

THE GOSPEL MAGAZINE

Editor

MAURICE HANDFORD

9 Birtlespool Road • Cheadle Hulme • Cheshire • SK8 5JZ

Incorporating the Protestant Beacon and The British Protestant

REGISTERED CHARITY 1070357

New Series
No. 1602

SEPTEMBER — OCTOBER 1998

Old Series
No. 2602

Editorial

IN ONE of the smallest books of the New Testament we find an unusual wish – “I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth” (3 John 2). The health of Gaius was not the best and the Apostle John sent him an unusual “Get Well” card.

It is a wonderful thing if we enjoy physical health; it is something to be profoundly thankful for. It is good if we have material sufficiency, but Scripture reminds us that “a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth”. We need to be concerned about our spiritual health. Many spend much time to secure material success but give scant thought to the needs of the soul.

Loss of appetite is often the first sign of some physical disorder. This is also true spiritually. The prosperous soul is always a hungry soul; it desires to read more and learn more of Christ. Have we a spiritual appetite?

Activity is a token of bodily health and again this is true in the spiritual realm. Gaius was active spiritually; he was known for his love for the Lord and for His people and was a good example to others.

Are we busy about the Master’s work? Do we make progress? Do we prosper spiritually?

Question and Answer

A Sermon by the Editor

*“Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life”
(John 6:68)*

THESE WORDS of our text occur at the end of a very wonderful chapter – a chapter which records the feeding of the five thousand with the five loaves and the two fishes. This, incidentally, is the only miracle that occurs in all four Gospels – a miracle exhibiting the creative power of Christ, as well as showing forth His compassion to those in need. Then the chapter goes on to speak of the rough crossing of the Sea of Galilee on the part of the disciples, and how our Lord went to them walking on the waves. Then the greater part of the chapter is taken up with a discourse in the Synagogue at Capernaum centring around the thought of Christ, the true Bread, and so we get that lovely verse: “And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst” (verse 35). Then the chapter comes to its climax with this great question: “Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life”. Let us notice, first of all—

The prevailing circumstances

What made the fiery, impulsive Peter cry out, “Lord, to whom shall we go?”. The preceding verses supply the answer. Look at verse 66: “From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him.” They retreated, they deserted, they forsook the position they once occupied. They “went back, and walked no more with him”. What a contrast to what occurred at the beginning of the chapter and at the beginning of the day! They had crossed the Sea of Galilee; they had sought the Lord out; they hung upon His words, but now they turn their backs upon Him, so unreliable and so fickle is human nature. They drifted away because He had disappointed the hopes they had entertained of Him.

Now the disciples too were bound to reconsider their own position. There must have been days when they felt they were the remnant of a failing cause. At times, perhaps, they were disturbed by thoughts of home. They thought of quiet domestic joys and of safety, and the Lord knew what was going on in their minds, and on this dark day when many went back and left Him. He broke in upon their thoughts and said, “Will ye also go away?”. Perhaps that very question helped to clarify their minds, and they saw that He was without a rival, that He stood alone, that He occupied a category all by Himself. There was no one else to whom they could go. They were shut up to Christ.

That is the background of this great word: “Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life.” Yes, many went back and walked no more with the

Saviour. What a solemn and instructive fact that is! You see, even Christ, who spoke as man never spoke and did works of matchless power and lived as no one has ever lived before or since, even from Him many went back and walked no more with Him. Even with the miracles as evidence of Christ's Person and work, they went back to their former way of thinking and living. They went back to Judaism, to the world, and many, doubtless, went back to their sins. If men could forsake Christ in the days of His earthly ministry, we must not be surprised if some go back today. But we need to ask the question, "Why did they go back?". Some, probably, because they had not counted the cost involved. Is not that something that is ever with us? There are some who make a profession of saving faith but they have never counted the cost and they go back. Others (and probably most) went back because they could not receive the deep doctrine that our Lord had just proclaimed. Look at verse 53: "Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you." That was something they just could not accept. They disliked a theology that spoke of blood. They did not like anything that had to do with the vicarious sacrifice, just as many do not have anything to do with it today. It was an unacceptable truth. Others dreamed only of temporal advantages and rewards. Why, only the previous day it had been proposed by some enthusiastic followers that they should take Christ and make Him King against His will. They had yet to learn that His kingdom was not of this world. We do need to remember that there is such a thing as counterfeit Christianity. We need to remember that our Lord Himself spoke about the stony ground hearers who, having no root in themselves, in the time of temptation they fall away. We need to remember too that not all blossom comes to fruit, and that not all are Israel which are of Israel. We need not be surprised that some went back. We need not be surprised if some go back today, and some do go back, undoubtedly, because the Gospel is offensive to them. It is humbling to their pride, and some retreat because of the influence of friends, or because they are afraid of the taunts of men.

But look at –

The inadequate alternatives

Peter said: "Lord, to whom shall we go?" It is like the saying of the Psalmist in Psalm 73:25: "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee." "To whom else shall we go?" Despite all the learning that abounded in the ancient world, Paul had to say that "the world by wisdom knew not God". Egypt, Syria, Greece and Rome were the very nations that obtained the very highest excellence in secular things yet, spiritually, they were sunk in gross darkness. The ancient philosophers of Greece and Rome groped after truth like blind men, and the wisest of men could only acknowledge their need of light. Where would Peter have turned for peace of heart and mind, for satisfaction of conscience, for hope in a world to come if he had left Christ and gone with the deserters? Would he have found what he wanted amongst the formal Pharisees or

the sceptical Sadducees, or the worldly Herodians? Not at all. Would they have quenched his spiritual thirst? Would they have fed his soul? Indeed not. They were all "broken cisterns, that can hold no water" (Jeremiah 2:13), and he that drank of these waters still needed to drink again. "To whom shall we go?" If we are ever tempted to forsake Christ let us ask ourselves, "To whom shall we go?". Who of all created beings can satisfy our every need? Who can give help and strength and comfort to us if we turn our backs on Christ? We live in a world of trouble, whether we acknowledge the fact or not, and nothing but an almighty, personal Friend will meet the needs of our soul. I am pleased to say that there is *One and only One* that can satisfy the yearning of the human heart – the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Now notice –

The noble confession that Peter made

"Thou hast the words of eternal life." Is it not striking that the wondrous miracles attracted the crowds, but they were repelled by our Lord's teaching, and it was the very opposite with the Apostles for whom Peter was the spokesman. It was not so much the supernatural works but the divine words of Jesus that held them. Peter, you see, had what those who departed had not. He had a hearing ear. He knew that the words of Christ were not just empty sounds, not just mere words, they were vital. They were dynamic, they were means of grace, they were the vehicle of salvation. Look at our Lord's own words in verse 63: "The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life." Peter believed them and was assured of them – "Thou hast the words of eternal life." Does not that bring us afresh to appreciate Christ's mission of coming into the world? He came that we might have eternal life – a life begun in the soul by faith while we are living, and perfected in glory hereafter. "Thou hast the words of eternal life." The Lord Jesus still speaks down the long corridors of time and His words come to us today with undiminished power and beauty, and what gracious words they are! You remember the crowds in the synagogue at Nazareth acknowledged that He spoke with gracious words: "And all bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth" (Luke 4:22). As He preached they must have listened in breathless silence.

Not only are they gracious words – they are authentic words, and so the crowds declared as the Sermon on the Mount came to a close, "He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes". Gracious, authoritative, but they are life-giving. They give life to those that receive them. Charles Wesley has that thought in his hymn:

"He speaks and, listening to His voice,
New life the dead receive."

What a noble confession! "Thou hast the words of eternal life." But for Peter to say this of Christ when the Pharisees and the Sadducees were agreed in rejecting Him, was surely a mighty act of faith. Notice he goes on, "We believe and are sure

that thou art that Christ". "We have come to realise," says Peter, "that You are the Holy One of God, that You have come from God, that You belong to God, and that You are appointed by God." What a meaningful and glorious confession! "Thou hast the words of eternal life!" Many have found the words and the promises of Christ not merely words, but solid realities. They have been persuaded of them and embraced them, and have found them both meat and drink to their souls. The writer to the Hebrews says, "We also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1) – yes, witnesses who in the faith of Christ have lived, and have lived useful lives, and also have died in faith, resting on the Word of the Lord.

Now such faith as this led Peter and John to stand up boldly before the Sanhedrin – before the Jewish council – and confess their Master and say: "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Such faith enabled Paul to come out of Judaism and to spend his life preaching the Gospel and to say on the very brink of eternity: "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

Said our Lord, "Will ye also go away?". That same testing question is still put to those who profess to be followers of Christ. He would have no unwilling followers and so He says, "Will ye also go away?". Or to put it in another way, He says, "Do you still firmly cling to Me?". Friends, remember this, there is no substitute for Christ. He is not an adjunct to life. He is a vital necessity. He has outlived all other rivals and outlived them because they were not really rivals at all. He stands supreme. "To whom shall we go? *thou* hast the words of eternal life."

So, permit me to put a question to you: Has Christ His rightful place in your heart and life? Can you say with Peter, "Lord, to whom shall we go? We are shut up to You. There is none other we can resort to. Thou alone art the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Do not be content with only a formal Christianity which, in effect, is nothing more than a respectability. Seek to have a living faith in the Christ of God.

Here, then, is Peter's great word: "Lord, to whom shall we go? *thou* hast the words of eternal life." May God write His Word upon our hearts, for His Name's sake. Amen.

M.H.

Beg the Lord to show you the depth of your fall. Free grace, finished salvation, imputed righteousness, atoning blood, unchangeable mercy, and the whole chain of evangelical blessings, will then be infinitely precious to your heart.

A. M. Toplady

For Younger Readers

CARINE MACKENZIE

A NEW BABY

HAVE YOU EVER SEEN a very young baby? Perhaps you have a little brother or sister. We cannot remember what it was like to be a baby but we have all experienced it. A baby grand-daughter, Lydia, has been born in our family recently so we are being reminded of the needs and activities of a new-born baby.

Jesus compared coming to trust in Him for salvation to the birth of a baby. "Ye must be born again" (John 3). "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

One of the first evidences of life that the new baby shows is crying loudly. One of the first evidences of being born again is the cry of prayer to God. When the Apostle Paul was converted to Christ, he began to pray. A man called Ananias was sent by God to help him. "Go and ask for a man called Saul," he was told, "he is praying." A habit of prayer is an evidence of new life from God.

The baby needs milk. This is necessary for health and growth. When the baby is hungry she does not lie quietly hoping that someone will remember to feed her. She makes a big noise and is not satisfied until she has had enough milk. The Bible tells us that we should be just as keen to read God's Word. "As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby" (1 Peter 2:2). God's Word is the nourishment that is exactly suited to our needs.

The baby has to be washed and kept clean. She cannot wash herself. We need to be washed clean from the pollution of sin. We cannot do that ourselves. Only God can cleanse us from sin through the death of Jesus Christ. "The blood of Jesus Christ God's Son cleanseth us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

The little baby is completely dependent on her mother and father. She trusts them to look after her. They will protect her and guide her and correct her too. She learns to love them through the love shown to her. If we love the Lord, it is only because He has first loved us. We are dependent on Him for everything – even for the breath we draw. If we trust in the Lord with all our heart and acknowledge Him in all our ways, He has promised to direct our lives (see Proverbs 3).

A mother loves her little baby so much. God tells us that His love for His people is even greater. "Can a woman forget her sucking child . . . they may forget, yet will I not forget thee" (Isaiah 49:15).

PUZZLE

1. Who was the first baby born into the world? (Genesis 4).
2. Which baby was hidden from danger in the River Nile? (Exodus 2).

3. Who was the mother who prayed for a baby in the temple in Shiloh? (1 Samuel 1).
4. Who was the baby whose father was struck dumb? (Luke 1).
5. Whose birth was announced by the angels to the shepherds? (Luke 2).
6. Which baby was born when his father was 100 years old? (Genesis 21).
7. Which baby was born to Ruth and Boaz? (Ruth 4).
8. Who were the twin babies who looked very different? (Genesis 25).

The Security and Comfort of the Church

FROM THE GOSPEL MAGAZINE, 1898

HENRY PARKER

“A man shall be as an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land” (Isaiah 32:2)

HOW PRECIOUS and how endearing does the Lord Jesus Christ become to the afflicted and tempest-tossed children of God in the various figures and metaphors which the Holy Ghost has been pleased to employ to set Him forth in the Scriptures of truth. Naturally, we can understand what a boon to an exhausted traveller would be the shelter from the wind and tempest, the river to slake his thirst, and the rock to screen him from the scorching rays of a tropical sun; but, apart from the Spirit's teaching, we cannot comprehend or appreciate its spiritual import. The promises, invitations, and exhortations of the Word are addressed to character. Unless we possess in some measure the features portrayed in that character, we have no part or lot in the matter. The hearing ear, and the seeing eye, the Lord hath made both of them (Proverbs 20:12). May the Lord the Spirit therefore enable us to mediate upon our subject with spiritual profit.

1. The Man Christ, in order to redeem His Church, His Bride, from the hand of the enemy, took into union with His Godhead our nature, and thus became bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh. “For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren”