

A
WORD
IN ITS
SEASON

1st Series

No. 55

October 1977

Contents

SALT AND LIGHT

PERSEVERANCE IN THE FELLOWSHIP

FRUIT FROM MINISTRY

THE CHILDREN'S SWEETNESS

SALT AND LIGHT

J.Renton

Matthew 5: 13-16

Two features that properly belong to believers during the time of the Lord's absence are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Salt arrests decay, corruption, and the working of leaven. This scripture might read, Ye are the salt of the land; that is, it is salt operating in a certain area. When the Lord was here there was a wonderful influence operating. We were reading on Lord's day in Mark 14 about the Lord in the testing circumstances before the leaders of the Jewish nation in the high priest's palace. He stands out in His perfection, His uniqueness and the holiness of His humanity. The Lord here is a wonderful object of contemplation, but in His absence believers are to be 'the salt of the land'. Wherever believers are, whether it is in their homes or in their business, in their employment, at school, whatever area believers are in, there is to be a restraining influence, a pure influence that arrests the working of corruption or leaven. Where the believer is true and where his reality shines, whatever the area may be, there is an arresting of what is evil. The Lord says "but if the salt have become insipid", that is, if the salt loses its own character; the believer is meant to have a certain character. Peter says "in your faith have also virtue", 2 Pet 1: 5. Virtue is the working of reality; it is the courage to be what you are. There are features in that section which Peter exhorts us about, so that the believer should appear in his true character as linked with and true and faithful to the Lord Jesus in heaven and having the Spirit possessing him down here.

We were reading on Lord's day about Peter "sitting with the officers and warming himself in the light of the fire" Mark 14: 54. For the moment the salt had become insipid. Peter had lost his true character. He said earlier "Lord, if it be *thou*, command me to come to thee upon the waters", Matt 14: 28. You see in this confession the reality of Peter. He was a real believer. You see his reality again

shining out when he said "*Thou* art the Christ, the Son of the living God", Matt 16: 16. Think of the character that Peter really had! But when he was warming himself at the fire beside the officers he was not shining in his true character; he became mixed up with those who were really the enemies of the Lord. The salt had become insipid. For the moment its true character was not shining. How liable we are to be mixed up! We need to maintain separation from evil, if the salt is to retain its true character; there has to be the feature of separation. If there is mixture there will be insipidity and the salt will lose its true character. "Ye are the salt of the earth". Just as the Lord was when He was here, so believers ought to be in His absence, and the Lord gives us His Spirit to maintain reality and to prove our reality, and to act as genuine disciples of the Lord. Peter was a genuine disciple of the Lord but he was not acting as a disciple in the verses referred to in Mark 14. We have all been like Peter; maybe some of us still are. Peter was recovered; he went out and wept bitterly. When Peter spoke of dying with the Lord (see Mark 14: 31) he meant it; he really loved the Lord. He was recovered as we can see in the early chapters of the Acts where we can see the feature of "the salt of the earth". Think of the influence Peter had! We read of Peter's shadow; Peter's shadow appeared to be the means of healing persons (see Acts 5: 15). Think of the greatness of the influence that Peter had! Think of him taking that lame man by the right hand! He said "Silver and gold I have not; but what I have, this give I to thee: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazaraean rise up and walk", Acts 3: 6. You see the salt operating in Peter as a recovered man.

If we become insipid in any sense at all, there is a means of recovery. What has happened in Christendom is that the salt has become insipid permanently. In the ruin of the church, including the setting up of the clergy and all the human arrangements of men, the salt has lost its true character; it has become insipid. It says, "if the salt have become insipid, wherewith shall it be salted? It is no longer fit for anything but to be cast out and to be trodden under foot by men". That is what has happened in mere profession, the mere

profession of Christ and of Christianity, and it is all around us. What we have around us is not heathendom, it is not heathen darkness; it is the insipidity of salt that has lost its savour. If salt is exposed for any length of time to certain elements it will lose its true character. Let us understand that we are meant to be an influence for good, an influence to arrest the working of evil and the working of leaven wherever we are found. This is what the believer is meant to be; it is how he has part in the testimony, not only in what is said but in what he is in reality, shining out over against a corrupted Christendom among which we move.

Then the Lord says "Ye are the light of the world". When the Lord was here He said "I am the light of the world", John 8: 12. The influence that arrests the working of evil in this world is the influence of believers; and the only light in this world is with believers. When the Lord takes believers out of this world, as will happen at the rapture, there will be nothing left but darkness. Oh, what darkness there will be! It says at the opening of the sixth seal, "the sun became black as hair sackcloth" (Rev 6: 12); that is what is going to happen. The only light there is in this world now is in believers. When the Lord was here the only light in the world was what shone in Christ; otherwise there was darkness. "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. And light appears in darkness, and the darkness apprehended it not", John 1: 4,5. The Lord said to his disciples, "Ye are the light of the world". This world is in total darkness except for light that shines in believers. This is light, of course, as to God, as to the true knowledge of God and as to the grace of God. Where are these features found? They are found only in believers. Nowhere else in this world is there light according to this verse. "Ye are the light of the world: a city situated on the top of a mountain cannot be hid". So it is geographically, a city on top of a mountain cannot be hid; it is seen. The Lord says "Let your light thus shine before men"; I take it that refers to verse 14 as well as verse 15. Let your light thus shine, as if we were on top of a mountain, not hidden somewhere, not covered up by self-gratification, not covered up by business, not covered up by any

other thing, but shining, the light thus available for men. "Let your light thus shine before men, so that they may see your upright works, and glorify your Father who is in the heavens". Oh think of the obligation that is upon us as believers, especially, dear brethren, as believers who have light vouchsafed to us, not because of our faithfulness but because of the faithfulness, the reality and the committal of men and women who have gone before us. Think of the reality that was seen in the recovery of the truth! How real persons were then! How real the coming of the Lord was to these persons! Thus because of their faithfulness, because of their committal, certain light has come to us: light as to the kingdom of God; light as to the assembly of God; light as to "my assembly", as the Lord spoke of in Matthew chapter sixteen. Think of what wonderful light we have! The Lord might say to us here in this city, "Ye are the light of the world". Every believer would shine in some way, but believers who have been blessed with such truth as has come to us are meant to shine in testimony like a city situated on the top of a mountain.

The Lord says, too, "Nor do men light a lamp and put it under the bushel, but upon the lamp-stand, and it shines for all who are in the house". There is the position of a city set on a mountain top; that is a great public thing. Our light is to shine publicly. "By this shall all know that ye are disciples of mine, if ye have love amongst yourselves", John 13: 35. All men are to know. There is what is public, but there is what is inside the house: "Nor do men light a lamp and put it under the bushel, but upon the lamp-stand". That is where the lamp is meant to be; it is meant to be upon the lamp-stand. It corresponds to local assembly conditions; brothers and sisters in their true place, and satisfied with the place they have, in the working out of things locally. It is not to be put under the bushel. We are always tested as to what we put first. We might tend to regard the Lord's things and the meetings as part-time affairs. We may have a pursuit in life and fit in the meetings somehow or fit in the Lord's service somehow. That is not the idea at all. The Lord said "seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all

these things shall be added unto you", Matt 6: 33. Everything else will fit into its proper place if we put first things first. Dear Mr Edgar Maynard often told us what he got from Mr Taylor: learn to put first things first. The lamp is not to be put under the bushel. It is important, of course, that we should earn our livelihood and be righteous. But the lamp-stand is the lamp's proper place. The lamp is to be put upon the lamp-stand and it shines for all who are in the house. The city on the mountain shines for all men, for all to see, but the lamp on the lamp-stand shines for those who are in the house. Those in the house get the benefit of the lamp on the lamp-stand in its proper place. May the Lord help us. These are obligations on us. Whether we like them or not, dear brethren, they are obligations upon us, but the Lord would help us to fulfil them. He would give us the power in His Spirit to fill out these obligations that He puts upon us. You will notice that it is emphatic 'ye': "Ye are the salt of the earth"; "Ye are the light of the world". The obligation is put on them and the Lord means it to be put on us, but He will help us to fill it out in reality and power. May it be so.

EDINBURGH

12 July 1977

PERSEVERANCE IN THE FELLOWSHIP

R.D.Plant

Nehemiah 2: 20; 4: 1-4, 7-11; 6: 2,3,15,16

I would like to speak a little about perseverance - perseverance in the fellowship. It is one of the things said of the saints in the early part of Acts, that "they persevered in the teaching and fellowship of the apostles, in breaking of bread and prayers", chap 2: 42. We can understand something of perseverance in prayer, and perhaps we know something of persevering in the fellowship. It is a very important thing that we should be committed to the fellowship. They persevered, it says first, in the teaching and fellowship of the apostles. I am sure there is some order for us in that, for no scripture is written haphazardly. You may get those in our day who would like to break bread on their own terms, but the order of that verse is important - they persevered in the teaching and fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers. Perseverance in the fellowship involves your life's work and I think it is set out in Nehemiah. We are well taught that the walls of Jerusalem represent the fellowship. The setting up of the altar and the house are in Ezra. Both are interesting books to read, and I commend them to the brethren, especially to those who are younger, that we might get an impression of men whose hearts moved them to do things for God. How thankful we are for the degree of energy and enthusiasm there is amongst the saints, but would that we got more of a present view of Christ, and that our hearts were burning a little more in relation to His interests here. As the hymn says,

'Who tasted Thy love, and whose hearts were on fire'.

Is your heart on fire? Is your heart burning for Christ? As you read some of these books in the Scriptures you wonder almost if you have started at all, as you read of those who have laid down everything for Christ. Has Christ seized hold of you like that? It is a wonderful thing to start early in life in relation to Christ. It is important to get the ministry, for I do not think you will ever get any power without the

light; but important as that is, the most vital thing, dear brethren, is to become acquainted with Christ. That is the heart of things, to keep in nearness to Christ. I wonder if we are before God enough, that there may be not only a generation coming on, but a generation whose hearts are burning for Christ. In Isaiah it says, "For as soon as Zion travailed, she brought forth her sons", chap 66: 8. Have you travailed, dear older brother or sister, that there might be not only a generation following, but that there might be quality for Christ? I do not think the brethren are concerned in these days just for statistics; it is not only numbers, or recovery just for the sake of numbers; no, they are looking for quality for Christ. Thank God for what there is. I commend to all the younger ones here to set themselves in relation to the Lord Jesus. Set yourself, not just technically, but fill your heart, ask the Spirit to give you a sense of the greatness of Jesus. Wonderful thing to have! Certainly read the ministry and above all read the Scriptures, but ask the Spirit, to help you to get your heart full of Christ - what a basis that is in the testimony! You get the sense, as you read these books, of men who felt things deeply. Do you feel things like that - the shame, reproach and breakdown that has come into the testimony? You find different men connected with the recovery, and their deep feelings are recorded for us. You get Ezekiel for instance; he was speaking God's words, you may say, from outside the city. Then you get Jeremiah who was speaking from inside the city; then Daniel, who continued right through the captivity; he represents another feature. It is very interesting to read about these men and look at the dates and the problems and exercises of the days they lived in; you will find that there is a fulness comes into your study and your appreciation of things when you read contextually. You find that Jeremiah for instance prophesied during the reign of the last three kings of Judah. What a prophecy it was! What an extended appeal it was! We are in the last times too, dear brethren. O to have a heart like Jeremiah! - to know what it was that moved him when he could appeal to those kings to turn to God. Then in his Lamentations he could say, "see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow", chap 1: 12. Dear brethren, let us not stop short of feelings in God's things.

Nehemiah was a man like this, a man who felt it that the walls of Jerusalem which had stood so stoutly had all been brought down through the unfaithfulness of man. Have you ever felt that? Do you in any way feel how God feels about unfaithfulness? You think of the walls, and divine feelings entering into the shaping and building of them, and through man's unfaithfulness they have all come down, burned with fire. All the gates were burned, all the walls were brought down, all the stones that they were built of were laid in the rubble. We need to feel the breakdown in Christendom, not to become occupied with it, but to provide tone in our souls. These men were all men who as before God felt things deeply and took responsibility in relation to all that had come in. Now there comes a point where there is a man not only feeling the breakdown but concerned that there might be recovery, and that is the day we are in, the day of recovery, and the brightest things are to be known in it. Nehemiah is a man we can learn from; it is not said that he was a gifted brother, but he was one who felt things, and all of us can be in that. He had a good job, and sometimes when people get good jobs they tend to lose their fine edge, but Nehemiah had a good job yet his sadness of heart was apparent to the king who enquires why it was, and Nehemiah in his fear and deep concern turns to the God of the heavens. That is one of the greatest privileges we have. You can turn to your bookshelf and pick up the greatest truth, that is a fine thing, but one of the greatest privileges we have is that at any time we can turn to the Lord. Do you ever just turn to the Lord? You may say, it sounds very simple. Well, it is very simple but very profound. You can be going along in your job at work and you can at any time just turn to the Lord. We need to be accustomed to turn to the Lord if we have to give a word like this; you feel the need of it, you are conscious you could not do anything without Him. I do not know that we feel like that all the time, yet He is available all the time. It is a Christian's privilege as one who belongs to the Lord Jesus, who knows Him as his Saviour, whatever your age or occupation, to turn to the Lord. The thief on the cross in his extremity may only have said those few good words in his life, but on turning to the Lord he finds salvation - wonderful thing! You will find

a history of it all through the Scriptures, persons who turned to the Lord away from all that surrounded them, away from the heart-break, and as turning to the Lord finding solace and peace and rest and help in His presence. Paul says as to the Jew nationally that when Moses is read "the veil lies upon their heart", 2 Cor 3: 15. You find yourself admiring them in one way, you admire their drive, the way they can get things done, the way they hit back for instance. Do you find that? And yet that is Israel in unbelief. You admire them that way because that is the way we are made naturally, and yet Israel's blessing will come when in utter dependence with nowhere to turn - no America, no great power, no money, no resources, no arms, no aircraft, no bombs - they turn to the Lord. Then the veil will be taken away. O what it is, dear brethren, to arrive in your soul at something of the greatness of the things you are connected with, yet in one way the simplest thing that you can do at any time is to turn to the Lord.

Nehemiah was a man who turned like that and he went on to persevere in the fellowship; and we need to persevere. In Ezra, when some came back from captivity, the first thing that they did was to put up the altar; no walls, nothing to protect it, just rubble all round, but they set up the altar. Think of the feelings of God then. He was not outwardly in relation to them at that point, but can you think but that God found His pleasure in them on that occasion, when they came back from unfaithfulness and from captivity and erected the altar? I think we have known something of that; in 1972 for instance, when brethren in devotion to Christ in a way erected the altar, not knowing what the next day would bring, perhaps knowing that there would be only one old brother or one old sister in a place, having had to leave many behind. Let us remember those things when we see that brother who may be difficult at times, and remember that he is one of those who had to do with the erecting of the altar; and it was done in faithfulness. Then there came a point when that altar needed protecting, and the fellowship is for protection; you will not need the fellowship in glory, it is to protect what is precious now. The fellowship involves the Peter side of things, it involves administration, it involves things which are kept

out, it involves things which are kept in. It is not a wall like those round the cities of the land; think of a system of things like that where it says they were "walled up to heaven", Deut 1: 28. Things got so out of hand and so abnormal, you may say, that not even heaven could get in. Think of some of our brethren who are caught up in a system of things that not even heaven can get in. The wall of Jerusalem was not like that, it was for protection and strength and was to be so strong and so broad that the saints could walk round it and sing. Do you ever sing in relation to the fellowship? Do you know what it is to thank God and to sing His praises in relation to the way in which He has maintained this great matter in our day?

So Nehemiah was concerned as to building the wall, but first he went and saw the ruin, and I would urge the brethren to go and see the ruin, not merely to talk in platitudes like 'we are all part of it', of course we are; but go and have a look at it as Nehemiah did. It says that he went by night with a few others, and there was no beast with him except the one he rode on. He comes to a point where he could not get past because of the rubbish. O feel it, dear brethren, that in the public ruin of Christendom, the beast - perhaps we could apply that reverently to the Holy Spirit - the beast that was under him could not pass. That is what Christendom is publicly; the stones are there but they are buried in the rubbish, and there was no way to get past. He went down to the fountain gate - no refreshment there. He viewed what it was, all those places suggesting features of spiritual power, all brought down to ruin by man's unfaithfulness. But then he is not a man to give up. You know, I think it is very easy to give up, for there is a lot of opposition today in relation to the fellowship. You say, but surely the opposition is against Christ always. Yes, but in recent history there has been much opposition brought out by the truth of the fellowship and ultimately that is against Christ.

Sadly what you find in this book is that persons who were connected with the testimony by natural relationship became opposers when the wall began to be built, persons like Tobijah, knowing the truth, knowing all about it, but not really genuine, and

the pursuance of the fellowship sorts out what is real and what is unreal.

Where we read in verse 20 brings out that there needs to be first of all clear speaking as to the fellowship. "The God of the heavens, he will prosper us, and we his servants will arise and build; but ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial in Jerusalem". What I wanted to illustrate from that is that the fellowship exists and there needs to be clear speaking in relation to it. Things are clear, things are not a mixture, things are not watered down, and we are not making a wall in a different way from God. Let us be established in it that love for Christ and love for the truth involves that there is clear speaking as to the fellowship. Then you get these various characters of opposition. In chapter 4 we get those who mocked, and we may have to accept that, it comes from outside. You get some interesting questions. I have always been struck with this little section of questions - What do they? - Shall they be permitted to go on? How many times have persons written off the recovery? How many times have they predicted it would fade out - I will give them six months, and this sort of thing? These things have their effect upon us. These points of weakness that we have been referring to are very real, dear brethren. You know what it is in the quietness of your home, not at the three-day meeting; not at the fellowship meetings, but in the quietness of the weeks in between, when the meetings go on, and sometimes it is not so easy, when at times the brethren are absent for one reason and another and we feel numerical weakness, and when sometimes we are not as bright as we might be; these are times when our points of weakness come to the fore. Shall I be permitted to go on? There needs to be strengthening in perseverance in the fellowship because it is a prime thing to be occupied with today. The woman in John 20 went through the fellowship into privilege, and I think that is the way we go, through the fellowship into privilege. As you looked at the tabernacle system from outside you would see the badgers' skins; inside you would see the gold but outside you would see the badgers' skins which would cover the whole thing over. It would not

look very imposing from outside but it would look protected. Let us be thankful if what is in our local places looks protected; and may it be protected and let us see to it that each one of us perseveres in the fellowship at the present time.

So it says "Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day?" How challenging these things are! Will they offer sacrifices? Will things just fade out? Will that meeting ultimately fade out when the brethren get old? What a day it is! but think of the support that is to your hand. Think of Nehemiah; when they came in mockery what did he do? Did he rail on them? He turned to the Lord. When things become difficult and do not go so well, O dear brethren, turn to the Lord, do not complain about the brethren to someone else, turn to the Lord. "Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish?" What stones these are; they stand for what is permanent, for what is of God. What stones have come to light! Some of them may not have been noticed before. Have you seen them in your place? You say there is only a few of us and we feel our weakness, but have a look at the stones - walk around Jerusalem and mark well her bulwarks. Go and find them; if there is something in a locality there are some bulwarks somewhere, have a look for them and mark them. I have found a few stones in recent years which I never knew were there. They are persons who can endure, who have been revived, who have gone on, who have known what the endurance of wind and weather has meant, persons who are stones in character; they are standing today in the fellowship and I would like to continue with them. "Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish?" Is there any rubbish about our circumstances or our local meetings that is covering up the stones? Get it out of the way that each one may become a strong part of the fellowship in relation to protecting what is precious to God.

Then as the work goes on you get another attack, that is this matter of hindering in verse 8. The devil uses different means of attack; he used mockery from outside, and then if it is not working he will use something else, a hindering line of things. The way they were hindered here was by a sort of guerrilla warfare, a constant

deceptive kind of attack so that the people had so much to do that they could not move the rubbish. It is not a very well understood thing, that if you are building you have to be constantly moving rubbish away. It is well to think of that when we say, Why cannot we have a more constructive line - more building. Well, if you want to build you have to move the rubbish every day and that involves self-judgment, it involves exercises of displacement and moving things aside. Paul speaks of laying aside every weight and sin that so easily entangles us. But here a point is reached where there is so much hindrance to occupy their attention that their strength began to fail and the rubbish was not moved. Let us see this, that in the fellowship we have always to be concerned as to moving our share of the rubbish. I think it would be a daily matter to move it out of the way. We know the sort of things it may be, the things that arise from being together in small companies, the kind of irritation that comes in by differing personalities working things out together. Sometimes we talk about this kind of thing in our families or to brethren who tend to think like ourselves, but that will not move things out of the way. You may say, Surely my irritation with a certain brother does not mean that ultimately, if allowed to continue and grow, the wall would stop. If you do not move the rubbish the wall will stop, and if the wall stops it is not complete and if it is not complete it will be overrun. "The strength of the bearers of burdens faileth". How thankful we are for persons who move burdens in places, and for those who take on responsibility even for seeing that the meetings go on, those who, as we have been reminded, are available and ready. Thank God for persons who look after and care for the brethren, and keep them comfortable and all these kind of things. But that this line of things might be maintained the rubbish must be removed in me and involves that there is the judging of a constant accumulation of small things because of the flesh in us. So Nehemiah puts them to work with the sword and the trowel. You may say I am a specialist bricklayer. Some are skilled at certain things; some brethren can put over the truth in a wonderful way, how thankful we are for them; but these persons had a trowel and a sword; it does not say they used them but they had them. Have you a sword? Would you be

prepared to use it? These are difficult days, dear brethren, and one thing is certain, the enemy has not ceased attacking right the way through the recovery and is attacking yet. We need the sword and we need the trowel.

So in chapter 6 there is this further approach which I think is the most subtle of all, to come down to the plain of Ono and meet there. It is very difficult when you see brethren with whom you once walked, many of them very devoted persons; and many amongst us are especially tested as to those of their families, and here are some who would say, Why not come down to the plain and have a look at things from there, they look a bit different? Then they bring an open letter in their hand, saying in effect that the whole base of this movement you are going on with was not right from the start, it was not really faithfulness to God but rebellion. That is what they said in this chapter - what happened a few years ago should never have happened, come down and have a chat about it. This line of things is very unsettling. I think it is true to say that there is no basis for any merging of companies. Christianity involves individuals and it involves the recognition of the truth, and although we love all our brethren (and never let us fall away from that line of Joseph that "I am seeking my brethren", Gen 37: 16) let us be sure of the dignity of the work we are committed to and the security of the wall. Nehemiah says "I am doing a great work, and I cannot come down". Let us be preserved in that, that the work we are doing in the fellowship is a great work and we cannot afford to go down. If you lose the wall you lose everything. If you decline, Mr Stoney says, you surrender the best bit of truth you have received (see Vol 2, p.502). You will find that is true, if you give up a bit you will give up the best bit, and ultimately if you give up a little you will give up all. Dear brethren, it is a great work; do you regard it that way in your locality? You cannot afford to go down to the plain to talk about it. Things in Christianity demand elevation. They demand elevation to speak about them, and you get a sense of that here in Nehemiah's answer: "I am doing a great work, and I cannot come down". It was a vital point here because the gates were formed but they had not

put up the doors. I think the door would be that things not only are known objectively but they work, persons can go out and come in. The sheep gate was there, there are no bars or locks on the sheep-gate; wonderful thing, God's sovereignty! Fellowship is not a bar to God's sovereignty. The fish-gate was there and all the other gates that went round the wall. The dung-gate was there - I think it has been said that the first gate that was burned after the setting up of things in pristine glory was the dung-gate, the principle that things had to be got out of the way was very quickly burned in the history of the church. We can read about the gates, read about the people who worked on them; goldsmiths worked on some of them. Think of that! brethren who could speak of the highest truth, those who deal with gold in refinement, who could show a shade of difference between the highest points of the truth. I could not do that but there are persons amongst us who are able in some measure for that; how thankful we are for them! But the goldsmiths were doing repair work at the gates. Nehemiah is an interesting book; I commend it to all of us on the line of persevering in the fellowship, and that involves your local meeting; it means that the wall is being built, the gates are being formed, the doors are being hung, all locked and barred except the sheep-gate, and it involves ultimately the choirs seen on the wall. Dear brethren, I would like to touch more of the greatness of the fellowship and the distinctive side of the fellowship. We are acquainted with the toil of it; let us persevere in it until we see something of the glory of it, for His name's sake.

GILLINGHAM

23 October 1976

FRUIT FROM MINISTRY

E.C.Burr

2 Timothy 3: 16,17

This scripture brings before us the authority of the Scriptures and their usefulness and their effect. None of us here this evening and, thank God, many other believers, has any doubt about the divine authority of the Scriptures. It is a thing to be thankful for and to look for the extension of, that the Scriptures might extend their authority in the minds of men. They have been assailed under the enemy's power for centuries; they stand in the brilliance in which they were first written nevertheless. The fact that the attacks on the authority of Scripture have to be renewed in every generation is only a demonstration of how ineffective those attacks are. It is as if the enemy bangs his head against the same wall for centuries. The Scriptures have divine authority. Then Paul says here that they are "profitable for teaching, for conviction, for correction, for instruction in righteousness", thus giving us what I may speak of as the general usefulness of the Scriptures. Then he tells us about the effect: "that the man of God may be complete, fully fitted to every good work".

Now that effect may be produced in individuals even by reading the Bible; the very reading of the Scriptures, as the soul is put before them, has the effect that their usefulness is brought to bear on the man so that he makes progress towards completeness and progress towards being fully fitted to every good work. It is something brought before us in chapter 2, that we should be serviceable to the Master; in this chapter what is in mind is "that the man of God may be complete, fully fitted to every good work". As I say, that effect may be brought about in souls as a result of sitting down privately and reading the Bible. More generally, however, that effect in applying the usefulness of the Scriptures to the soul is brought about by ministry, and their usefulness for the purpose which is indicated here has its effect in souls as a result of ministry. I suppose we never cease to be thankful for the ministry which the Lord has given us,

ministry which has helped us to understand the Scriptures, perhaps in the sphere of the recovery the Scriptures understood apart from the intellectual capacity of man in a way that they are understood nowhere else. I question whether the Scriptures are understood spiritually anywhere as they are amongst those who have sought to walk in the light of the truth, and that is the consequence of the ministry that the Lord has given and is giving, that the usefulness of the Scriptures is applied with a view to this effect.

But I believe that ministry is most effective when the objective is kept before those who minister; that is to say, if ministry proceeds, you might say, aimlessly, then the effect achieved will be by the grace of the Spirit in the souls who hear, as it were a bow shot at a venture; but there will be more effect as the divine intention in giving ministry in relation to the Scriptures is kept in mind. Therefore, as any of us serve, I think we do well to keep in mind the availability of the Scriptures to this great objective. There are other objectives presented in Scripture as well in relation to ministry and we do well to equip ourselves with a knowledge of what the divine intention in ministry is. The Scriptures that Paul would have had available, or Peter, or the other apostles, would be almost entirely the Old Testament. It is remarkable to us with what power the apostles draw on the Old Testament Scriptures; what ability the Spirit gives them to take one scripture or another in order to make, as it were, the point which the Spirit would be making at that moment. Read, for instance, the way in which Paul quotes from the Old Testament in Romans to establish the way in which the gentiles are to be brought into blessing, ways in which I do not think you would ever have understood the Old Testament if you had not had the epistle to the Romans. Then consider the way in which Peter, both in his speaking in the Acts and in his letters, is able to draw with great versatility on the Old Testament Scriptures, using them for current gain. And we have the advantage of having the New Testament as well.

Now one thing that Paul was concerned about in all his service and ministry was that there might be fruit from it. It is interesting that in writing to the Romans, to whom he hoped to go, he says that he

hoped to impart some spiritual gift and to receive from them, and that he might have fruit among them "as among the other nations", chap 1: 13. Now that scripture makes it plain that Paul could identify fruit from his own ministry among the nations. And he was anticipating going to Rome in order that there also there might be fruit which he could identify from his own ministry among them. "That I might have some fruit among you", he says, indicating that Paul regarded it as normal that there should be identifiable fruit from the ministry in which he served. That there was such fruit we can observe not merely from the epistle to the Romans but from other scriptures, and it is interesting that in writing to the Colossians, to whom he had not been, he says that the glad tidings were bearing fruit among them and growing (see chap 1: 6). That shows that the preaching of the gospel and ministry may have the effect of bearing fruit, no doubt as room is made for it amongst those who receive it. Of course, Paul at the close of his ministry has to speak of all in Asia having turned away from him and you might therefore think that, as it were, a withering blast had come across the fruitful field in which Paul had ministered, and no doubt there was much loss in that immediate day, though there has been much gain from Paul's ministry since. But in his own time he was able to discern the fruit of his ministry in such a place as Ephesus where he could distinguish the capability of a local assembly, not only to apprehend the truth on its highest level, but to give expression to that truth in the service of God on its highest level. That, I suppose, is the greatest fruit from ministry that we might expect to be brought about; that is, that the saints are capable of apprehending the truth on its highest levels and capable of expressing themselves to God in service collectively at the level of the light which they have received, the fruit of Paul's ministry.

As I think of these things, beloved, it is a matter of considerable current exercise, to myself at least, as to what fruit there is from ministry at the present time. What fruit is there from ministry? A good place to start in relation to that question is to ask yourself, what fruit in me is there from ministry under which I have sat? We have meetings which we enjoy, and we look forward to meetings on

Saturday, if the Lord will, in which we anticipate having the truth powerfully ministered and opened up among us. We look therefore for fruit from that. But we look back, too, and we think, for instance, of similar meetings that we have had in this city over a long period. Let us go back over three months or over six months, over a year, over longer than that; we can go back as to ministry of that kind. We have had more extended occasions, over a period we have had a series of three day meetings. We have ministry continually, we have ministry continually on a Tuesday night, we have ministry on Wednesday nights and locally on Thursdays and Fridays and we go to other meetings, and we preach; and, beloved, what is the fruit? Is there fruit that is identifiable? Paul says he hoped to have fruit among the Romans that was identifiable, and I think that would be in the view of any who undertook service of any kind, that they hoped to see fruit.

There is, of course, much to encourage any who serve at the present time. There is a lively interest in the meetings, in the truth, as it comes along; but what fruit is there? Is it a pleasant song, an idle tale? Do we enjoy good meetings and go away? Do we enjoy good meetings and eventually put them on our bookshelves and forget them, or is there fruit? What is the fruit of the ministry? I suggest that it is well for us all to ask ourselves, what is the fruit in me from the ministry under which I have sat? What is the fruit among us collectively, what is the fruit in this city of ministry which has been carried on under the Lord's hand amongst us here? You might say, and I would certainly say, that if you look among the saints and compare where they are today with where they were at such and such a previous date, you can see progress. I speak respectfully to the brethren, I myself can certainly see progress among the saints, but what is the identifiable fruit? Does it find expression in the service of God? Is there a new fulness in the service of God? Is there a readiness in the service of God? Is there a capacity to sustain the service of God or do we, as it were, go to the Supper for the service of God, give out our hymn, get on our feet for our thanksgiving, and then that is our part finished, or are we

bearing fruit all through the meeting, so that if it is necessary for somebody to take part again, we are there with more fruit? It says "he purges it that it may bring forth more fruit", John 15: 2. Are we there in the spirit of more fruit or are we just, as it were, going and putting our contribution metaphorically into the box and that is that? Or, beloved, is the occasion of the service of God a manifestation of substantial fruit from what I may speak of as substantial ministry? Then, what about the other meetings? Are our contributions to the readings, our questions, our participation in them, a manifestation that there is 'more fruit' among us because we have brought of what we have already acquired? or do we remain childish and in the kindergarten, and our contributions on that level? Is the man of God becoming complete, fit for every good work, fit to take a man's part where it is needed, or do we remain in the situation where we prefer to be nursed and to be ministered to, to be fed with milk and water, as it were, or are we ready ourselves to bring forth fruit in its season for the saints? These are the results of fruit from ministry and a sign that the man of God is becoming complete.

Then there is the preaching. I find my own response to the preaching a great test. It is one of the easiest meetings to criticise - Well, a fair word tonight, thought he was helped a bit, or something like that. But, beloved, we were there to hear the word of God even if we thought that the brother did not get on too well; not always do all of us get on very well in the preaching. It may be that the Lord would use even our own questioning about it to raise exercise in us as to the quality of preaching generally and as to the quality of our own preaching. There is no meeting that should regularly be more fruitful among the brethren than the preaching of the gospel, because it gets to the roots of the work of God in the brethren and it is able to water things at their very root. One might go through the meetings in which we participate together and ask, Is the result that the man of God is being complete and fitted for every good work? Every good work involves primarily the service of God, it involves the testimony of God, it involves the administration of the Lord's interests: fit for every good work. Those who are bearing fruit as the

result of ministry that the Lord gives have little difficulty with administrative questions that may arise because they have been nourished in the truth and have therefore developed the capability to take up, in great simplicity, administrative matters that may come up. Those who are nearest to the Lord always have the simplest answer to administrative problems. The way to make administrative problems difficult is to get into the borders of the camp; those nearest the holiest will find that every question is answered there.

These things I speak of, beloved, because they are an exercise to me. I myself have had the privilege often of serving among the brethren, sometimes in extended meetings, sometimes in fellowship meetings, sometimes on other occasions, and I, like all the brethren, would seek to be serviceable on any occasion. You would never come to a meeting without something for the brethren, never come without feeling that the whole responsibility of the meeting lay on you, although it never does unless you are giving an address. But you come to the meeting, this meeting, come to the Lord's day reading, as if the responsibility lay on you, so that you have something for the brethren no matter how small it may seem to be, and you will discover how much fruit it bears. But I question myself as to what fruit there might have been from anything in which I have served, and perhaps you question yourself as to what fruit there might have been from any ministry in which you have served, whether in fellowship meetings, or in the preaching, or in a reading, or in a word tonight, or something like that; what fruit has there been? I think, beloved, the Lord would exercise us about this, exercise us as to the cultivation of the ground. None of us need have stony ground. We can all go down deep and therefore get rid of the stones. None of us need have thorns growing up; we can all root them out in the power of the Spirit by putting to death the deeds of the body. None of us need be afraid of the birds of the air snatching the seed away. One of the earliest men in the Scriptures frightened birds away and we can certainly do that. What we should look for in ourselves is good ground and we should be those who are receiving the truth in ready and good hearts. Then in relation to

ministry that we receive there is much scope for the service of an Apollos who would water. "Apollos watered", it says, 1 Cor 3: 6. Paul ministered, Apollos watered; that is, he helped to make the ministry fruitful, and God gave the increase. There would never be any increase any other way than by what God gives, but I feel, beloved, that there needs to be exercise amongst us currently as to what fruit there is from ministry. I speak with my brethren, you have a word with a brother here and there; how did you get on at so and so, did you feel helped? Yes, but you wonder what the fruit is. And you say to another brother, were you encouraged at so and so and he says, Well, I felt helped but I wondered what the impact was. Beloved, I wonder what the impact is too. But the result that is to be looked for from ministry is "that the man of God may be complete, fully fitted to every good work". I believe the Lord would exercise us in order that what proceeds amongst us may be of the character that it bears more fruit in order that the service of God may be enriched and the testimony strengthened and the administration simplified as we are fully fitted for every good work for the Master's use.

LONDON

11 January 1977

THE CHILDREN'S SWEETNESS

In the early days of wilderness life the children of Israel had both sweet water and sweet food. No doubt the water was so called because it had before been too nasty to drink even after three days of thirst! The people called the name of the place "Marah" meaning 'bitter'. If they had been a little more patient and waited for God to act for them they could have named it "Naomi", meaning 'pleasant'. How often we think more of our troubles than of God's perfect answer to them. Moses was shown a special wood to cast into the waters - probably a salty marsh of the Red Sea - and they were made sweet. One of the lessons for believers is that Jesus in His suffering humanity and in dying for us has tasted every kind of sorrow and trial that we may meet with.

The manna was a food from heaven which gave the people all they needed through their long journey. You can imagine the surprise of the children on first going out of their tents after the heavy morning dew to see what looked like white seeds or frost crystals all over the ground. Although told that this was "the bread which Jehovah has given you to eat" the people still always called it "Manna" meaning 'what is it?' This must have been more in wonder at God's goodness than in ignorance and would encourage everyone to enquire about it.

The taste of the manna was like cakes with honey so that it gave the nourishment of bread and was always sweet. You will remember that the apostle Paul often wrote words like "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you" so that we find special strength and sweetness in feeding our souls and spirits on Christ as a lowly and obedient Man when here on earth.

Besides providing good things for us God looks for sweetness from His children. Once He said in sorrow "Thou hast bought me no sweet cane with money". But think of the joy of being able to yield pleasure to His taste by some sacrifice on our part! At another time He said in a questioning way of one of His own "Is he a child of

delights?" Well then, let us just put our own name in and be able to answer 'Yes, I am'.

But our lives are not naturally sweet to God because of selfishness, pride, envy and unbelief: nor will effort alone make them so any more than much stirring of a cup of tea without sugar. But the true sweetness - the love of Jesus - dissolving and spreading in us is the only answer to our need. Then by the Holy Spirit, given to the obedient believer, the stirring that was useless before is now absolutely necessary. Do you try to please the God who has so blessed you?

J.C.Evershed