. It stretches out before you, and are you going to run that, are you going to have your eye on “the leader and completer of faith”?

Jesus, the Model and Example, has set it all out. He says to the Father, “I have completed the work which thou gavest me that I should do it”, John 17: 4. He ran with endurance the race; what a blessed Saviour we have! And Mr Darby says this word “leader” is a difficult one to translate, but it is ‘one who begins and sets a matter on’, Acts 3: 15, footnote. He sets the course, runs the race, wins the battle, establishes the city, and rules it: the Lord has done all of that. He is “the leader and completer of faith”. Who better? There is no better, in fact there is no one else to have your eye on as you run this race; “stretching out to the things before”. That is what God would set before you; he would set Jesus before you.

And then it speaks a little bit about Jesus, “who, in view of the joy lying before him, endured the cross”; “the joy lying before him” was like

the prize. What was the prize for Jesus? We often think of the assembly, the bride of Christ as the prize and that is right, but I think it involves all that God had in mind. "In view of the joy lying before him", involves the assembly: what an answer to His heart as a Man, but there is a whole system. There is going to be a universe that is entirely in accord with God and His thoughts, "wherein dwells righteousness", 2 Pet 3: 13, established on the basis of the work of Christ. That will be established for eternity, and you, if you put your faith and trust in Jesus, will be part of it. You may say, 'What difference does it make then if putting my trust and faith in Jesus makes me part of that wonderful universe that will be set up for God?'. Dear friend, do not ask what difference it makes, but "run with endurance". What God is looking for is character: persons with character like Jesus. That universe will be populated by persons, not by robots, not by slaves, but by persons who are brought in, who are part of this joy before God. I have the feeling the idea of stretching out and running with endurance is that you might be formed substantially after Christ, so that what arrives at that time when the Lord comes is substantial. When He calls each one of us home, the time of growth will have gone, the time of advancement and progress will be finished; what will be harvested, just like when they harvest the grain, is what is complete. If an ear has thirty grains, that is good, or sixty or a hundred. I think it is this which is affected by stretching out for the things before, and running with endurance, the increase in fruit to God. You may say that thirty-fold is good, thirty times: then how much better is a hundred fold! That is what God wants you to stretch out for. The Lord Jesus "endured the cross, having despised the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God". We have the opportunity to stretch out, and to run with endurance, and the prize, the joy set before us, is "the calling on high of God in Christ Jesus".

He is there, exalted above all others; is He not worthy of your time, of your life; is it not worth stretching out? I have this sense that is involves exercise, and you can stretch out when you are young, you can stretch out whatever age you are. God might set things before you. I do not know what He might set before you. He has set some things before me that I never expected, but He wants us to stretch out. There is a poem that says -

If the Saviour's won your heart
And for heav'n you've made a start,
Keep your eye upon the chart,
And - go on!

(From A Selection of Poems, compiled by G H S Price, page 225)

'Go on!' he says at the end, 'Go on! there's all eternity to rest in'. Well, that is a poem that encouraged me. Look it up - it is written by a Mr W Lawrence; and stretch out for the things that God sets before you, for your blessing and for fruit for God.

May it be so for the Lord's Name's sake.

Maidstone

8th December 2012