

A WORD IN ITS SEASON

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“A TIME TO KEEP SILENCE, AND A TIME TO SPEAK”

Andrew E Mutton

Ecclesiastes 3: 1, 7 “A time to keep silence, and a time to speak”

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I have been arrested by this reference in Ecclesiastes, “A time to keep silence, and a time to speak”. Naturally, it is a very difficult thing to work out. Some of us speak too much, and that can be a frustration to others. Some of us do not speak nearly enough. That can also be a frustration. But to have the ability and the sensitivity to distinguish between a time to keep silence and a time to speak is, I think, something that is to be desired and discerned by a believer on the Lord Jesus. The setting of this scripture in Ecclesiastes is that there are certain things that apply to all men - all men, all women, all children. Naturally speaking, the writer says, “To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heavens”. There is a time for it; there is a season. It begins with, “A time to be born, and a time to die”. Everyone here knows when they were born. You children, you all know your birthday. You may even know the specific time at which you were born. I know that I was born at a quarter to four. That is very special to me, or it was when I was at school, because that was going home time, and I never forgot that! But the one thing I do not know is when it will be my time to die. I do not know that. God knows that. I do not; you do not. But there is a time, a season to everything, and the writer speaks of it here when he says, “A time to keep silence, and a time to speak”. This is a very sensitive thing. You will notice the wording, “A time to **keep** silence”, not a 'time to **be** silent' - “A time to keep silence”, a very deliberate thing. Sometimes, we make an awful mess of it, do we not? We speak when we should not and we do not speak out when we should. We get ourselves in an awful muddle. The scripture is very clear: there is “A time to keep silence”; a time when maybe we have to just keep our thoughts, and what we want to say, to ourselves. But then there comes a time to speak, and we will look into that in the scriptures that we have read.

With that in mind, I turn to Mark's gospel because we see in our Lord Jesus the perfect example of a time to keep silent and a time to

speak. I was torn between reading here and reading in Isaiah 53. You see the perfection of a Man here on the earth, a great Man, but a Man, and He had the ability, as you and I do, to keep silence and to speak; and *He* does it perfectly. We should learn from the Lord Jesus here as a Man in this respect. The conditions here in Mark's gospel were unbelievably hostile. We think we live in a hostile world. Dear brother, dear sister, dear young person, you have never been in a circumstance such as the Lord Jesus was in here. We have all been in situations where people are accusing us of things, maybe falsely, but I would suggest that no-one in this room has been in a situation where whatever you did and whatever you said, or whatever you did not say, the end would be that you would be put to death. This is the situation in which our Lord Jesus was. Men were bearing false witness against Him. They were telling lies about this blessed Man, the One who had walked amongst men doing nothing but good; healing, helping, praying, here as a Man from whose hand was dispensed the greatest gifts and help that a man could give, with all the power of a divine Person but in manhood's form. And here He was, surrounded by those shouting and jeering and falsely accusing Him. Would that not be enough for you to seek to justify yourself? I know I would; I would have a good try at justifying my position, and saying why I was right and they were wrong, and, 'No, I had not said that, and this is what I meant when I did say that'. They said, "We heard him saying ... The high priest said, Answerest thou nothing? ... But he was silent, and answered nothing". He kept silence. How much He could have said! How much was there in that precious body, in that Man, that could have been said at that time; "But he was silent, and answered nothing". What a lesson for us to take account of! What a precious, precious example of One so full of God's will that there was absolutely no need, not even the desire, to justify Himself. It is one of the strongest urges - it is for me anyway. Someone says, 'Well, you said this'. You may answer, 'Yes, I know I said it but I really did not mean that'; "But he was silent, and answered nothing". Isaiah says, "as a sheep dumb before her shearers, and he opened not his mouth", chap 53: 7. "Who, when reviled, reviled not again", 1 Pet 2: 23. This is a beautiful feature of the Lord Jesus Christ, to be able to keep silence in the presence of the greatest provocation. This was such a melee. These were lies and falsehoods; this was an argument that they could not even agree upon amongst themselves. Was this Man, this precious Man, to stoop to that level? No, His face was set, His path was marked out. The time had come for Him to fulfil

that will of which we have spoken already earlier today - the will of Another. The Lord Jesus was not going to answer those who accused in such a spirit. I understand as to the type of the sheep that the sheep can endure the greatest suffering. It is an animal that can endure a lot of suffering, and Isaiah uses that type. What opposition, what falsehoods the Lord Jesus Himself endured, "But he was silent, and answered nothing". May that spirit be a little more with us! We are so quick, I am so quick - I am sorry, I do not wish to accuse the brethren - to answer back, to answer with my opinion. As we were saying today in prayer, it is not my opinion that counts: it is what God wills, and the will of God at this point was that this precious Man should go onwards to the cross, to suffer and to die, to shed His precious blood. His desire for you is that you live here according to that will, and that you should be here displaying the features of Christ that were so pleasing to Him. Are you going to answer back your accusers? There is a time to speak. We will come to that, but to keep silence, this is a precious thing, and the Lord Jesus kept silence.

But then the high priest speaks to Him again. He says, "*Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?*". I had never noticed it in such a way before. I had always thought that the Lord Jesus remained silent throughout this time. I obviously had not read the scripture carefully enough. But He is asked this question, and now He answers. There was a time to speak. You will notice it was the high priest who asked Him, "*Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?*" And Jesus said, "*I am*". He is not answering the argument and all the confusion around Him. He is speaking of the greatness of His Person and He is answering the chief priest in relation to the place that this precious Man had in regard to His people, Israel. He says to him, "and ye shall see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of power". This was a time to speak; a Man wearing garments that were so meagre, indicating a lowly position; a Man who was to be mocked and buffeted; a Man who was accused by everyone and He says, "and ye shall see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of power". Oh, the time to speak presented itself gloriously here. The nation of Israel will yet see the Son of man sitting in power "and coming with the clouds of heaven". This was the time to speak. Our Lord Jesus was absolutely able to divide perfectly between those two things. Accusation and confusion meant He kept silence, but when it came to speaking, He was able to speak of the glory of that which was in Himself and that which would be available for His people. It is a wonderful thing, I think, to contemplate the perfection in which this

was executed here upon the earth at the time of greatest trial. The time of greatest trial for me brings out the greatest lack of ability to discern what should be said and what should not. For the Lord Jesus, what it brought out was His perfection.

I turn now to 1 Kings. I would like to speak as to Elijah as to a time to keep silence and then speak as to Moses as to a time to speak. I suggest that Elijah here is an example of when we need to keep silence. I feel the edge of it as those who know me will understand the difficulty I have naturally of keeping silence, but Elijah here drew near to the people and says, 'You are wondering between two opinions. Can you not make up your minds?'. He says, "if Jehovah be God, follow him; and if Baal, follow him". There are lots of tests at the present time, and there are many things that frustrate and tend to push us into a course of action very quickly, but keeping silence is the way to hear what God would say. It is the way to hear it. As we spoke of it earlier on, if we get into the presence of God and we fill all the time we spend there with things that we want, it does not allow time for God to speak. To keep silence allows God to speak *His* mind and to show us what is in His heart for us.

I have some sympathy with Elijah, as he must have felt extremely frustrated here. He acts on it where we read in verse 40. He slaughters the prophets of Baal, but then he comes to Jezebel and she says, 'Well, for doing that, you are going to die too'; and he runs away. He runs to a good place. He runs to Horeb, the mount of God. You say, 'Well, that is a good place to run', but you find as soon as he gets there he is still very self-righteous, he is still quite full of himself. Oh, how like us that is! You run to the right place. You say, 'I am all right. I am still going to the meetings. I still do the right things. I turn up every week night. I do what the brethren expect me to do'. Jehovah comes to him, "And [Elijah] said, I have been very jealous". He says, "for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I am left, I alone". I wonder how often we feel like that, 'I am the only one doing right; I am the only one who sees this clearly'. What noise, what confusion was in the mind of Elijah, and Jehovah was there and Jehovah listened. He listened to him. How gracious God is. We get caught up with the turmoil and turbulence of our lives, whether it be domestically or testimonially. We can get caught up with the turmoil of it. Beloved brethren, let us take time to keep silence and to hear what it is God would have to say. I think

He would delight to say it. He would always be ready to say it, but He did not have the opportunity here because Elijah was too busy telling Him how good he was and how bad His people were, and you will remember what God's thoughts were of someone who spoke out against the people. You will remember what He said to Moses. He denied him going into the land because of the way he spoke about His people. Let us not do that. With regard to such a situation, let us learn to keep silence.

And so these other things come. I think Elijah would have been pleased with any one of these things, the wind, the earthquake, the fire. At this point he was so worked up, he would have been quite glad if Jehovah had brought one of these to bear upon the situation, but then, as he learns to keep silence, he hears a soft gentle voice, and after he heard that "he wrapped his face in his mantle". Elijah was starting to disappear out of sight. How many times has God had to do that to me or to you? I may be very vocal about something and then, in all the noise, I am not hearing the answer. There is an earthquake, there is a fire, there is a great wind and I still do not hear the answer. Why? Because there is such turmoil and I am so confused. The situation is confusing. And then comes the soft gentle voice and "he wrapped his face in his mantle". I love to think that the second time he repeats these words he would say them in a much quieter voice. Scripture does not tell us that, so I would be glad to be adjusted, but I think when his face was wrapped in his mantle he would not be quite so belligerent as the first time. He still would have been true, he still would have felt it, but now God is pleased to answer him and he hears. Some of the answers were quite difficult and potentially involved a lot of pain and exercise, but God speaks to him. He still says, "and I am left, I alone", and God says, 'Well, just let me tell you something. This is what is going to happen.' He even names the people who are going to do it. We were speaking earlier on about answers to our prayers. This is a very specific answer. God does not always catch us by surprise when He answers our prayers. Sometimes He is very specific, and there is absolutely no mistaking what it is He says, and here He says, 'This is what is going to happen and, by the way, although you think you are the only one left, I have got seven thousand. And Elijah, you have been making so much noise, you have been so worried about this thing, that you have not even identified one of them'. What a solemn thing. I may be so worked up and so self-righteous that I know what is right, that I have not seen seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal. Oh, beloved

brethren, that we might see God's view of what is precious and what is worthwhile for Him. I find this extremely difficult. My first response is to talk and to act and want to do something, but to keep silence is very precious to God. It would allow Him to show me what He is doing. It would allow Him to show us what is precious to Him. He says, "all the knees that have not bowed unto Baal". Now bowing knees are very precious to God. Every single one at some time is going to bow to Jesus, every single one. Would that I could identify all seven thousand now who have not bowed the knee to Baal. Let us cast our nets wider than we maybe sometimes think, and recognise that God's work is very precious, wherever it is, and He has it and He continues to work with it. Maybe I cannot always be linked on with it in practical fellowship but the work continues, and it is for God, but I need to keep silence to be able to hear it and to allow it into my heart.

I pass on now to Moses because there is also a time to speak. "And Moses said to Jehovah, Ah Lord! I am not eloquent, neither heretofore nor since thou hast spoken to thy servant". He says, 'I have never been good at speaking and now you want me to speak to all the people and to Pharaoh. You want me to take up on your behalf speaking great words'. He says, 'I am not able; I am not able to do it'. I guess we have all felt like that at some time. It is a good way to feel, not able to do it, because what that means is that we become dependent. We spoke of that in the reading and I make no apology for returning to it. Dependence on God for everything is a key to great blessing. He says, 'I am not eloquent, I cannot do it'. My own experience is that if you try to speak for God in any supposed eloquence or ability of yourself, you will fail. God says to him, "I will be with thy mouth, and will teach thee what thou shalt say". Now that is a precious thing, is it not? "I will be with thy mouth". God can give you the words. Dear young brother, as you stand up to pray, God will be with your mouth. Do not worry about what it is that you have to say, as God will provide it. Moses here felt unable for the task. We all sometimes feel unable for what God gives us to do, but He is with us. I would like to speak just briefly about three different areas in which it is a time to speak, and in all of them God will be with our mouths, and will give us what to say. The brethren will understand that I do not speak as having experience in these areas, but can see that they are important.

The first is in the area of evangelism. It is very, very vital that the word of God is with us as we seek to evangelise. It is now the time to do

the work of an evangelist. I have heard many say, certainly in recent times, that the brethren are not evangelical enough. As far as I can see, that is not true, because I see the evangelical work of many. It maybe does not go on in a very great outward way, but I know there is a generation younger than me who are far more evangelical than my generation ever was. They are happy to speak to one another and to others about their faith in the Lord Jesus, consistently more so than I did when I was in my teens. The work of an evangelist is vital. It is vital, and it needs to proceed now, and it needs to proceed in power, but also in the dignity of the whole scope of the gospel. It should proceed not just as relieving people from their sins and from the burden of sin, but it should sound out with the whole of the truth encapsulated in the great message from God. It relieves men, it brings them into blessing, it brings them into touch with what is so great as to Christ and His assembly, and it brings them into touch with the service of God. Evangelising at the present time is a very precious and needed service. May we all take it up in our own measure. Some of us feel limited in speaking in the open air. Do not worry about that. If you do not feel able for that, do not worry about it. You have plenty of opportunity to speak to your colleagues at school, at work, those you come into contact with. There is no limit to the opportunity to evangelise and to speak of the grace of God in providing Christ as a Saviour. Take it up! Take up the work! It is the time to speak. The fields are white unto harvest. Take up that work, but do it as God puts the words in your mouth. Do not bring it down to any lesser level than the greatness and scope of the gospel that God has provided. Do it according to Him.

Secondly there is what we might refer to as being able to speak a word in its season. Now, I find this extremely difficult. There may be a lot of need. There may be someone who needs a word to be said, a word of encouragement, of exhortation. Maybe it is primarily one to one and you may be the person called upon to say it, a word of comfort, a word of encouragement. Are you ready to speak? That is a time to speak. I would just relay an example where I failed very badly. I was working in Ireland and was in Dublin with a colleague of mine. I had worked with him for about ten years; so I knew him well. We had been working all day and we were about to have something to eat in the evening, and he said he needed to ask me something. To be honest, I was not really listening because I was quite hungry, and he said again, 'I need to ask you something'. I said, 'What is it?' He said, 'Well, my mother has just died and I want you to tell me where she has gone'.

Well, I did not know what to say. I could speak to that man about his soul. I could speak to him about a Saviour for himself. What could I say to him that would bring in any sense of relief or comfort with regard to someone who had already died? It lives with me today - my failure to speak to that man properly, to bring in the proper word in its season. It is a real gift to be able to do that. There are those who are able to do it, to speak to those who are widowed, bereaved, suffering. If it is something that God has given into your hand to be able to do, do it. Speak. Sometimes we can overdo it. I will maybe say the wrong thing when a word in season is needed. Maybe someone else has that gift to draw alongside and to speak to someone who needs a word. I do not know to this day whether that man has got an answer. I was able to speak the gospel to him very simply but on that day he did not want to hear that. He has spoken to me since and we have spoken about the gospel, but he wanted an answer then that I was unable to give. Oh that we would have the ability and the gift and the sensitivity to draw alongside souls in need! Everyone here will know someone like that who has a need, who needs an answer. Can you bring it in? Are you close enough to God to have His words in your mouth, not you thinking up an answer, not me thinking up an answer, but God's word for a soul in need, a word in its season.

Lastly, I would just refer to probably the greatest time to be able to speak and that is in the service of God. To be able to have part in the service of God is the greatest privilege we have at the present time, to be able to open our mouths and to speak or to sing, taking part in God's service. What a tremendous thing it is! What a privilege to be able to do so! I would just encourage all, and I would encourage my younger brethren particularly, to take up that privilege, to speak and to take part in the service of God. It is what He has set you free for, "Let my son go, that he may serve me" (v 23), that you may find your part vibrantly, livingly, rejoicingly in His service. Do you know what it is to have your part in that? We can all sing, we can all lift up our voices. Do you pour your heart into the songs of praise and the songs of worship that arise at the time of the service of God? It is a great, great privilege to have your part in it and to stand on your feet, if you are a brother, and give expression and to serve God in praise, particularly towards the end of the morning meeting, as a sense of worship fills your heart, as God in His greatness and in His majesty fills your hearts and fills your sight. We are standing there in His presence, in His sanctuary, with the Minister of the sanctuary leading the praise and with the Spirit of God

empowering us to take part in it. I wonder, are we ready to speak, to use these God-given voices to give to God what is so rightly due to Him? I would encourage all, all who have the desire to do it, to make that step, increase what is rendered to God in His service. May there be an increase! There is much need. We have spoken of that and of what we may need to do by way of speaking, but there is a time to speak in the presence of God and in His service.

I might just say in closing that there is also then a time for silence. We touched on this a couple of weeks ago at home as to the woman in John 4 where the Lord said to her, “they who worship him must worship him in spirit and truth” (v 24), and it may be just at that moment in the service of God that there is that power for all to worship in silence. There is room for both. May we know more of it! For His Name's sake.

Bristol

11th June 2011

“WHO IS A GOD LIKE UNTO THEE?”

G Bruce Grant

Micah 7: 18-19

I was thinking of this expression, “Who is a God like unto thee”? God, in the beginning of Romans, is known to us as God recovering man for Himself; God has operated from His own side, hence the importance of coming to know God, and growing in our knowledge of God. The knowledge of God will satisfy us eternally. What a wonderful thing that is, and we acquire that knowledge now; therefore the gospel is for unbelievers and for believers, as we see in the epistle to the Romans, which is addressed to believers. So, “Who is a God like unto thee?”. There is no one like God. Think of creation; we were remembering this morning about creation. It brings before us the greatness of God, how He considers for His creature. "He makes his sun rise on evil and good, and sends rain on just and unjust" (Matt 5: 45), God's impartial goodness in creation towards His creature. We have that knowledge of God, and He sustains His creature, even the lower creation. When God created, everything was perfect. At the beginning of Genesis everything was perfect, then the top-stone of His creation was man. Satan was always against God and what was for God's pleasure, so he corrupted man. In deceiving Eve, he brought in wrong thoughts as to God, and man was disobedient. Now God has operated from His own side to recover man for Himself, and in that very fact that man was at a distance from God, what God is has been brought out in a far greater way than you see in creation. The creation is wonderful. In the vastness of it, men cannot encompass it; the minuteness of it, the detail of it, and how it all keeps going is all dependent on God. There is God's power in the creation, God's greatness, but far greater than that, because of evil coming into the race of man, we see what God is morally, what God is in His heart, what God is in His love for His creature; so, “Who is a God like unto thee”? There is no one like God.

How God has moved from His own side in view of recovery, salvation, deliverance of men, women and children. For God came in Himself. He did not send an angel to do a great work; God came in Himself in the Person of Christ. How wonderful that is! Think of it, God felt the loss of His creature so much that He came in Himself in the Person of Christ. What a stoop of grace, the glory of the incarnation! He moved here amongst men, the Lord Jesus here making God known,

approachable. What condescending grace marked the Lord Jesus! How attractive He was to men, women and children. He was God here, manifest in flesh. In the gospel of Matthew it says, "God with us", chap 1: 24. God came here, amazing thing! God came here in manhood's form. What wonderful years these were, these years of the life of the Lord Jesus here: "the Son of man has power on earth to forgive sins", Matt 9: 6. He is God in His Person, and God alone can forgive sins. He was here expressing that attitude of God towards His creature. Man could not do anything about his sinful state, his history, his catalogue of sins, his lost condition. He could not do anything about it himself, but God came in Himself and took up the matter in the Person of Christ. And Christ is now at God's right hand. God has placed Him there. That brings out the greatness of God that God considers for man, that God has placed Christ in that position for man's favour, for man's good. God is setting forth Christ as a mercy-seat, "Christ Jesus; whom God has set forth a mercy-seat", Rom 3: 24, 25. That is Christ in His present position; God is setting *Him* forth. It is God that is setting Him forth as a mercy-seat, that is God's throne, and that is taking into account God's holiness, His righteousness, His supremacy. God has set forth Christ in that position as a mercy-seat. Is that not wonderful? And the mercy-seat has the blood upon it, a witness to a life being given up. That is how much God is considering for you, dear friend. At the present time He is setting forth this One as a mercy-seat, a place where you can meet with Him, have to do with Him, and it is all favourable. In a day to come the throne will not be favourable, it will be for judgment against those who refuse the glad tidings, but in the present day God's throne is favourable and that is a wonderful thing and nothing can change it. It is dispensing mercy, and God is righteous in dispensing mercy because of the work of Christ. He has been satisfied in relation to the distance that sin has brought in between Himself and His creature, and at what cost to Himself, what cost to the Lord Jesus. God is setting Him forth, He is bringing Him out towards you for your acceptance through faith in His blood. That is how we come into it. It depended on the shed blood of Christ and on that basis, in His death, God is coming out in the way of mercy and forgiveness towards His creature, and He can righteously do it. So to begin with it is the righteousness of God that is available for man in contrast to man's own righteousness, or supposed righteousness. God has a righteousness for man; it says it is "borne witness to by the law and the prophets", Rom 3: 21. The very law that made it more obvious than ever that man was a sinner, made the offence abound because man was an offender before the law, had

alongside of it the tabernacle system which was typifying the system of Christianity: righteousness was borne witness to “by the law and the prophets”. But now we are not in a time of types or figures, we are in the time when God is coming out in full mercy, first in the way of forgiveness towards His creature. How great that is; the supreme God who hates evil, and we sinners, evil by nature, yet God is desirous to forgive us on the righteous basis of the work of Christ. That tells you what God is like. He is setting this Person forth as a mercy-seat; so you can approach God through Him, have to do with God on the basis of the work of Christ. In chapter 4 of Romans, our way into it is on the principle of faith; you have to believe, take that work and claim it for yourself, believe in God, believe in what the Lord Jesus has done on the cross, have faith in the blood, that it can shelter you from the judgment of God: it can cover you.

It goes on in chapter 4 that He “has been delivered for our offences”, v 25. That is an amazing thing. God delivered Christ for our offences. Here then it brings out what God is like. The Lord Jesus took it on Himself willingly, as involved in God's will for Him, but God delivered Him for our offences. Think of our horrible offences, and God has sacrificed Jesus, His Son, for these. That brings out the kind of God He is: “Who is a God like unto thee”? God acted in that way, He delivered Him for our offences. “He who, yea, has not spared his own Son, but delivered him up for us all”, Rom 8: 32. God has done that. What wrong impressions there are in the minds of men as to God, and the light of the glad tidings is intended to change that completely. The apostle says, “If God be for us, who against us?”, Rom 8: 31. We see in these scriptures how God is for us; “delivered ... for our offences” means He suffered for our offences, that the Lord Jesus on the cross suffered the judgment due to my offences, due to your offences, “and has been raised for our justification”, Rom 4: 25.

God raised Christ for our justification. One aspect of the resurrection of Christ is that, because of who He is, He in His own power could raise Himself; but this side is that God raised Him and that is in view of the blessing of men. Here it is God who has raised Him for our justification, so that we might be completely clear of any charge towards us, even though we have many offences. You are guilty as a sinner, with many offences, but do you know that He has suffered for these instead of you suffering for them? Think of the Lord Jesus on the cross suffering these three hours of darkness, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”, Matt 27: 46. What feelings were in the Lord's

heart and mind in saying that, speaking to His God, the One with whom He had always been in perfect communion. No creature could have come under that judgment of God and emerged from it, but the Lord Jesus did. He is no mere creature. The Lord Jesus suffered God's righteous wrath against sin and sins as made sin upon that cross in the three hours of darkness; therefore, dear friend, if you believe in the Lord Jesus, trust in Him, believe in God and trust in Him, there is no judgment for you. He "has been delivered for our offences"; He "has been raised for our justification". Then we have peace: "we have peace towards God through our Lord Jesus Christ", Rom 5: 1. How wonderful that is. God has placed Christ in His present position so that these blessings can be administered and are available for man. God has done that. He has raised Him. He has set Him on high so now there is a whole administration of blessing, and blessings available in Christ and through Christ for the blessing of man. God has arranged that. "Who is a God like unto thee"? There is none can be compared with God, and going through these exercises, coming to the realisation that you are a sinner and realising God's attitude towards you, you have grown in your knowledge of God, and that is a thing that will remain with you forever. "We have also access by faith into this favour in which we stand". Think of it! So, as a guilty sinner, but cleansed, justified, you have access into this favour: that is the favour of God, not the judgment of God. Another has borne the judgment of God. "But where sin abounded, grace has over-abounded", (Rom 5: 20), and we do not see anywhere sin abounding like we do at the cross. That is where sin abounded, and as history proceeds sin abounds and it accumulates. There is no sin abounding like at the cross. "But where sin abounded, grace has over-abounded"; that tells you what God is like. Sin is the thing He hates most, and yet grace has over-abounded. Men did their worst to the meekest Man on earth, to the One who was sinless; they put Him on a cross. There is sin abounding; and grace has over-abounded. God used that occasion so that His glory might shine out. Judgment was due to my sins and your sins, and the sins of those who cruelly crucified His Son, and there is grace abounding, God coming out in mercy towards these very persons and towards ourselves; therefore we may have peace, peace towards God. How wonderful that is: no longer worrying about the burden of your sins, no longer worrying whether everything will be right in the end, you have peace, free and happy in your relations with this God who has operated from His own side in view of your full blessing and salvation and deliverance.

As you see in the chapters that follow, we are left here as believers and we have the flesh still in us and we need deliverance; apart from God it is a hopeless situation. Yet God has come in from His own side and condemned sin in the flesh in His beloved Son, taking that matter up and dealing with it in Christ. "For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God, having sent his own Son, in likeness of flesh of sin, and for sin, has condemned sin in the flesh", Rom 8: 3. That was done at the cross, but not only that, He has given the Holy Spirit. God has given the Holy Spirit. God is desirous of forgiving your sins, and that is a wonderful thing that God is actually so concerned about you that He wants to forgive your sins. God desires that all men should be saved. That shows God's feelings: He actually wants you to be saved. And think about God's feelings towards you: He actually wants to give you His Spirit. That is the truth, and it cost God much. In Exodus, when there is no water when they camped at Rephidim, "Jehovah said to Moses, Go on before the people, and take with thee of the elders of Israel, and thy staff with which thou didst smite the river" - that is not the Red Sea, that is the river in Egypt, that staff - "take in thy hand, and go", chap 17: 5. That brings out what God thinks about the river of Egypt. It was turned into blood, and Moses smote that river, and God said, 'take that staff'. God does not want His own here, believers here, dependent on the resources of Egypt, "My river is mine own, and I made it for myself", Ezek 29: 3. It shows what God thinks about persons that go on in an independent way. Moses smote that river, and it is that staff he is to take here, "Behold, I will stand before thee there upon the rock on Horeb; and thou shalt strike the rock". God is identified with the rock, there was cost to God and to Christ that the Holy Spirit might be given, "and there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink", Exod 17: 6. There again, you grow in your knowledge of God in that you begin to realise that God considers for you so much that He has provided His Spirit for you because He knows you need the Holy Spirit, but it has not been without cost on the basis of the death of Christ, and because of His present position, the Holy Spirit is available for believers.

These were typically young Christians at the beginning of Exodus, and God provided for them, and God arranged it so that they had been forced to feel their dependence on Him. They had no option. They made their way through the Red Sea and they were in the wilderness and they had no option but to depend on God, and God may arrange circumstances for ourselves so that we are forced to turn to

Him, to depend on Him. So God wanted the children of Israel to have their resource in Himself in their pathway here, and that is the situation, and in that way they grew in the knowledge and appreciation of God. Yesterday we spoke about the manna in chapter 16. In verse 6 it says, "And Moses and Aaron said to all the children of Israel, In the evening, then shall ye know that Jehovah has brought you out from the land of Egypt". Well, you might say, they already knew that Jehovah had brought them out from the land of Egypt, but why in the evening? What happened in the evening was that quails came up. That was God demonstrating the same power as He used in making a way for them through the Red Sea. God in His power could change things completely for us in the wilderness if He wanted to do so, but He does not choose that way. The verse goes on to say, "and in the morning, then shall ye see the glory of Jehovah", v 7. And what happened in the morning? The dew was there with the manna on it. It says that in verse 13, "And it came to pass in the evening, that quails came up, and covered the camp; and in the morning the dew lay round the camp. And when the dew that lay round it was gone up, behold, on the face of the wilderness there was something fine, granular, fine as hoar-frost, on the ground". That was the manna, and that was God's intention, not to give them quails but to provide the manna for them. There again you see, "Who is a God like unto thee"? Think of it, God Himself has come in in the Person of Christ that He might be food for us and sustain us in a Christian pathway. He thought so much about you that He has done that. You are brought to dependence upon God to be sustained according to God in the wilderness. There is the manna and the well, the water. That brings out what God is like. He has not only provided for us in the way of eternal salvation, but He has provided for us in our wilderness pathway. Who is like unto God? What a wonder that God Himself has come into lowly conditions. That is, "then shall ye see the glory of Jehovah". What glory is in it that God has been manifested in flesh and comes here into ordinary circumstances. We were hearing yesterday of ordinary human life. He did that, not in that instance to save us from our sins, but to sustain us, to be Food for us, to be an Object for our affections, to supply grace for us in the pathway.

What a God we have, who has provided for us in every way we need so that we might trust in Him, have confidence in Him, depend upon Him. I have said before, and it is right, that true dependence is based on confidence. If you thought of it another way, if you were asked to depend on someone in whom you had no confidence, that

would be an awful thing; but as you grow in your knowledge of God, you grow in your confidence in Him, therefore you depend on Him, and that is what God desires to bring us to, to feel our dependence upon Him. We will not survive in the wilderness pathway apart from dependence on Himself, finding our resource in Him, turning to Him, turning to the Lord Jesus and to the Holy Spirit. God has come in in the Person of Christ and He has come in in the Person of the Holy Spirit, to be power for the believer. "Who is a God like unto thee"? There is no-one like God, dear friend, and you will have to have to do with Him one day. What a blessed opportunity to have to do with this Person now through the Lord Jesus Christ. We grow in our appreciation of God; God desires man for Himself. What a master stroke of the enemy to bring in distance between God and man, but God has recovered man for Himself, and He will have man eternally for Himself. He has man in the Person of Christ in His presence already, and He will soon have myriads with Christ eternally. What a triumph for God.

God desires that we might be before Him in sonship, set up in Christ in sonship. That comes into Romans also; we can call God our Father, know God as our Father, the One who is intimately interested in us, whom we have a relationship with in affection. That is an amazing thing. God, the supreme One in the universe, has desired to be known in this way as the Father and we creatures can have an intimate relationship with Him, speak to Him in an intimate way, knowing His interest and love and affection for us.

May we be encouraged, seeing how God has acted from His own side in view of our full and eternal salvation, and what a cost it has been to Himself. It is no light matter. "He who, yea, has not spared His own Son, but delivered him up for us all", but also He provides for us in our whole pathway here, and has provided for us eternally. "In my Father's house there are many abodes; were it not so, I had told you: for I go to prepare you a place", John 14: 2. What a wonderful prospect the believer has, to be with Christ for ever in the Father's house. May the Lord bless the word!

Dundee

18th September 2011

FOLLOWING

Andrew Martin

John 1: 35-39; 10: 27-30; 12: 26

Joshua 14: 6-15; 15: 16-19

The verses that we have read in John refer to following Jesus, and in Joshua we read of the man who “wholly followed Jehovah”. Now there are different presentations in the gospels. In the synoptic gospels, for example, we read of the Lord's appeal to follow Him, and that is to follow Him in a path of suffering, taking up the cross; and that is very necessary. There is much blessing in doing it. The cross is what is laid upon us and we accept it from the Lord. There are things hard to bear, but as we accept them from the Lord we receive blessing.

In John's gospel, He is not speaking on those lines. What we read in chapter 1 is the attractiveness of Jesus, the attractiveness of Christ here. It says of John the baptist in this well known section, “looking at Jesus as he walked, he says, Behold the Lamb of God”. What that walk involved, beloved! There had never before been a walk like that. Men had been going about in their own way, but here was a walk that was entirely different, a pathway that had never been seen on this earth before, a character of walk that had never previously been witnessed; and John the baptist was there, a man who had been given divine light, light beyond his dispensation. “And, looking at Jesus as he walked”. At this point, he is just drawn to the perfection of that One, and he says, “Behold the Lamb of God”. There was no need to say any more; it was not a question of what He was going to do, or what He was going to effect, just a call to look at Him, “Behold the Lamb of God”, that He should be the Object. What a testimony that was, a testimony of one who was absorbed with Christ. Now, what sort of testimony do I give? Do I give a testimony of one who is absorbed with Christ? Think of the effectiveness of John here, “Behold the Lamb of God”. There was a walk here, beloved, a walk that was absolutely perfect. In John's gospel the Lord Jesus walks in majesty, in the greatness of His own Person; He does things in His own power. You can see Him towards the end of the gospel where it says, “Jesus therefore went forth” (chap 19: 5); even though He was wearing the purple robe and the crown of thorn, everything was in His hands, everything had been committed to Him, and how perfect was that walk. I love to think of the majestic footsteps of Jesus here, fulfilling the will of God in its entirety, in completeness, in regard to man upon the earth. There He was,

magnifying the law, setting out everything that was honourable in it. The walk of Jesus in John's gospel is not given like the other gospels. The walk of Jesus in the synoptic gospels begins at the manger and it goes to the cross. In John's gospel we have Jesus, knowing that He came out from God and was going to God. It is a walk that came from heaven and was going back to heaven, a walk that was leading to the glory, and there was one who was, "looking at Jesus as he walked". He could take account of the heavenly walk down here. There has been a heavenly life witnessed in perfection upon this earth. Oh, think of what that meant to God. There was one heavenly Object upon this earth upon whom His pleasure could rest without qualification, no hesitation as to that. The Father's joy was in Jesus, and John the baptist was one beloved servant who had received light from God. He had received light from heaven as to who Jesus was. He speaks about that in the paragraph before where we read; he says, "And I have seen and borne witness that this is the Son of God", and then he looks at Jesus as He walked, and "he says, "Behold the Lamb of God". He has left us such a testimony, beloved. There were those who had been attached to John. They were attached to him because they knew that there was one who spoke the truth and who had a message from God; but when they heard the testimony, "Behold the Lamb of God", they left him. I would not say they severed their former attachment, but they followed Jesus. "And the two disciples heard him speaking, and followed Jesus." Oh, beloved, what a move that was. They were following in His steps. They were going to see where He lived. Where was He going? "But Jesus having turned, and seeing them following, says to them, What seek ye?" He knew what they were seeking and He loves to bring it out. The Lord loves to bring out what is in the hearts of His own. "What seek ye? And *they* said to him, Rabbi ... where abidest thou?" If there is such a Man, where is His home? What are His circumstances like? What does He surround Himself with? "Where abidest thou?" What would Jesus say to that? "Come and see". He would say that to you, "Come and see". Do you know what they saw? It does not describe here in historical terms what they saw, but we can tell you what they saw: they saw "a glory as of an only-begotten with a father"; they saw the "only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father". That is where He was dwelling, that is where He dwells now. He is in the bosom of the Father. He continues to dwell there, ever in His Father's affections. They were admitted into such a wonderful insight of glory and love. We may think of Him, "the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father", and these disciples who came where He abode

were thus admitted into a holy and intimate sphere; they could contemplate Him in His own conditions. Have you seen Him in His own conditions? Lay hold of it! Lay hold of the fact that the Lord Jesus is in heaven, He is in conditions which are suited to Him, He is the centre of the Father's affections. Lay hold of that! There is a glorious Man who fills the Father's heart and, as we have been saying, He fills all things. He fills heaven with His glory and with His love, and "They ... saw where he abode; and they abode with him that day". What a day that was, beloved. That is still available today, "they abode with him". These two disciples had the heart for it; they wanted it; they went in for it. They took this journey. You might say it does not sound as if it was a long journey. It was a journey. They had to give up whatever else they were going to do that day, and we have been hearing about that in the reading. We have been hearing about taking a journey. They had to leave whatever would have occupied them and they found there was something which was so much greater. There was one perfect, heavenly, glorious Man, and they abode with Him in His own surroundings. Well, I feel measured as to how much I can say about that.

I will go on to chapter 10 because here we have the same One and He is the Shepherd, and He speaks about His sheep, and He says, "My sheep hear my voice". You see, in John 1 they saw; it was a question of what they saw, they saw where He abode and they abode with Him. In John 10, they are hearing His voice. Have you heard the Shepherd's voice? You say, 'Well, I heard the call in the gospel'. Yes, that is a great thing, you never forget it. You hear that call in the gospel and it affects your heart, and it is an early milestone in your spiritual history. That is where you started, but have you heard the Shepherd's voice; have you heard His voice? Have you heard His voice today? Did you hear it yesterday? I think the Shepherd's voice has been heard; He has been speaking again, "My sheep hear my voice". John's sheep follow the unmistakable voice of Jesus. You may be sitting in an occasion, any occasion like this, a preaching, ministry meeting, reading, whatever it may be, and something is said; and it does not just go into your ears, it just goes straight to your heart. That is the Shepherd's voice. You might say, 'Well, He showed me that something was wrong'. Yes, the Shepherd would guard you. You might say, 'There was something that appealed to me that I have never seen before'. Yes, the Shepherd will feed you. The Shepherd's services are so varied. Let me read a passage in the prophets which gives you, by

way of contrast, the great variety of the service of the Shepherd. It speaks about one who is a worthless shepherd, that is a man who is yet to come, who has yet to be manifested in the world, and so it speaks about him in a negative way. It says, he “shall not visit those that are about to perish, neither shall seek that which is strayed away, nor heal that which is wounded, nor feed that which is sound” (Zech 11: 16), four things. But the Good Shepherd, the Lord Jesus, He would seek that which is strayed away. That is the basis on which I am here today, that He sought that that was strayed away. I suppose every one of us can say that we are here because the Shepherd has sought that which is strayed away. He heals that which was wounded. Oh yes, beloved, get to know the Shepherd. We have been reminded recently of a young sister who lived in the 19th century, Lady Powerscourt. She experienced much sorrow in her life. She wrote a letter in which she appealed to somebody, 'Let us get to know our Physician; let us take lodgings near His dispensary'. How appealing that is! He will “heal that which is wounded”. Oh yes, how many opportunities exist for the healing grace of Jesus. He will “feed that which is sound”. Think of all the supply that comes from the Shepherd. If the sheep wishes to wander, he may experience Him bringing him back. He may lead you a way you would rather not go, but His love is behind it all and it is all for our own good. He cares, and His tenderness goes with it, and at the end when you look back you say, 'Is He not wonderful?'. He says, “My sheep hear my voice”: they hear that voice; they gather to Him. They know the sound of the Shepherd. Earlier in the chapter it says, “But they will not follow a stranger” (v 5), but they hear His voice, “and they follow me”. Where He goes, they go, “and they shall never perish, and no one shall seize them out of my hand”. Oh, beloved, the enemy would come in and he would seek to instil fears. “No one shall seize them out of my hand”. That is the Lord. In a sense that is a committal, the Lord making that committal, “no one shall seize them out of my hand”. He has the power and the greatness to ensure it anyway but He gives that assurance; and then He gives us further assurance, He says, “My Father who has given them to me is greater than all, and no one can seize out of the hand of my Father”. Who could seize out of the hand of One that is greater than all? But these sheep are retained because they know the voice of the Shepherd, they know that voice and they follow Him. I would say, dear friend, young or old, if ever you hear the voice of the Shepherd and it goes against what you want to do, do not ignore the voice. Keep near the Shepherd, follow Him because,

where is He leading you? He is leading you above. He is leading you to enter into your heavenly portion. That is where He is. We gather to Him, we gather to One who is a heavenly Man, above this scene altogether. He has been here but He is above this scene altogether and He is drawing us with his wonderful Shepherd's voice. He would draw us to Him where He is. Let us go, let us be prepared for that.

I do not want to say too much about John 12 because our brother spoke about it yesterday, "If any one serve me". If you have come to the Lord, if you have heard the Shepherd's voice, if you are conscious of the fact that you are in His care, you will want to serve Him. You will. That is the normal reaction of a heart that has been touched by the Lord, that they will serve Him, and it is not 'What do I think I should do?' but 'What will He have me to do?'. "If any one serve me, let him follow me". He says, "let him follow me". How are you going to follow? You say, if the Lord Jesus is in heaven and I am down here, 'How will I follow?'. The one who may have been the greatest servant there has ever been since the time of the Lord Jesus, said, "What shall I do, Lord? And the Lord said to me, Rise up, and go to Damascus, and it shall be told thee of all things which it is appointed thee to do", Acts 22: 10. You will get directions. If you want to know how to hear the Shepherd's voice, how will you hear it? You find where the flock is; you follow the footsteps of the flock. That is what it says in the Song of Songs -

"Tell me, thou whom my soul loveth,
Where thou feedest thy flock,
Where thou makest it to rest at noon;
For why should I be as one veiled
Beside the flocks of thy companions?" chap 1: 7.

And the answer comes, that you follow the footsteps of the flock. Maybe you see that there are brethren, some of whom you know are enjoying something. I have been in a situation where those I knew were enjoying something and I felt out of it. Maybe there is someone who wants to enter into divine things and you maybe feel a little bit out of it, as if you cannot understand everything. Follow the footsteps of the flock; do not go off on your own. Follow the footsteps of the flock. You will find the Shepherd there, you will hear His voice. If you want to serve Him, beloved, you will find His words, you will find His directions in the same circle, you will find that you get all you need to satisfy your desire to serve Him. "If any one serve me, let him follow me; and where I am, there also shall be *my servant*".

Now I just wanted to speak about Caleb, because he was one who had gone through the wilderness journey, but one thing that distinguished Caleb was that he had been into another land. He had seen something that was not the wilderness and he valued it, and he had confidence in God, that if God had shown him something He would bring to him to it. You remember the ten spies went to the land and they came back and they said it was a very, very good land but we cannot go in there. They preferred the wilderness to the land. Never settle down, beloved, in the wilderness. Sometimes, circumstances around may become comfortable. Do not settle down in them. I think that is one of the greatest things the enemy has used, to get us to settle down in comfort. I know of somebody who went astray and one of his relations said to him, 'The problem is, you have never needed God'. If you feel your need of God you will not go astray. In effect, these children of Israel said, 'We have travelled through this wilderness for so long, we are not going into the land, we will just stay here'. No! Lay hold of God's purpose. Lay hold of what He has for you. Lay hold of the inheritance because it is yours, and it is yours to enjoy. There is no good having an inheritance if you do not enjoy it. It is like owning property in another country but we do not go to see it, we do not know what it is like, and we do not take any interest in it. It is inconceivable, is it not? But that is how many of us are. Oh beloved, lay hold of God's thoughts and His eternal purpose and enter into them. Caleb said, "I wholly followed Jehovah". He would say, 'I have not diverted. I have not looked back to Egypt'. No, "I wholly followed Jehovah". I think that Caleb had the land in his heart. You remember when those ten spies came out from the land they brought a bunch of grapes with them. It was huge, so huge that two of them carried it on a pole. I think those two were Caleb and Joshua. They would say, 'Whatever the others are saying, we are going to bring back some evidence of the fruit of that land, something that God has prepared for those that love Him. We are going to enjoy it'. I am sure that they enjoyed those grapes. They have come from another world, another scene altogether, and, beloved, there is another scene where Jesus is, and He is the Centre of it and He gives character to it, and it is yours and it is mine and we can go in for it. We can go in by the Spirit. We can get some impression of it as we follow the history of the children of Israel. They went round in the wilderness, as Moses said in Deuteronomy, they had gone round and round this mountain, and then God said, "Ye have gone round this mountain long enough" (chap 2: 3), and they moved forward, and there was a well. They did not

just find it, they had to dig, there was exercise involved. If they were to make progress it involved exercise, and they dug that springing well (Num 21:18); and there was no stopping from that point on. They went from one place to another to another right through to the land. Think of the resource they had in the Holy Spirit typically to enter into the whole region of God's purpose. So Caleb knew that the promise was, "The land whereon thy feet have trodden shall assuredly be thine inheritance", and he says, "And now give me this mountain". Caleb was not saying, 'I am eight-five years old, give me a little retirement home'. No, Caleb was saying, 'I want a mountain. I want to enjoy the blessings. I want the elevation. I do not want to sit in the valley; I want the elevation'. There are blessings in the valley, of course, in the land, but Caleb is saying, 'I want the highest ground and I am going to make it my own'. Oh, let us make the truth our own, not just simply in a form of words and teaching, though that is precious as well, but let us make it our own so it becomes substantial in us. That is the kind of man that Caleb was. So Caleb received a blessing, the blessing of a man who followed Jehovah. That is who the blessing was for; so he received the inheritance and he received the blessing, and then Caleb said, 'Who is going to follow my lead?'. And there was another man, Othniel; he also received a blessing, he received a wife, and what a woman she was! She had a desire for the inheritance, a desire to acquire what God has prepared for those that love Him. So Caleb said, "What wouldest thou? And she said, Give me a blessing; for thou hast given me a southern land". Some might say, 'Was not that blessing enough? She had been given a southern land'. No, she says, 'I need to be maintained in it, and "he gave her the upper springs and the lower springs". How precious that is. Think of the lower springs, "the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ", Phil 1:19. Think of what is available to us down here, "the love of God ... shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit", Rom 5:5. He maintains the saints down here. But then think of the upper springs, "that ye may be fully able to apprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height", Eph 3:18. These are the upper springs, and Caleb says, 'Well, they are available'. These things are available, beloved, to us all, for young and old alike; I am not omitting anyone from the section here, but let us have the heart for it, let us go in for it. We have been exhorted as to what is complete, full growth, the full grown man, and so on. Let us have the heart to go in for these things and lay claim to them for ourselves that what God has so richly and bountifully provided for us may be enjoyed by us. If the

Lord leaves us here for another day, we may enter into something of this tomorrow morning. Is the Supper, the service of God, an occasion which we experience for one hour, and then immediately continue as if nothing had happened? Will these three days, when they are over be just a pleasant memory? No, beloved, they must not be! We have received a supply from above. God has poured out a blessing on us in these last couple of days, and if we are left here for another day we will touch something in our spirits of the heavenly realm. God has made that provision for us. Are we going to just let it pass? No, let us go on. Let us have the heart for it, the appetite for it. Let us go in for these things, for His Name's sake.

Wheaton

26th November 2011

THE ASSEMBLY

Bob Gray

Acts 20: 26-32

Matthew 13: 45-46

1 Corinthians 11: 18, 23-26

Acts 13: 1-3

What is in mind in reading these scriptures is to seek help of the Holy Spirit to speak about the assembly, and what it is to divine Persons, and what it means to us. The assembly is a marvellous vessel, and God will show it in the world to come, in the day of display; a wonderful sight. The scripture in Revelation which tells of its appearing gives us some idea of its size. Of course it is figurative, but still the Spirit of God would impress us with the greatness of the assembly. It says in Revelation that it is twelve thousand stadia long and broad and high, chap 21: 16. If we look on these measurements for a moment literally, the holy city would take up space from here to Spain, maybe further, and it is that wide and that high; it is vast. As I say, that is figurative, but it is intended by the Spirit of God to impress us with the grandeur and the greatness of what God is doing in regard of the assembly, and what He will yet bring out in display. Now if you consider that on the one hand, and compare it with what the assembly is now publicly, we must accept that there is no place in Edinburgh where we could gather and say, 'this is the assembly'. We cannot do that because things have become so broken up on the line of responsibility that we cannot point to the assembly in that sort of outward way but - and this is the burden of what I have in mind - we must not lose sight of the fact that the assembly is God's masterpiece. It is His mightiest work by far, and He intends that we should have an impression of it, not only in our minds but in our hearts; and He intends too that we should have something of the experience of assembly light. Well, that is fine, we can read of that in the ministry, but my desire is that we might have some actual impression in our hearts of what the assembly is to God.

I read first in Acts 20 where Paul is speaking to the elders of Ephesus, and I have the sense that what Paul was speaking about here had the character and quality of first love. He says of the assembly, "Take heed therefore to yourselves, and to all the flock, wherein the Holy Spirit has set you as overseers, to shepherd the assembly of God, which he has purchased with the blood of his own". What a thought that is, no question of your needs or mine entering into this. This is what

God did; He purchased the assembly "with the blood of his own" because there was no other resource that would meet the matter. Now, it was said in the reading that the idea of love in the world has become debased, and so it has, but I do think our minds and hearts are set again on what love really is according to God when we see the way in which divine Persons interact with one another. You think of the mighty transaction when God purchased the assembly "with the blood of his own." What was He purchasing? We are taught that we cannot apply the idea of redemption to the assembly because its origin is heavenly; there is no defect there that requires redemption. It says He "purchased with the blood of his own". I suppose it involves the way in which He has operated to secure persons for Himself who would form part of the assembly, and let us not be in any doubt that that is you and me. If we are saved persons and we have the gift of the Spirit, we form part of God's assembly, something that He values beyond our calculation. If it is so, what is the assembly to God? The psalmist says prophetically "here will I dwell, for I have desired it", Psalm 132: 14. The assembly is a dwelling place for God, wonderful thing. Another thing is that it is a vessel of praise. The Lord says, "in the midst of the assembly will I sing thy praises", Heb 2: 12. You think of that, what this great creature is as before God, to God, and in the heart of God. It has been said that the assembly is never an object of worship: it cannot be because it is a creature, but it does promote worship in our hearts as we look at what God has wrought. "At this time it shall be said ... What hath God wrought!", Num 23: 23. As we have these thoughts in relation to God's feelings about the assembly it would help us as we gather. 'Oh', you say, 'there are just a few of us'. We are not gathering to ourselves, we are gathering to the name of the Lord Jesus and we are gathering in the sense that there is something represented in the company of the saints which is pleasing to God. I would say this to our younger brethren: do you have the sense in your soul that God is pleased with you? 'Well', you say, 'I fail sometimes': yes, we all do. But there is a view of things, which the scripture teaches, that is, that we are in Christ Jesus, Rom 8: 1. The hymn says:

"In Christ Jesus" - new creation,
We are graced in God's own Son.

(Hymn 37)

When God looks at you, just being simple, what He sees is the work of Christ. Do you have the Holy Spirit; have you come under the shelter of the blood? You are part of the assembly, and God looks on you in that

light, and when you come to the meeting He is pleased with you. Is this too simple? You know, these things are very real. God treasures the fruit of His own work, and the assembly constitutes these things we have mentioned.

In Matthew 13 we have the suggestion, not so much of what the assembly is to God, but what she is to Christ. Now, this brings in a different view of matters. It says, "the kingdom of the heavens is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls". What is the assembly? What do you think the Lord thinks about the assembly? It is presented, of course, in the types in various ways. One of the things that we could say about the assembly is that it is a comfort to Christ's heart in the absence of Israel. That is one view we should never lose sight of. The type teaches us that "Isaac was comforted after the death of his mother", Gen 24: 67. You think of the Lord's life, thirty three and a half years, and of these three and a half in public service. He worked all day, and sometimes He was in prayer through the night. He slept when He could. He slept on the boat on the cushion in the middle of a storm. Now I do not say that to belittle the Lord or to speak in a familiar way, but to show that His humanity was so real, and He came so near, and yet He had to say, "I have laboured in vain, I spent my strength for nought and in vain", Isa 49: 4. These were His feelings about Israel because they rejected Him and eventually crucified Him. What do you think then His feelings are about the assembly? What a comfort the assembly is to Christ. The reality of this vessel, this body, which He has secured at infinite cost to Himself; she is all for Him. Would we not want to be part of that? A company that is responsive to Him. It says here He was "like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls". That would, I suppose, involve the attractiveness of the assembly to Christ. We get inklings of it in the Song of Songs; you gather there His feelings, almost His longings, "Let me see thy countenance," He says, "let me hear thy voice", chap 2: 14. Well, would you like to answer Him in regard of that, let Him see your countenance at the Supper, let Him hear your voice? Would you not want to respond? Of course we do. The assembly means everything to Christ at the moment, and it says He is "seeking beautiful pearls; and having found one pearl of great value". I asked a brother recently if the Lord was looking for beautiful pearls, why does it not say He found a very beautiful pearl? It does not say that; it says one of great value. The brother suggested that the beautiful side would be for the satisfaction of the Lord's own heart, but the value might relate more to the fact that when He secured the pearl He found in it something that

not only met His heart's desires but something that filled out to the full the purpose of God; "great value". There it was, the assembly; so you can get some inkling of the Lord's feelings even when He was here. Remember before He was taken up how He spoke to Mary in the garden. He did not have to say much to touch her heart, did He? One word, He just said "Mary" (John 20: 16), but what volumes were in that word; His heart reaching out to that woman, who suggested to Him something of the features of the assembly, and she answers "Rabboni, which means Teacher". We said in the reading, and I verily believe it is true, there is no teacher like love. If love is there, love in our hearts for Christ, our hearts are opened to receive impressions, to take on the lessons that He would impart, what He would give to us and say to us. This is the Man we spoke about in the reading; this is the Man that we are following. He is worthy of everything we can give Him, our heart's longings, our heart's desires are after Him and, believe me, He will satisfy them in a way that nothing else could.

Well, I go on to 1 Corinthians because we said that the assembly meant much to the blessed God and it means much to Christ. I will just read the verse again, 1 Corinthians 11: 18, "For first, when ye come together in assembly, I hear there exist divisions among you, and I partly give credit to it". Now it is not in mind to talk about the divisions, but to show that the Lord was intent on bringing in this matter of the Supper and setting it in the assembly, and He was going to do that in spite of whatever may come in. Paul might have said, 'Well, no, I will not tell them just now, I will leave it till some other better time', but he brought it in and set it out before them in spite of conditions. I am not saying the conditions were acceptable, nor am I suggesting that we can hold the Supper carelessly. Scripture is very clear about that, that we are responsible to maintain what is due to the Lord.

What I wanted to touch on is that this is Christ's assembly in Corinth, and His assembly is a vessel here to whom He can entrust His most precious secrets. Now that makes the assembly very important. He has here a vessel that He looks to to maintain His interests like the woman of worth in Proverbs 31. The Lord has something here that He trusts and the question that I ask myself, sometimes at the Supper, is, 'Have I been trustworthy?'. How has it been in the past week? I know we do not bring that to the Supper exactly; we have "let a man prove himself" (1 Cor 11: 28) before that. We come prepared; but the sight of the emblems brings things up; it sharpens them up to our minds when we see the loaf and the cup. Divine wisdom is seen there shining; you

could hardly get anything simpler, could you? You could not make the Supper any simpler: a loaf and a cup, His body and His blood. You cannot alter it or adjust it; it is stark simplicity, and yet it holds volumes for those whose hearts are affected. Well, am I trustworthy? That is a question we can ask ourselves. But Paul goes on, “I received from the Lord, that which I also delivered to you”. Now he got it from heaven and he placed it in the assembly, and the devil through the intervening centuries has attempted to swamp the idea of the Supper and what it meant. But the Lord has the last word: He says “I am the Alpha and the Omega”, Rev 1: 8. The Lord, in the time He chose, revived it: near the beginning of the nineteenth century. The real teaching and significance and truth of the Lord's supper was recovered, and you know it was not just overnight. In earlier times there were still pious saints who had the Supper; filled out the meeting with prayer and praise to the Lord Jesus, and with a certain amount of mention of their sins and so on and their repentance, then took the Supper at the end of the meeting. As you know, the Lord worked through all of that, He bore with it and He gave ministry to adjust it, and what we have, I believe, is the Supper as it was as He set it on, as He wished it to be. We have a treasure in the Supper that is priceless. I do not want to use, unwise, extreme language but it is something I do not think we can survive without. We need the Supper every week; we need the Supper. God arranged Israel's history in months, and that was fine, that was suitable, but the assembly's history runs in weeks and days, and we have the Supper weekly. Now the Lord has put that in the assembly. He has sovereignly revived it to us: we cannot treat it lightly, can we? Could we say, 'Well, the Supper would do once a month or once a quarter?'; some do that. He has given it to us and He is trusting us to carry what is for Him and His interests. I sometimes have the sense, even as the emblems come round: what must it have been like when He handed it to His disciples? You know, it is as real as that. The Lord is there, He is interested; I trust I speak reverently. He is watching, what for? Something springing up that would answer Him. That Man who loved so well and so dearly and gave so much, He says, 'Here you are, what will you do with it?'. Well, now, that is what the Supper is, to call the Lord to mind, and it is placed in the assembly, and it is for us to take it up, and then enter on what flows out of the Supper. I wonder what our feelings are, not just about the Supper, but the service of God. We say that the service of God flows out of it. How does it? What happens? It is the fact, the truth held by faith and known by the Spirit, that the Lord is present, and He takes us with Him; “Rise up,” He says, “my love, my fair

one, and come away”, Song of Songs 2: 10. What a word that is! Could you go with Him? Surely you could go with Him. He takes us on and, you know, He binds us to Himself; He binds us to Himself with the relationships that we speak of. We speak of Him first as the Lord and bring in a note of worship, and then He is not ashamed to call us brethren, Heb 2: 11. Then He brings us closer and He says, “my assembly”. He brings us up with Him in His affections and takes us thus: we go from one step of glory to another and it is cumulative, and then we have an address to the Holy Spirit which I believe is right. He supports the whole thing and then what opens out: what a vista! The Father's house, the Father's home. Are these things real? Of course they are real, more real than the things we see in front of us now; they are things that we will know and touch to all eternity.

I just close with a reference to Acts 13. Here we have the assembly again, but this time we see the blessed Holy Spirit active in it. These persons were there; it must have been an interesting meeting there among those brethren that were “first called Christians in Antioch”, Acts 11: 26. These varied names are given. I suppose that would suggest different characters, different personalities. What a wonderful place the assembly is, where saints are brought together and bound together “in the bundle of the living”, 1 Sam 25: 29. These would be different characters, having personalities, and so it is with the saints. We can try each other, and do at times, and what is the answer? The answer is to keep our eye on Christ, but more and more I think we need to make way intelligently for the service of the Holy Spirit. The matter has come into our readings in Grangemouth and one of the things that came out was how sensitive the Spirit of God is. If you deny Him, He will retire. You say, 'He is a divine Person; He may do what He will'. Well, that is so: but that is the character of His service; He is gentle and the hymn speaks of that

But soon the Spirit's gentle grace
In service shall completed be; (Hymn 288).

Do not deny Him; be sensitive. Remember this, when you are praying, even privately, remember to listen. Well, you say, 'I am speaking to God'; yes, but is He going to speak to you? That is more important. Make way for the Spirit, make way for His guidance, make way for His prompting and when He prompts. You say, 'How will I know?'. Well, just keep listening, and when He prompts, do something. I am speaking now about the service of God, and readings, and ministry

meetings, and the Supper. If you get a little encouragement from Him, give voice to your impression, make way for it and the brethren will take it up and expand it because it is a living system of things we have part in. Well, the Holy Spirit was here, and He was active, and again I would say this of the assembly, it is a sphere in which the blessed Holy Spirit operates. He is active, He is present, He is living. Our brother here said in the reading, 'Would the Lord be speaking to us today?'. Well, would He? Was there anything at all in what was said that was the Spirit's voice? Would I go away and say there was nothing of value? Surely not. If the Scriptures are read and prayer is offered, divine Persons would come in, according to our state, of course, and give help, and give a word, and give encouragement. "And as they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, Separate me now Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. Then, having fasted and prayed, and having laid their hands on them, they let them go," and so on. It is part of the Christian path that we were speaking about, that is sacrifice. Fasting involves that. Oh, you say, 'We do not fast literally nowadays'. I am not so sure. We are surrounded by everything we need and want. Would it be of any value to go without something, say for a day, or a week? I am not trying to introduce a legal note at all, but something in the way of self denial would show the Lord I really mean what I say to Him, I really want to be committed, I really desire to be here pleasing to Him.

I trust the Lord will use what has been said to encourage us to have a greater appreciation of the assembly as it is to God, and as it is to Christ, and as it is to the Holy Spirit. When we gather it will engender a tremendous respect and holy fear in our hearts as to what is there amongst the saints for the pleasure of God.

May the Lord bless the word.

Edinburgh

21st January 2012

(This is also the date of the reading in No 63.)