

A
WORD
IN ITS
SEASON

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FIRST THINGS

J.Renton

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We are all governed by what we put first. If a man is engrossed in his business when he ought to be with his family he is a business man, he puts business first. If a man puts his family first he is a family man; he might even be with his family when he should be at business. If a man puts sport first he is a man of sport. Many put themselves first; if I put myself first I am a selfish man. We are governed by what we put first; therefore what we put first is of all importance. In the first scripture we have read the Lord says to his disciples "But seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness": seek ye first. The Lord had spoken about other things, about food and raiment; these things have their place, but what matters is what comes first. The Lord says "Do not be careful" (v 25), do not put first what shall we eat or what shall we drink or what shall we put on. Maybe men tend to think of what they eat, and women tend to think of what they put on, but these things are not to come first; "seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness". What does that mean? There is an area down here which can be called the kingdom of God; it is in the hearts and souls of believers who confess Jesus as Lord, who have received the Holy Spirit, who have their own links maintained with the Father. The kingdom brings persons into right relationship with the Lord, with the Holy Spirit, with the Father and with one another because believers are meant to be brethren in the kingdom of God. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God"; that is, seek first the promotion of what is for the pleasure of God down here, seek first to extend the prosperity of the interests of the Lord Jesus Christ down here. Then the Lord says "and all these things shall be added unto you". Everything else will fall into its proper place as we seek first the kingdom of God.

When two of John's disciples followed Jesus we read "But Jesus having turned, and seeing them following", John 1: 38. These

two disciples might not have known that anybody was seeing what they were doing, but the Lord saw. If anyone here sets himself or herself to seek first the kingdom of God the Lord will take account of you. If you are set in your measure for the prosperity of the interests of the Lord Jesus Christ down here the Lord will have regard to you and the Holy Spirit will help you. "But Jesus having turned, and seeing them following, says to them, What seek ye?" What a question that is! If every one were asked this evening, what are you really seeking? what is your objective in life?, what would be your answer? These disciples said "Teacher, where abidest thou?". They were beginning to be interested in the Lord Jesus and His interests. I trust there is someone here who, if up till now has never thought of the promotion of the Lord's interests, might begin to put it first. The Lord will encourage you, the Spirit will support you in this move which you desire to make because it is as we move in a right direction that we get the Spirit's help. Moses turned aside to see the bush that was burning and was not being consumed, and Jehovah saw that he turned aside to see (see Exod 3: 2,3). I would say this for the encouragement of anyone who desires from this day forward to put the Lord's interests first. All the other things, the necessities of life, have their place, but they will all fall into their right place if we put first things first: "seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness". I trust we will all be set that our first consideration in anything we do or any matter that confronts us is, how would this affect the Lord? Would this be pleasing to the Lord? Would this promote the interests of our absent Lord Jesus Christ who is coming soon and looks for persons down here faithfully to promote His interests in His absence. In this gospel of Matthew you will find five definite identifiable courses of instruction, but we will not be able for any of the other courses unless we begin in the first course - "seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness".

At the end of the 11th chapter of Luke, we read "And as he said these things to them, the scribes and the Pharisees began to press him urgently, to make him speak of many things" (v 53). The scribes and Pharisees made the Lord speak of many things because they

had an ulterior motive, they were opposers of the Lord; it says they were watching Him to catch something out of His mouth that they might accuse Him. It is in the context of the scribes and Pharisees making Him speak of many things that in chapter 12 "he began to say to his disciples first". He had many things to say to the scribes and Pharisees in chapter 11, and they caused Him to say many things, but the Lord has something first in mind to say: "he began to say to his disciples first". The note indicates that it was the first thing on His heart to tell them. It would be a great matter, dear brethren, to enquire as to what would be first in the Lord's heart to say to us. We might say many things, many right things and many true things, but O to be a true disciple to desire to have what the Lord has first in His heart to say! The crowd were gathered together and were treading one on another, disregarding one another, imposing themselves on one another; then "he began to say to his disciples first, Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees which is hypocrisy". I understand the word 'hypocrisy' comes from the idea of acting a part. We live in a day when much acting goes on and the best actors are acclaimed, but that is not to mark the disciple; we are not to be acting a part, and yet we are always in danger of professing to be what we are not. What is needed, dear brethren, is reality with every one of us. If we are real we will use diligence to gain the knowledge of God, to hear what the Lord has first in His heart to say to us. We are always in danger of the leaven of the Pharisees. Let us hate this very idea of being unreal or professing to be what we are not and acting a part. The Lord would have us entirely delivered from this hypocritical attitude. Paul said, in writing to the Corinthians, "But by God's grace I am what I am", 1 Cor 15: 10. Let us be, dear brethren, what we are; there is nothing more attractive than for a believer to be what he is by God's grace. Someone said, if I imitate somebody else, who will be me? Let us each have our own spiritual personality. What a personality Paul was! In Acts 20 those he spoke to embraced him.

Now in 1 Timothy we have Paul writing to an individual, having in mind the truth of the house of God. God's house is where God is

known and where He is represented. Paul is concerned that Timothy should take on this feature of representing God and that he should take on a charge to promote the representation of God in the lives of believers with whom he came in contact. So he says "I exhort therefore, first of all"; there were many other things he would exhort him about but this was the first thing he had in mind. He says in effect, if you are going to represent God down here you will have to have an outlook like God has. "I exhort therefore, first of all, that supplications, prayers, intercessions, thanksgivings be made for all men". We need, dear brethren, universal outlook. Paul exhorts here that our outlook should be as wide as God's outlook is, because he goes on to say "for this is good and acceptable before our Saviour God, who desires that all men should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth". We tend to be narrow; we are never, dear brethren, to be narrow-minded and we are never to be narrow in our hearts. Our feet are to be in the narrow path as Mr Darby wrote often in his letters, but our outlook is to be as wide as God's outlook is in the glad tidings which Paul speaks of here. Not only does God desire that all men should be saved but Paul goes on to speak of God's provision for all men: "the man Christ Jesus who gave himself a ransom for all". Supplications, prayers, intercessions, thanksgivings, are priestly activities, but they have in view all men, not only all who live in Britain. We often hear prayers for the government of this country, but we are to think of all men and other governments too. How extensive is God's outlook and God's desires! How great is the provision that God has made for all men! Let us be no longer narrow in our outlook or in our hearts, although keeping our feet on the narrow path. We need wisdom to keep our feet on the narrow path, in the path of God's will, God's will for every believer, and yet have in mind all men. Then it says "for kings and all that are in dignity, that we may lead a quiet and tranquil life in all piety and gravity; for this is good and acceptable before our Saviour God". God is represented in persons who have an outlook like His own. Paul wrote to the Colossians that his object was to present every man perfect in Christ (see chap 1: 28). It has been said that he would look upon every man as a potential for Christ. When he

was in Corinth he was told to stay there for the Lord had much people in that city. They had not yet come to light, but when Paul was in Corinth he would look upon every man he came in contact with as a potential for Christ, a potential for the will of God.

James speaks in his epistle about wisdom. There is a great need of wisdom in this day in which we live. It may be that there is more wisdom needed in the day in which we are than was needed in the early days of Pentecost or in the days of the pristine securing of the gentiles by Paul. Both Paul and James condemn all human wisdom and merely human intellect. James presents the wisdom which is from above and which he says "first is pure". I believe, dear brethren, if there is one thing needed it is purity, purity of motive and purity of desire; we so tend to be influenced by prejudice or preference that we depart from purity. If we are going to derive the wisdom which comes from above there must be this feature of purity. The word of God searches our motives; it will penetrate and divide and discern thoughts and intents of the heart (see Heb 4: 12). We need the word to penetrate so that if our motives are impure the impurities are exposed and judged and we are found with purity of motive. It is not an easy matter to act always on pure motive, we so tend to be wrongly influenced, things influence us, persons influence us, preferences influence us, prejudices influence us; even Peter had deep prejudice. Apostle as he was, commissioned, given the keys of the kingdom - for he was the one whom the Lord meant to use to open the door of the glad tidings to the nations - he had to have a vision three times, the great vessel like a sheet coming down, to overcome the innate prejudice that he had. In the epistle to the Galatians, in the second chapter, when Peter came to Antioch, he was not quite clear of that prejudice. How deeply it was in Peter and how deeply it is with us! These kind of things corrupt purity of motive, "But the wisdom from above first is pure". If we can arrive at purity of motive we can go on to the other features - "peaceful, gentle, yielding"; the Authorised Version reads "easy to be entreated". O what wisdom that is! If you are on the wrong course would you like to be easy to be entreated? O that this feature were

found in every locality on the face of the earth! Alas I am afraid it is not evident in every locality. There must be some fault as to the "pure". If we can be pure we will be easy to be entreated. The brethren will not entreat in vain; there will be an answer to a right entreaty, yielding and unquestioning, that is uncontentious. These are very practical matters dear brethren. What I want to call attention to is "first is pure"; then these other beautiful features, which were no doubt seen perfectly in the Lord Jesus will be manifested with each one of us.

So may the Lord help us to know what it is to put first things first, because what comes first in our lives will govern us. May the Lord come first, may His interests come first. It may be we could put the Lord first in a certain way but not get what is first in His mind. There are many real believers who are devoted to the Lord but whether all their activities come from what is first in His mind is a question. We need to have the Lord before us as an objective, but we also need to get the Lord's mind as to how we are to apply ourselves. May we be helped to put first things first for His name's sake.

LOCHGELLY

10 September 1977

PRIESTHOOD

J.McKay

Psalm 99: 5,6; Ezekiel 10: 1-4; Ezra 2: 68,69

It is in mind to say something as to priesthood. I speak, I trust, with some feeling as aware of the need that priesthood should be developed among the people of God. It is one of the greatest of our privileges that, in the language of the book of Exodus, we should be called to serve Jehovah, or to serve God, as priests. Of course His prime thought, as we have mentioned already, is sonship. He said as to the children of Israel in Egypt, "Let my son go, that he may serve me" (Exod 4: 23); finally it will be that those who serve Him are sons. Yet, as the wilderness history opened up, what became very necessary was the service of priesthood, a service which, in a day of difficulty, could furnish what was for the divine pleasure; and it is that into which we are presently being called. I would like to stimulate exercise with us as to more function Godward as priests. I wonder what you would say if somebody asked how you understood the matter of priesthood. I suppose if you asked someone in the established Church of England you would get a certain answer; if you asked someone in the Roman Catholic system you would get a different answer; but I wonder what answer we would get if we were to make such an enquiry in a company like this. Mr Darby raises the question, who are priests and what are priests? The wonder, dear brethren, of Christianity is that all the saints are priests. Now that is a statement which in itself is exceedingly simple, and yet the blessing of it is perhaps little realised. Such as you and I may have direct access to God. The existing established system, where persons have someone between them and God, is nothing less than a slight on the efficacy of the finished work of Christ; it is a slight on the glory of Christianity as we know it. All the saints are called into priesthood. If we have the privilege of immediate access, as Hebrews says, let us use boldness, the way being made open, let us avail ourselves of it so that we become characteristically priests who are serving God.

Now I read this verse in Psalm 99 because I am impressed with the glory of this description that comes into it as to some, that they are "among his priests": "Moses and Aaron among his priests, and Samuel among them that call upon his name". It is here a matter that is viewed as apparently greater than what these persons stood for officially. Moses, you might say, officially was the great apostle; through him the truth as to God's relations with His earthly people had been opened up. How glorious those disclosures were! but let us remind ourselves, dear brethren, that what is greater than any levitical activity, greater than any service however effective, as God gives grace for it, that service may be, is that we should be engaged in priestly service towards Him. So I speak of Moses as among His priests. Think of the development of priesthood in a man like Moses; how early did it begin? I wonder if priestly feelings, feelings that really consider for God, are beginning to develop in the young ones among us. We could refer to Samuel, one who as a boy was girded with a linen ephod; he was not mature as far as age was concerned, but early developing in those features which considered for God in a dark day. We are living in such a day, and the great concern is not to be occupied with the darkness but to be occupied positively with the greatness of the things of God and what is ministering to His pleasure. Thus Samuel as a boy was ministering before Jehovah girded with a linen ephod. So also with Moses; very early in Moses' history the features of priesthood began to show themselves. You will remember how as a babe, placed as he was in the ark of reeds, what came into expression was deep feeling. The situation was one of reproach, of murderous opposition publicly; what came into evidence in that babe was that he was weeping. God protects him there; and then as he came to years Moses was characterised by making a discriminative choice, he chose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season (see Heb 11: 25). Think of Moses choosing! I hope the faculty of discriminative choice in relation to what pleases God is gaining ground amongst us. We need to discriminate, a priest will always do that, he will discern things and he will choose what is right. So the whole of Moses' early history was educational under

the divine hand, educational not simply in view of public ministry but in view of the exercise of priesthood according to God.

When Moses was being divinely commissioned he was on the mountain forty days. What an opportunity he had! He was shown the pattern, shown by God what His thoughts in blessing were for the saints. He was on the mountain for this extended period and Jehovah says, Go down, the people which thou hast led out of Egypt have corrupted themselves (see Exod 32: 7). What a test for Moses! Moses himself determined, you may say, to go on with the great things of God and God tells him that the people have corrupted themselves, they have departed out of the way, and what had come in among them was idolatry. What is such a circumstance going to bring out in a man like Moses? What it brings out, dear brethren, is the power of priestly activity in relation to God . I feel that this is greatly needed. Moses says "blot me ... out of thy book", Exod 32: 32. He was prepared, you might say, to sacrifice himself that the saints should be preserved in relation to the greatness of God's thoughts for them. How much development of priesthood is there among us of this calibre? If we find that the saints are diverting, do we become critical of them? Do we sit in judgment on them? Or are we characterised as persons who would intercede for them? Moses says, I am not going on without the saints; he says they are Thy people and he puts himself, as it were, into the breach, in priestly power, and he tells us that Jehovah listened to him: he said "And Jehovah listened unto me also at that time", Deut 9: 19. I wonder if there are persons among us whom Jehovah can answer in relation to whatever exercises may be current among the saints, persons who in devotion will avail themselves of this wonderful privilege, direct access to God, using the power they have with God to intercede for the saints that they might be protected and preserved. What a man Moses was! Therefore when he came among the brethren he had power with them. The more power we have with God the more power we shall have as among the brethren. So he was able to bring in the divine word in adjusting skill so that the whole situation was not lost but that the people were preserved. Let

us not, dear brethren, think that we can go on alone; let us realise that in priestly power we are to carry the saints with us. One feature of the priest is that he has the shoulder pieces, his whole strength is to be used to support the saints at their true level in the sight of God. So Moses develops in priesthood - "Moses ... among his priests". I think that is a beautiful description. Would you not like to be described that way, as among God's priests? one who in circumstances of difficulty can shine; one who in circumstances of normality can shine too.

Psalm 90 gives us a prayer of Moses; it describes him as the man of God; not the great apostle or the great minister but the man of God. How does he speak? "Lord, thou hast been our dwelling-place in all generations" (v 1). He did not know the economy as now revealed but he knew God and he was abiding in God, and at the end of the wilderness history the impression he leaves on the spirits of the saints is not of the difficulties, is not simply of the power that had led them through, but of the God who had done it. He says at the end of Deuteronomy "The name of Jehovah will I proclaim" (chap 32: 3) - that is the word of a priest - "Ascribe greatness unto our God! He is the Rock, his work is perfect". I think what we need is development in our knowledge of God; we shall then have more power with one another, more power to steady the saints when circumstances of difficulty arise. So Moses and Aaron are among his priests and Samuel among them that call upon His name: and they called unto Jehovah, and He answered them. I believe that there will be an answer for us as we avail ourselves of the privilege of direct access to God.

I go on to Ezekiel because here we have a man who is described as clothed with linen. Linen is a very fine material and is linked with priesthood throughout Scripture. This man is clothed with it. He is a person characterised by the qualities of which we have spoken. As we know, the background to the prophet Ezekiel is a day of breakdown, everything in the book being dated from the captivity. The breakdown of what had professed to stand in relation to God is fully taken into account. The prophet himself becomes in the earlier

chapters a delineation for us of the truth. What experiences he went through! Let us not underestimate the experiences of those who labour among us; much goes on behind the scenes. What pressures Ezekiel knew! In chapter 4 he delineates for us the sufferings of Christ, lying on his side as bearing the iniquities of Israel; his feelings were being developed. Later we find that his head was shorn, all that is comely as to the natural man is removed. Then we find that he is caught up by a lock of his hair, showing how God links on with Christ in type in resurrection. All this has gone on in the experience of the prophet and at this point he sees a throne. "In the expanse that was over the head of the cherubim there appeared above them as it were a sapphire stone, as the appearance of the likeness of a throne". O, what it is to get a view of the stability of divine supremacy in days of departure! a throne like a sapphire stone, a full representation of what God is in His supremacy. You will notice that, distinct from the reference to the throne in chapter 1 of this book, there is no one sitting on this throne. In chapter 1 it speaks of one sitting on the throne and "from the appearance of his loins and upward, and from the appearance of his loins and downward, I saw as it were the appearance of fire" (v 27), Christ in heaven representing fully God's thoughts in relation to the whole scene. But at this point He is not on the throne, and the voice comes to the man clothed with linen from *between the wheels*. I think the suggestion is, and others have pointed it out, that the Man is not on the throne but He is actually in the scene of testimony. It is very precious to know the Lord as near to us in the scene of testimony. The wheels suggest God's government, the great forward and direct movements that characterise divine operations. Ezekiel links very much, I think, with John's gospel. John the baptist's service at the beginning of that gospel is to prepare the way of the Lord, to make straight His paths. The way of the Lord would be the undiverted and definite forward movements of Christ in testimony. So it is to be in our day; we have to do with God, His way is perfect and He is moving forward. Scripture speaks of the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning (see Jas 1: 17), and God's ways are going on. The invitation comes to this man from between the

wheels: "Come in between the wheels, under the cherub, and fill the hollow of thy hands with coals of fire from between the cherubim". I think it is interesting that the invitation is given to a man like this. Would you like to be in the secret of what God is doing at this time in His testimony? I think the answer is that features of priesthood shall be developed. This man is available. I would love to be available when the opportunity comes. God is looking, you might say, for someone He can draw into the secret of what He is doing at this time. Would you not like to be available for that? The invitation is "Come in between the wheels"; not to know God at a distance but to know Him near in testimony inviting you, as it were, to be alongside Him in relation to what He may do. His ways are perhaps often difficult to understand; Romans 11 speaks of them as unsearchable: "how unsearchable his judgments, and untraceable his ways!" (v 33). So there may be things, things happening even among the saints, that you find difficult to understand. Perhaps God is looking for priestly persons to be more closely with Him in relation to what He is doing. I would love to be among such, among His priests and available, that He might disclose to us the direction of His movements at any time. Of course, let us remember that He is God; it may be that He will not tell us everything. I believe we are often tested as to whether we can trust Him in relation to what we may not fully understand. One of the difficulties in Christendom at the present day is the attempt to limit the truth to man's understanding of it; that is, to reduce it to a very low level. But having said that, I believe there is much that God would wish to disclose to persons who are rightly available and rightly with Him in His testimony. Let us seek then, dear brethren, to be among His priests, persons who can be trusted and who can go along with Him. Abraham in the Old Testament is an outstanding example of this; it says he conducted God to judgment (see Gen 18: 16). He was with God not simply in relation to the privileges of his calling but in relation to the whole public scene in which God's government and His ways would yet be worked out. Thus one of the challenges of the present time is as to whether we are available for what God Himself would lead us into.

I conclude with a reference to Ezra 2 where we have a day of recovery. The background of this book is very interesting. It begins with God opening the way, through right government, in order that His testimony shall prosper. One of the things we need to pray for is that right government should be preserved to us. The king of Persia makes a decree and God uses it to open the way for the saints to be recovered from captivity and come back to Jerusalem. Now we are living in a day when favourable government leaves that opportunity open. What a day it is! We pray for our brethren who are still held in the systems of men. Thank God for government that does not insist on a certain way religiously. Thank God the way is open in a public sense, that persons shall be brought back into the fulness of God's thoughts for them. What is in view in this book is not a partial answer to God's thoughts; what is in view is Jerusalem, the great centre of divine operations, and that is what these persons are being recovered to. These chief fathers come as persons who have substance. It is remarkable that as the people come back there are priests available, there are levites available, there are singers available; I think in our own experience it has been remarkable how fully furnished the companies of the saints have been in days of recovery. But here are persons who are providing more than they need themselves, providing for the benefit of others. I appeal simply, dear brethren, for the development of this kind of concern among us. These men, chief fathers, come and they bring after their ability and give to the treasure of the work gold and silver, and finally priests' coats. Perhaps we can encourage one another on the lines of which we have been speaking, that priesthood shall develop in our brethren; I think we should be concerned that it should be so. We are in a position which is a recovered position; we have come into it because in the language of 2 Timothy we have named the name of the Lord and have withdrawn from iniquity. Thank God that we are in a position that is thus divinely supported. Are we going to stop there? There is a danger that we shall settle down having come into a position where we experience divine support. May I remind the brethren that 2 Timothy 2 does not stop there; it goes on to the pursuing of righteousness, faith, love, peace, with those who call on

the Lord out of a pure heart. I think that is priestly - those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. You are not simply in a right position but you are there as a priestly person. I think that is the concern of these chief fathers. They bring a hundred priests' coats, as if to say there is to be an abundance; anyone who desires to come into this service shall come into it; and as we have said, it is the privilege of our day for all the saints to come into it. But I think we should be concerned that we are developed, and concerned for the development in one another, in the quality that calls upon the name of the Lord. Let us do that, dear brethren. Let us not rely on someone else's relations with Christ, someone else's relations with God; they may carry you so far but it is vital that we have our own link; we are calling on the Lord, even as Samuel called upon His name. I believe it is one of the features of the last days that we are here as persons who have a source of supply unseen by the world, as developed in priestly constitution. It is only thus that God's testimony will be maintained. The book of Numbers shows in chapter 17, after the great challenge in relation to the rights of God is met, how the testimony is going to be extended and maintained in the power of priesthood; Christ in type, the rod of Aaron that budded.

Well, I close with that; it is a wonderful privilege to be among His priests. Not that we shall gain any distinction; we are among them, there are many of them, but how wonderful is the privilege that in days when all seek their own things, and the selfishness of man is becoming more apparent every day, in the midst of it there are persons who are considering not for themselves but for God. May we be among them for His Name's sake.

MAIDSTONE

10 February 1979

"THOU ART MINE"

F.C.Mutton

Isaiah 43: 1-7; Philippians 3: 12; 2 Timothy 2: 1-4

These three passages bear on the saints as being divine property. I think it is a very great point we are to arrive at that, as Paul says to the Corinthians, "ye are not your own", 1 Cor 6: 19. This is a tremendous matter in soul history; not that one would in any sense make it formidable, but it is something very real to be arrived at, that I am not my own. A brother referred in the reading to our natural selfishness. It is a thing that, in a way, is admired in the world, a selfmade man who is determined at all costs to forge his way forward and reach his ambitions and aims; but not so in Christianity; I belong to Another. Another, the Lord Jesus, has a supreme right to me on many grounds. What a happy day it is, and I was going to say a restful day, when I arrive at it that I am no longer my own but I belong to another, I am divine property.

In this scripture in Isaiah Jehovah is appealing most affectingly to Israel. I suppose at the beginning it is Israel as a nation, but where we finished it comes down to every individual - "my sons", "my daughters", "every one that is called by my name and whom I have created for my glory". I would that this may lay hold of us; in it lies the answer to the greatest questions of life. Many complicated issues and problems are resolved when we come to it that we are no longer our own. Paul says "whose I am and whom I serve" (Acts 27: 23) - what a clarifying principle that is! The old hymn says, 'We've now to please but One'. As we look at those of whom we spoke in the reading, men like Paul and Timothy and those who so walked that the saints had Paul for a model (see Phil 3: 17), you see this thing displayed; they had one Man before them; every element of selfishness had been removed from the motives of those men. No doubt that is why Paul addresses Timothy as a man of God; he was a comparatively young man but he had reached this milestone in his history that he was here for God. He was not living just for himself

as a young man might naturally do, thinking about his own course and planning it; he was a man of God, a title of immense moral distinction; he was here on God's behalf in relation to God's will, God's service, God's testimony.

So in this scripture in Isaiah we have brought before us the grounds upon which the believer in the Lord Jesus belongs to Christ, belongs to God. In one sense, of course, it applies to all men: "Jehovah, that created thee ... that formed thee"; on the ground of creation I am divine property. It links with the expression in the Revelation: "for thou hast created all things, and for thy will they were, and they have been created", chap 4: 11. We need to think about creation. Who gave me being? It was God who created me, giving me existence and personality, for His own pleasure. One's mind often goes to that remarkable expression in Psalm 139: "My bones were not hidden from thee when I was made in secret, curiously wrought in the lower parts of the earth. Thine eyes did see my unformed substance, and in thy book all my members were written; during many days were they fashioned" (vv 15,16). That has its application to the assembly but it also has its application to the individual. It would give us an impression of God's extraordinary interest in you and in me, even before our birth. May these things lay hold of us! "In thy book all my members were written; during many days were they fashioned" - my members. There is something quite inscrutable about that, relating to the omniscience, the supreme knowledge of God of everything, that before I had existence my members were written in His book. What does that mean? It means they are to be used for His pleasure; the members that He has given me are to be used for Him, His service; to be held sacrificially and willingly for His will. He certainly did not write my members in His book that they might be used for sin and in self-indulgence. So it says here, "thus saith Jehovah, that created thee". I need to sit down in the presence of these things and consider how I regard myself and hold myself, and whether I am yielding willingly, happily, obediently, to God the rights that He unquestionably has to all I am and all I have.

Not only that but, "Fear not, for I have redeemed thee"; there is the supreme claim of redemption. As Peter tells us, we have been redeemed not by corruptible things such as silver and gold but by precious blood, the blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot (see 1 Pet 1: 18). Oh the price of redemption! It was not that God's rights over us in creation were ever relinquished, they remained; but sin having come in, the great divine operation of redemption has been completed, involving the work of Christ in all its many glorious aspects, including the shedding of His blood, so that we might be set free from every encumbrance to be for divine pleasure. "I have redeemed thee": what an affecting thing this is that God looked upon me in the light of all the ravages of sin and ruin! If I might use an illustration, you might look at a property in a ruinous state, it has been open to the weather, there is rot and damage, and you say, I will take that property over just as it is, with all its encumbrances and all that needs to be invested in it. It is a poor illustration, but redemption is that God takes up the whole situation of my moral wreckage and debt, my sinful state and my sins, and through the work of Christ secured me on the basis of redemption, the blood of Jesus being the evidence of the price paid in order that He might have me exclusively for Himself. May we answer to the claims of redemption!

It leads on to "I have called thee by thy name"; that is the call that reaches us in the gospel on the basis of redemption, and then He says "thou art mine". I trust this finds an echo in each of our hearts; "thou art mine", I belong to another. The implications of it are immense; not that we are to be daunted by them, but let us face up to them and start from this point, that we belong absolutely and exclusively to God, to the Lord Jesus. If that single impression remained with us this occasion would be worthwhile. I might have all sorts of things before me - and when we are young that is perfectly understandable. We have to think of the future, if the Lord leaves us here, we have to be educated, we have to get a job, all perfectly right and legitimate in its place, but let every matter be considered and every step be taken in the light of this supreme fact that on the basis

of redemption God says "thou art mine". He says it in His love, His jealous love, for us. Can He ever regard lightly that which has been secured at such a price, involving the death of His Son? What that meant to Him! We were reading recently as to Abraham offering up Isaac, the knife and the fire; "Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest", Gen 22: 2. Let us think of what redemption meant not only to Christ but to God, to the Father; and in the light of that He says "thou art mine".

There are wonderful promises that follow immediately, as if God would encourage us, as only He can encourage us, as we are prepared to answer to His claims over us in love. "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee; when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned ... For I am Jehovah thy God". The Christian path is not easy; we are called to a path patterned on that of Jesus which was one of suffering, loss and obedience even unto death, but there is a wonderful ministration of divine comfort, strength and reassurance if we commit ourselves to Christ and to following in His steps.

I was reading a letter recently from a brother who had been to East Germany and he was greatly affected by a certain simplicity of life among the saints there. There is a diminution of career prospects; young people have to take what we would regard as inferior, lower paid, jobs; but he spoke of the obvious joy and love amongst the beloved brethren and their committal to the Lord. Dear brethren, how precious that is in the sight of the Lord! And let us be prepared, when the rights of God are involved, to suffer rather than sin, to suffer rather than be worldly or earthly, in the thankful recognition that we belong to Him. We have this divine promise: "I will be with thee"; we have it in the Lord's own words: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you", (Matt 6: 33); that is, what is necessary materially will be supplied. Let us set our course by this compass: "thou art mine" It is like the north point on the compass, and we navigate now in relation to that. Let "thou art mine" govern every

decision, every step, every purpose of heart, and we shall be safe, we shall be kept on the Christian course for God's pleasure and glory.

God is here gathering, or about to gather, His people Israel. May there be some gathering done today, even in this occasion. "I will bring thy seed from the east, and gather thee from the west; I will say to the north, Give up; and to the south, Keep not back: bring my sons from afar, and my daughters from the end of the earth, every one that is called by my name, and whom I have created for my glory". Maybe someone among us is away in the west, the east, the north, the south; God is claiming His property; Give up! He wants us free from every element that is holding His property in bondage. "And to the south, Keep not back": is anything keeping us back, holding us in its grip? Satan would use a thousand things to hold us, but God would set us in the holy liberty of committal to Himself in answer to the claims of the love of Christ - "the love of the Christ constrains us", Paul says, and he goes on to say that "they who live should no longer live to themselves, but to him who died for them and has been raised", 2 Cor 5: 15. That was the simple principle that governed Paul's life; he no longer lived to himself but to Him who had died for him and had been raised. O that every day one's life might be thus simplified, to live day by day for Christ and to Him. How simple in that sense Christianity is - "to be to another", Rom 7: 4. It is very affecting; "my sons ... and my daughters"; how God values what He has made, formed and redeemed in boys and girls, young men and young women, and older men and women, "every one that is called by my name, and whom I have created for my glory".

So now we see glory coming in; we are to be here for God's glory. Can we doubt that God was glorified in those of whom we read earlier like Paul, Timothy, Enoch, and Abraham? There was moral glory and worth under His eye in those men who lived simple lives of committal, love and obedience to Him, who walked with Him and walked before Him. "Whom I have created for my glory: I have formed him, yea, I have made him": how wonderful these

expressions are! The enemy would form us according to the world but we are not to be conformed to the world but to be transformed, to be the subjects of divine formation, and that will always be formation according to Christ. O, may our ideas of what is really worth while going in for be transformed, that we may be delivered from man's thoughts as to personality, success and progress, and be subject to divine formation. "Yea, I have made him"; the Lord made people; He made His disciples, His apostles; wonderful products they were. We love to look in the Acts at those beloved and morally great men; it would be no exaggeration to say they were the finest product of the human race as taken up on the basis of redemption - Peter lifting up his voice announcing the glorious news of Jesus and the resurrection; then Peter, with John, saying "Look on us"; there never had been such a spectacle apart from what was unique in Christ on earth. There are no apostles now, I need not say, but there are men and women formed according to Christ; that is morally the greatest thing that any of us could have part in, and God has given His Spirit that it may be so, that Christ might be formed in us.

In Philippians 3 Paul uses this remarkable expression: "I have been taken possession of by Christ Jesus". It hardly needs commenting on, it is so eloquent. You see a house with a board outside: Vacant possession. You can buy that property and have it exclusively; there is no encumbrance, there is nobody else living there. Paul had been taken possession of by Christ Jesus; every corner, every crevice of that man 's being had been possessed by Christ. The word used here means 'seized', 'taken hold of', and that is what the Lord did when He laid hold of Saul on the road to Damascus; you might say He gripped that man. I wonder if He has you and me in that same way?

"Taken possession of" is not the same as being converted, though it follows that; it means full possession by Christ. It meant a lot for Paul, as this chapter shows us. If we may use that illustration of a house there had been a lot of rubbish in Paul's structure, a great moral spring cleaning had gone on to make room for Christ. He had gone through all the things that were filling the rooms in his structure

such as "Hebrew of Hebrews" and a "Pharisee", and now he says "but what things were gain to me these I counted, on account of Christ, loss" (v 7). In that moral spring cleaning things went right out of the house so that Paul, in the most real and practical sense, might be taken possession of by Christ Jesus. Of course, the moment he was converted he belonged to Christ, but now in an experimental sense the man in his mind, his affections, his motives - his whole being - had been taken possession of by Christ Jesus. What a fine thing! I would like to raise this question, first of all with myself, an exceedingly searching question: To what extent have I been taken possession of by Christ? To what extent am I insubject or have reserves? May each of us work this out. Here was a man who exclusively, without any qualification, had been taken possession of by Christ Jesus. Christ filled that man, his mind, his affections, his soul, and governed his motives, and I say very simply, I see no finer spectacle than a man taken possession of by Christ, secured by Him and wholly committed to Him, sacrificially devoted, and thus richly available for the furtherance of the interests of Christ.

In our last scripture it is a different picture; here we have a soldier, this is military. The Lord Jesus has soldiers, good soldiers, because there are very precious things here that need defending. You find that in the Old Testament; in Exodus and Leviticus you get exceedingly precious things relating to the whole tabernacle system. Then you come to Numbers and there has to be an army for its protection, and people are numbered for the army. Here Paul says "No one going as a soldier entangles himself with the affairs of life, that he may please him who has enlisted him as a soldier". You are on the record now; your name is on the list among the soldiers of the Lord. Is your name on that list? Is mine? These questions are very searching indeed. We all know what being a soldier involves. At a moment's notice you could be called upon; you are wanted in Londonderry or Belfast. No question, no objection, you have to go; you are under command, under orders. I am not giving any impression, I trust, that the Lord is harsh or arbitrary, but there are most precious things which need defending, need good soldiers.

There are precious things in localities that need defending, and they will not be defended unless there are good soldiers of Jesus Christ. I want to ask you, having asked myself: Are you on this list? There is a list: "him who has enlisted him as a soldier". This is not a list of people who are converted and are going to heaven, though they are all converted and going to heaven; but these are soldiers who have committed themselves to the will of the Lord because they want to be devoted to the protection of what belongs to the Lord Jesus on earth. He Himself is not personally here as He once was, when every divine interest was so perfectly safeguarded by Him, but in His absence He has good soldiers, and may you and I be deeply exercised to be among them, because the most precious things, I say again, require defending, protecting.

So let us not entangle ourselves with the affairs of life. It does not say we have nothing to do with them, because we have a lot to do with the affairs of life; we have family responsibilities, business responsibilities; the point is do not get *entangled* in them; that is fatal. The enemy will seek to entangle us but "No one going as a soldier entangles himself with the affairs of life" . Many things that are quite legitimate in their place become a most serious entanglement as they get out of place and hold us in a way that is not legitimate. The Lord would give us grace to hold things in their place, so that the claims of the 'army' - you will not misunderstand me - are paramount. May we commit ourselves in this way. The Lord committed Himself absolutely, even to death, facing suffering untold that every right of God might be upheld and every purpose of God established. May that spirit be in us for His glory.

MAIDSTONE

23 December 1978

THE CHILDREN'S GARMENTS

Scripture uses the well-known figure of clothing to describe how we appear in God's sight. We read, for instance, of festival robes, garments of salvation and garments of praise. I remember a believer who was said by his friends to be the best-dressed Christian known to them, yet he was not a rich man. The reason was that, in particular, he was "clothed with humility". This garment should of course be amongst the simple yet rich raiment always worn by those who know God. In fact it is available to suit even the youngest and smallest as well as the greatest of us. It actually grows on the believer as he or she develops in the true knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Of Him it is written that, coming into human form, He "humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death".

During the years that the Israelites journeyed through the desert it must have been something wonderful for the children that their clothing did not grow old nor their feet become weary. Doubtless, as the children grew up, the dresses, coats and other garments had to be passed down the family or to another household. Yet there would be no complaints because the clothes would be always new! This was by God's miraculous power. For the believer the teaching is that, however trying the path of faith may be, we always have the power by the Holy Spirit to appear before God clothed freshly in His own thoughts for us. The feet not growing weary shows likewise that there is power to walk in daily life to His constant pleasure.

Preachers of the gospel often remind us of the way in which our Saviour-God clothed our first parents, Adam and Eve, in coats of skin. By their consciences they knew - as every awakened sinner knows - that they needed to be made suitable for His presence, and their own efforts were without avail. The garments of skin given to them had their origin in the death of another, beautiful type of the death of the Lord Jesus. This made a covering, or atonement, for the very sin that brought death into the human race and for all the sins of those who believe. You may not know who made your coat

for going out of doors, but when you think of the holy presence of God can you say 'He Himself made my coat'?

J.C.Evershed