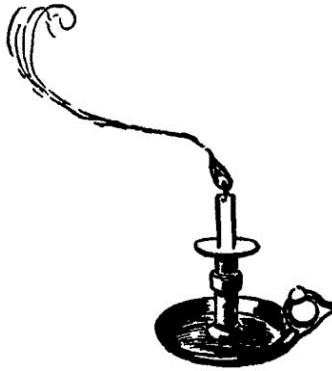


THE AUSTRALIAN ANABAPTIST

God's solid foundation stands firm. 2 Timothy 2-19

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Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel,
but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in
the house.

Matthew 5:15

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For A Conservative Anabaptist Perspective

From The Editor's Desk

According to one definition risk is the action of needlessly putting our lives at risk of injury, damage or loss and it is the one we would like in this instance to apply to our spiritual lives. The question then is how do we put our spiritual lives at risk and how can we avoid it?

Let's face it life is full of risks and a Christian should not take *any* risks – Right? But all of physical life is subject to risk and is worth taking because the person who risks nothing has a pretty tedious life and if we do not take any risk how are we ever going to relate to those around us who do not know the Gospel? So what are some of the risks, other than those brought on by our human condition of being susceptible to injury and disease?

If you laugh, you risk being thought silly and some would say mirth has no place in a serious Christian life,

If you weep, you risk appearing sentimental and some say emotions should be suppressed.

If you show your feelings you risk revealing your true self and some would say you are being over emotional.

If you ask a question you risk sounding foolish and some would call you rebellious for questioning their dogma.

If you try you risk failure and some would call you impractical or unsteady in character.

If you tell someone you love them you risk not being loved back and some would say you are being inappropriate in relationships.

If you place God's directions for your life before those of men some would say that is unrealistic you might not fully understand God's directions.

If you refuse to partake in the pleasures of the world some would say you are short changing yourself and not enjoying life.

If you are not seen to be pursuing wealth and status some would say you will never get anywhere.

If you are not following the world's fashions in clothing or possessions and care not for riches some would say you are old fashioned or unrealistic.

But Jesus has some excellent advice for us in His short speech on not being anxious, read Matthew 6:25-34, which make it clear that God knows our needs and He will provide, so let's take the risk of a life lived for Christ with its ultimate reward of our Master saying, Well done good and faithful servant, enter into the Kingdom of Heaven!

J.V.L.



From the Pulpit

Born To Die, Celebrate & Remember

Linford Berry

Calvary Mennonite Fellowship

At the children's assembly this morning I asked some questions about Christmas, what they liked about it, what they enjoyed about it, one of the things that they mentioned was the fact that they get to go and see their grandparents or family and so we do celebrate that even today as we have guests and visitors here, this is the time of year when we tend to gather as a family and celebrate together and it is a good thing that we do that.

Christmas is also a time where we tend to get kind of selfish and some of the children referenced that as well with I like Christmas because it makes me happy because I get what I want or I get presents. For far too many of us that is part of Christmas and so today I would like for us to turn our attention in a slightly different direction.

At first glance it might appear to be a more morbid direction with a title like "Born to Die, Celebrate and Remember."

You know Christmas is a time of joy it is a time of celebration that is for sure but the context of that is in the context of death and it might seem highly unlikely that we would come to a Christmas and we would use a text from the book of Ecclesiastes.

The book of Ecclesiastes is not exactly a joyful kind of book in many cases and I was wrestling with this couple of weeks ago as I was thinking what I was going to preach this morning and I considered maybe I ought to choose some other text for this day and I thought well maybe I can find a book, a chapter in Ecclesiastes that will fit with the Christmas theme so I read the rest of the chapters in Ecclesiastes that I haven't preached from yet and I found out that the one I was to preach next was the one that worked, Ecclesiastes chapter 9.

I'll read this text and I hope you will be thinking with me as we read how this text applies to Christ and to Christmas. You see it should not be a sur-

prise to us to find when we open our Bibles even to the book of Ecclesiastes that indeed Jesus Christ is referenced here he is pointed to here as He is in every part of our Bible.

Now the application today it might be somewhat different than the application would be next month but the fact is that all of Scripture points to Christ.

So let's read Ecclesiastes chapter 9.

The preacher here is referencing what he just got done describing in Ecclesiastes chapter 8 the last few verses where he talks about the reality that none of us, not even the wisest among us, know what is in the future, none of us can know what God is about what is the work of God, we can toil, we can seek but we will not find out, we cannot find it out. That is the context of chapter 9 verse one:

Ecclesiastes 9:1-18(ESV) But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God. Whether it is love or hate, man does not know; both are before him. ² It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As the good one is, so is the sinner, and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. ³ This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all. Also, the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. ⁴ But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. ⁵ For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. ⁶ Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun. ⁷ Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. ⁸ Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. ⁹ Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. ¹⁰ Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going. ¹¹ Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise,

nor riches to the intelligent, nor favour to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all. ¹² For man does not know his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them. ¹³ I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. ¹⁴ There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siege works against it. ¹⁵ But there was found in it a poor, wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man. ¹⁶ But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard. ¹⁷ The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. ¹⁸ Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

A reminder here of the context of Ecclesiastes, in the whole book of Ecclesiastes there are some themes that run throughout it and you see them here in this chapter, one of those primary themes is the sovereignty of God, that God is sovereign, we are not.

Another theme that runs throughout the book is that of vanity or futility and we find that referenced here as vanity of life, vain and evil, this vanity is referenced in the context of life under the sun and so this context is the perspective of life here in this old earth without the benefit of God's perspective and yet as we see in this chapter today, and throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, there are some beams of light that shine through into this under the sun existence that gives us a bit of a picture, a bit of a window into a bigger story, a bigger picture. Life is not constrained by what is happening just under the sun.

So it is helpful for us to remember the perspective of the preacher in Ecclesiastes, the perspective that he comes from is life under the sun, and it is referenced here a couple of times, so when he describes for example this is what happens after we die he is not making a statement that would lead us to believe that there is no existence after death but he is saying in this life under the sun perspective once you are gone you're gone, there is nothing more and herein comes some of the vanity some of the frustration and that is that death comes to all of us and it is outside of our control.

We cannot dictate the time, the place, the means, the circumstance of our death and this seems to the preacher and to us to be vanity, evil.

Chapter 9 verses 1 through 6 speak about the inevitability of death and the injustice to our eyes, to the under the sun eyes, the injustice in the fact that the wicked die and the righteous die, this happens to all of us both righteous and unrighteous and neither of us control it, neither of us can say when we will die and how.

In verse 1 it says that the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God and this points us to the need for trust in a sovereign God in the face of an uncertain certain death, we must trust God we are in the hand of God.

And in fact in verse 1 it says we don't know whether the circumstances that God brings into our life we don't know whether those circumstances are circumstances of love or circumstances of hate. Does God bring us this suffering because He loves us? Does God bring us this suffering because He is judging us? Who are we to say?

If I was to title this message at another time of year I would probably title it "Things are not as they seem" because in this whole passage we find this recurring theme where in our limited perspective under the sun we don't even know whether it's good or bad but God does.

And as we think about Christmas as we think about what happened to Jesus Christ think about this paradigm this dynamic, Jesus Christ the only man who ever was perfectly righteous, the only man who ever was perfectly wise what happened to him? He died.

He died not just any death He died a cruel death one of the worst kinds of death, He died at an untimely young age, He suffered the worst of this event that comes to us all and yet He was THE most righteous.

Now if that doesn't seem unjust, if that doesn't seem unfair then our sense of justice and fairness is probably messed up and we should say like the preacher in Ecclesiastes, this isn't right, this isn't the way it should be.

But who are we, who are we to know whether that death of Christ was good or evil?

Because you see with the perspective of time the perspective of the word of God that has already been read to us today from Isaiah and Philippians we

see that this unjust, this tragic death of Christ was good, it was ultimately good. But how are we to know? We do not have it within us to know, we don't know that for ourselves and we don't know that when we observe what God is doing in our world and so it forces us, it presses us into the sovereignty of God to rely on him, to trust in him with everything that we have and do.

It is unfair, it is an evil as he says under the sun but the same event happens to us all how much more than that Christ should die, that Christ should be born to die, born to die.

You know He suffered death as a result of sin, as the result of humanities sin, it is kind of our just deserts, the wages of sin is death but Christ came not a man of sin, but a man of righteousness, He did not deserve to die but He was born to die, born to set his people free from death and ultimately this was in the hand of God that the righteous one would suffer and die for the unrighteous, the suffering Saviour bringing into existence the upside down kingdom where things are not as they appear to be.

And we have reference here later in this passage to the race not being to the swift nor the battle to the strong nor bread to the wise nor riches to the intelligent, that's the way God works, He takes that which is weak and He confounds He overcomes that which is strong. And so we end up in our existence, in our life He takes that which we would call suffering, that which we would call unfair and He uses it to accomplish his good purposes.

So remember that this Christmas all of us struggle in some ways, all of us suffer in some ways maybe more pronounced than others, maybe at some times like Christmas we are reminded of the death of a loved one who is not here to celebrate with us, maybe we are reminded of our own immortality through sickness but let us remember that Jesus Christ came He was born to die, He was born to die, to suffer, and that was good, so our suffering can also be good if we trust God to make it good.

So what should be our response to this, to this reality that death is coming and it is inevitable for us that even Christ had to suffer, that even He the most glorious, the most righteous, the most holy came to die.

Well one response would be that of morbidity, just a sorrowing, self-introspection that would cause us to mourn and weep and throughout the Bible we have this reference to sackcloth and ashes and we see when

people came to this solemn manner of death they would put on sackcloth and ashes they would mourn and repent.

But the picture that we get here in Ecclesiastes in the next section is somewhat different he says don't put on sackcloth and ashes put on white garments and oil on your head. This is the exact opposite.

What is he saying to us here? Go eat your bread with joy, drink your wine with a merry heart, let your garments be always white, let not oil be lacking on your head.

What he is saying is that in light of this death that is coming to all, that is coming to you and to me that came to Christ, in light of this let's celebrate, celebrate.

So it is right that this time of year we would celebrate Christ his coming to die, that we would celebrate that.

Unfortunately we often celebrate for the wrong reasons and in the wrong ways.

Backing up to verse 5 we see that one of the advantages to being alive is that we know we are going to die.

You say, well what is that an advantage for, I mean how does that work? And the presumption here, the idea here, is that if we are still living we have this reality of death in front of us so we can act and live accordingly, we can still do something in this life under the sun, we can still do something of value, of importance, there is a way that we make the best of this life, once you are dead there is no more opportunity for that, once you are dead all of our love, our hate, our envy these perish in terms of our under the sun existence. And so we have an opportunity here, we have an opportunity to not continue in the wickedness, to not continue in the sorrow and the mourning and it comes not just because we know that death is imminent but rather to celebrate, to rejoice because God does hold all of these things in his hand.

And really there is no other reason to rejoice, there is no other reason to celebrate than the fact that God came and interfered in our world and God came and interfered even in our death, God came and brought life and that life came through death, one of the great paradoxes of Christian faith, and so we rejoice, we eat, we drink and it says God has already approved this, He has approved these activities of eating and drinking, first Corinthians

tells us whether you eat or drink or whatever you do to all to the honour and glory of God.

So this Christmas season as we celebrate as we feast let's do it in that way remembering that these are God's good gift to us.

You know there is a place for feasting there is a place for celebration. Jesus while He was here on earth said to his disciples while I am here with you you are not going to be fasting, no it will be feasting, you will be celebrating, when I'm gone then will be time for fasting for denying yourself.

And so in some ways Christmas is that celebration of Christ with us, Christ present in our lives and so we feast and celebrate and it is right that we should do that, God has already proved that. It is right that we should be reminded of purity, the white garments, the oil on our head, the care of God for us, enjoy our friends and family; enjoy life with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life.

These are things we are to celebrate but there is one thread here that reminds us that all is not well in our world in our culture.

This celebration that is referenced here is a celebration of contentment a celebration that recognises that these things are from God, He has given it to us and we enjoy it in contentment and yet so much what passes for Christmas celebration in our culture, in our context, is not contentment it is the celebration of "I want, I want something I don't have."

And so this very celebration that should point us to Christ ends up being a selfish kind of celebration where we see what we can get out of this deal, we say what is going to be in that box with a pretty bow, is it something I want?

No, celebration, the kind of celebration that God approves of is that celebration in contentment, not looking for something better, not looking for something more but delighting in what we have.

Whatever your hand finds to do do it with all your might, whatever it is God has given you celebrate in it, rejoice in it, engage in it to the full extent for there is coming a day, there is coming a night when this life as we know it in the abilities, the resources, the blessings that we have will be no more.

Jesus says in John 9 verse 4 I must work the works of him that sent me whilst it is day, the night cometh when no one can work.

Again this view of death should cause us to celebrate, should cause us to rejoice, should cause us to work because we know there is coming a day when that work will be done.

So Jesus Christ born to die, Jesus Christ born to celebrate and finally Jesus Christ born to remember.

There is a little story here in this text in Ecclesiastes chapter 9 about the poor wise man, this is an example that the preacher gives us of how this works, remember things are not as they seem, things are not as they appear to be to us we think that the one who runs the fastest should win the race, the one who is the strongest will win the battle, the one who is the wisest will be who has the most provision, the one who is most intelligent will be the most rich. That's not the way it works.

That's not the way it works because of what it says in verse 1 – all of our deeds are in the hands of God. And so this time and chance that happens to them all is not talking about a lottery but in our perspective, in the under the sun perspective it does seem like chance, we cannot see the future, we cannot see what lies ahead of us and so it seems as if time and chance have their way of disrupting our plans the way things ought to be in our estimation.

Verse 12 tells us this is because a man does not know his time. We don't know, we have limited perspective under the sun, but God does know and God sees it all from beginning to end, the alpha and the omega, but we tend to be caught, we tend to be snared caught by surprise but at this time of Christmas let us not be caught by surprise, let us not be surprised that the Babe in the manger had to come to a manger. We say a King, we need a place fit for a King! And God says here is a cattle stall here is a manger. And we say no that is not right and we say a King is coming there should be celebration, there should be recognition, there should be applause! And God says no, I've got some poor dirty shepherds out here on the hill I'm going to let them in and let them get the first hand, the first glimpse of the King.

You see God does things different than we do, God sees things different than we do because He sees it all we only see little bit. And the same thing happens with the wise man the example is given here in the text and we don't know what he is referring to exactly what experience, what account he is referencing, there are various ways to surmise about this, but for our purposes today for this Christmas season let's think about this for a bit see if you can pick up on the themes here.

This story there was a little city with a few men in it and a great King comes against it, besieged it, and built great siege works against it.

This should be to us a picture of that Kingdom of God, you see few there be that find the narrow way.

There is a city the Kingdom of God with a few men in it and it is under attack, it is under attack by a great enemy a powerful enemy and yet in this city there was a poor wise man and he by his wisdom delivered the city and that poor wise man is Jesus Christ, the one that we read about in Philippians chapter 2, who came to this earth as a poor man who came as nothing, made himself nothing so that He might set his people free, so that He would deliver us from our enemy.

The poor wise man by his wisdom delivers the city but what happens after he accomplishes this deliverance?

What happened to Jesus Christ when He came? People scorned him, they laughed at him, they mocked him and they crucified him and then they went on with their lives to remember him no more.

Same thing happens here the poor wise man delivers the city, we are not told how he does it, but he delivers the city and yet no one remembers that poor man.

After we get what we want after we get deliverance then we forget, we forget the one who delivered us we forget the poor wise man.

Now Christmas time we remember the wise men, generally the rich wise men, the wise men who came bringing gifts out of their abundance we forget the poor wise man and so we have the glitter and the glamour and the gifts and all of the finery of Christmas, that's what we remember, it's what our culture remembers, but we forget the poor wise man Jesus Christ.

And the writer here in Ecclesiastes says that even though they forgot the poor wise man even though no one remembered him anymore he says I say that wisdom is still better than money, might does not make right, wisdom is still better even though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard.

And so we might say well since Jesus wasn't heard, since He was despised, since He was killed then that must mean that wisdom wasn't worth much. No! Remember God works in ways that we do not, God's ways are not our ways.

Even though Christ's wisdom is despised even though his words are not heard it is still the right way, it is still the best way. Even though they killed the wise man the poor wise man who came to deliver his people yet his words are still right, the words of the wise heard and quiet is better than the shouting of a ruler among fools.

So even though people today do not understand the true meaning of Christmas even though our culture celebrates it backwards it doesn't mean that we have to, it doesn't mean that we should avoid altogether, the wise man, the poor wise man is still right.

Many people will not understand the true meaning of Christmas and they are fools, they are fools. They would rather have the wisdom of the shouting of a ruler; they would rather have the weapons of war. And it says here that one sinner destroys much good.

And so our world culture prefers the weapons of war to the wisdom and power of Christ, prefers the words of our President then the words of our Saviour, it prefers the words and wisdom of men rather than the wisdom and word of God and so they destroy much of the good that Christmas could and should be.

So what is our response in the face of that?

We could do like some, retreat, and say well since Christmas is so misused and abused and since people get it all backwards we are just not going to celebrate, we are going to pretend like it doesn't exist.

And I would say that is an error, a very grave error, because we are to be a King's children the ones who shine the light into the darkness the ones who show how it really is and what better time to do that, what better way

to do that then this season when there is at least on the surface a reason for celebration.

So that is one error, another error is we could just join in the celebration that our world makes and does, we could buy in to the consumer mentality, to the seeking after that which is glitzy and glamorous, we could seek after the wise man versus the poor wise man, that too is an error because if we do that then we are revealing where our hope really is and we have nothing to say to a watching world, a watching world who thinks that the race is to the swift and the battle is to the strong and the bread is to the wise and riches are to the intelligent and favour is to those who know a lot.

No, we must say to them you've got it all backwards, you don't understand.

And even though one sinner can destroy much good as Adam did so one Saviour has brought eternal life for evermore.

That is what Christmas is all about, a Saviour born to die, born to set his people free and we must celebrate and we must remember.

Let's pray.

Our gracious and kind heavenly Father we know we are reminded today we don't see things the way you do, that your ways are not our ways, that your ways are higher than ours, we are reminded that we must trust you that even our steps are in your hands.

So help us at this time of celebration of Christmas help us to remember the poor wise man Jesus Christ who came who left all of heaven's glory and came to this earth as a poor man but very wise.

Help us to remember well to celebrate in ways that you approve of and remind us of our own mortality and our need of you.

We pray in Jesus name, Amen.



No man has the mind of Christ
Except him who makes it his business to obey Him.
George MacDonald 1824-1905

Christ is Born

Many centuries ago God had His prophet preserve these words that foretold of the coming of the Saviour of mankind as prophesied at the time of the rebellion by Adam and Eve to God's precepts for them and whose effects all of mankind since continues to be subject to. Isaiah said: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace." Isaiah 9:6

The Christmas story is the same today as it has been from the beginning. The events associated with the advent of our Lord Jesus have taken place once, and they will never be altered. We are thrilled over and over again as, year after year, we are reminded of the same event with its remarkable and miraculous significance. The way this event is romanticized in today's world is not always to the glory of God, but in whatever way its celebration softens the hearts of the "Scrooges" of the world, we want to give God the praise. The true meaning of the birth of our Saviour Jesus Christ is not adequately represented by the activities we traditionally associate with the season, enjoyable as they may be. At best these activities will serve as props to awaken in us an appreciation for the actual sacrifice God made in sending His Son into the world to redeem us.

Matthew 2 and Luke 2 contain a clear account of some of the circumstances surrounding the birth of Christ and we have chosen Luke 2 as a reminder to us of this event that had been prophesied back in Genesis when Adam and Eve rebelled against God the effects to which all of mankind since have been partakers.

Both Matthew and Luke include the story of Jesus' birth in their accounts of Jesus' ministry. We are fortunate to have both these accounts for their different details and emphasis. Both accounts give the historical setting in which this event took place. Only Matthew includes the story of the wise men from the east who followed the star, and only Luke tells about the birth in the stable and the message of the angels to the shepherds and their visit to do homage to the newborn babe of the Christmas story. These accounts capture the imagination and are often used as themes for the presentation of the Christmas story. The story appeals to all, young and old.

Luke develops his account of the birth of Christ in some detail. After relating the story of the remarkable arrival of John as a forerunner to the gospel, born to Zacharias and Elizabeth, he begins his account of Jesus' birth with giving the reasons for Joseph and Mary's presence in Bethlehem where this birth took place. (See also Micah 5:2) God arranges the circumstances to suit His plans. Joseph and Mary made the long trek from their hometown, Nazareth, to the prophesied place for the Savior's birth. Crowds of other travelers on the same errand as Joseph and Mary crowded available public accommodations, so the parents-to-be were forced to seek shelter in a stable, and as legend has it, laid the newborn infant on a bed of hay in a manger among the lowing cattle and braying donkeys. Whatever the backdrop, all this was by God's design. The Son of God was born under the lowliest of circumstances as a manifestation of the humble position He was willing to take for the benefit of mankind.

The message of the angels to the shepherds has not lost its impact. Following the announcement of the birth, the shepherds hurried to the stable to see the infant Jesus. They eagerly spread the news, "glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen." Christian people today still bear this message to the world.

Luke 2:1-20 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. ⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will

find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.”¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

We cannot divide the plan of salvation into a number of different elements and apply them separately as they relate to our commitment to serve God. The conception, birth, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus are all required for the complete plan. We do at times emphasize one aspect above the others, but we must not ignore any part. Is it because of our human limitations that we need to departmentalize these elements and give them special consideration at different times? We cannot so easily be merry and sad at the same time. Christmastime is a season of joy and pleasure, overdone by many people to a degree that leaves God out of the picture. As Christians, we need to withdraw from those activities that, carnal by nature, are pleasant merely to the flesh. We treat Christmas as a time of special joy with activities that we consider appropriate for the holiday season. We celebrate Easter as a more serious and a more sober time, suitable for reflection on the sacrificial and suffering aspect of the plan of salvation. Neither one of the events is meaningful without the other.

A worldly approach to the celebration of Christmas appeals to the carnal mind the music, pageantry, ornamental lighting, tinsel, trees, and other decorations all appeal to the senses. Traveling, shopping, gift-giving, programs, caroling, and family gatherings also afford pleasure, and we consider these activities legitimate. However, we need to establish for ourselves what is appropriate for us to do based on sound scriptural principles that apply to Christians at all times. We cannot expect to revolutionize the

world in its errors, including its way of abusing the Christmas celebration, but we are responsible for what we ourselves promote by our choices. If what we do brings glory to God and contributes to peace and goodwill on earth, we have set a safe standard for ourselves.

If we were to travel on foot and on the back of a donkey from Nazareth to Bethlehem under circumstances similar to what Joseph and Mary did at the behest of a despotic ruler and then find only a stable to accommodate the birth of the first baby in the family the romantic aspect of the story might lose some of its appeal. Trying to simulate the experience would not benefit us, but we would do well to keep our festivities simple, and we would honour God by doing so. We would do well to consider more the sacrificial aspect of the event rather than obscure it in festivities and by displays of finery.

God did not send His Son into the world to set up a great earthly kingdom, although there were those who mistakenly expected Him to do so. God gave us a lesson in humility in the way in which He stooped to our level for the purpose of saving us by letting His Son be born in the most humble circumstances. Jesus in His ministry was an example to us in doing good.

What should our attitude be about profiting from the commercialism associated with Christmas?

What kind of emphasis should we place on the incarnation in our celebration?

Should we and how can use to an advantage the general spirit of cheer and goodwill among people at this time by witnessing to them?

Christ has made those who benefit from His sacrifice responsible for sharing the Gospel.

How do we measure up?



Every thing is pure loss
 Chapels and creeds and churches
 All is loss that comes between us and Christ
George MacDonald 1824-1905

LEAD, KINDLY LIGHT

Often in our journey through this world here below, we wonder what the future holds for us. Our thoughts about the years ahead may contain many questions: How will I make it spiritually? Who will be my companion in life? What will I do to make a living in this world? Where will the Lord send me? Will I be all right? Will the end come soon? What kinds of preparations do I need to make for the future?

All these and many more questions can trouble our minds. This is because we are enough like God our Creator that we know of a past, present, and future. We even have the thought of eternity in our hearts, though we cannot know the infinite quality of it (Ecclesiastes 3:11). We make plans for future activities, and we even become obstinately set upon our own desires for the accomplishment of those plans, but we are always aware of a degree of uncertainty. This very uncertainty can be a troubling presence in our lives.

We say that God inhabits eternity, and our awareness of Him includes the thought that He knows everything. He knows the history of the whole universe in infinite detail. We also believe that since He is not bound by time or space His knowledge includes the future. Our minds grapple with the idea of a Being who dwells in a realm where time means nothing at all, but we believe in such a One.

The Word this mighty God has given us tells us that He is good and does no evil. His thoughts toward us are thoughts of peace; so He told us by inspiration given to His prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 29:11). Yet we find it difficult to go onward through our lives with entire confidence and without worry and care. This is our human dilemma. Some people's lives become very difficult for them because of their thoughts about the future.

The Great God begot a Son in eternity. In due time and because of His love for man whom He had created in their likeness, God sent His Son down to our world on a redemptive mission. The Son, who understands everything that the Father understands, came and took upon Himself the form of man and became subject to all the things that man is subject to. No doubt He experienced pain, heat and cold, hunger and fatigue. To what extent did He experience man's anxiety about the future? The word tells us that He was

tempted in every way as we are, so we believe that He experienced and understands our feelings in every way. But He was completely successful in turning aside human anxiety before it became something that was displeasing to an all-knowing Heavenly Father (Hebrews 4:15).

How many times have things turned out differently than we expected? How many times have we recognized the hand of an Almighty One moving events that relate to our lives? Are we conscious enough of God to see His works in relation to our own personal lives? Do we see His hand revealed in His leading of the nations and particularly in the guidance of His people represented especially by His church?

A look at history and even at current events shows evidence of a great master planner at work. Civilizations have risen and waned; leaders have assumed power and lost it again. Only upon later observation can we see what God had planned and how seemingly small events led to great changes with widespread effects.

Perhaps many only need to think of their own lives in order to recall an experience in which they saw the hand of God some would be tempted to dismiss as mere coincidence what others would call divine providence. But the Bible clearly tells us that God has His way with the nations of the earth. He sets up whom He wills and puts down whom He wills. If this is true of nations, why would it not be true of individuals?

It is true that the Bible speaks of time and chance. God has set certain natural processes in motion and only upsets these for some special purpose. We come under this law of cause and effect. In another sense, everything that happens in the universe is in His control, for "in him we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28). It is stated in the book of Job that if God were to withdraw His support, all life would cease to exist (Job 34:14-15). Jesus said that even a sparrow would not fall to the ground "without your Father" (Matthew 10:29). He said that even the very hairs of your head are all numbered." (Luke 12:7) What a great God we serve!

Who wakes the tiny seeds of the flowers in the springtime? Who tells the bulbs hidden in the earth to wake up and send forth their spikes with their beautiful blooms? Who tells the waterfowls to leave their nesting grounds and form themselves into vees and wing strongly, surely northward? Who

puts the attraction between a man and a maid so that they desire to be together always? Oh, the wisdom and providence of the almighty God!

Now let's think of how this great God leads our lives according to His plan. If we don't have faith that He is doing this, we can become subject to much anxiety. Perhaps each one can think of such happenings in his own life. There is surely an unseen hand that is moving things beyond our control.

Let us trust the unseen hand of God and let His Light lead us.

Courtesy Messenger of Truth Gospel Publishers Kansas

LEAD, KINDLY LIGHT!

Lead, Kindly Light, amid the' encircling gloom,

Lead Thou me on;

The night is dark, and I am far from home;

Lead Thou me on:

Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see

The distant scene—one step enough for me.

I was not ever thus, nor prayed that Thou should lead me on;

I loved to choose and see my path; but now lead Thou me on.

I loved the garish day, and, spite of fears,

Pride ruled my will: remember not past years.

So long Thy pow'r hath blest me; sure it still will lead me on

O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent, till the night is gone;

And with the morn those angel faces smile,

Which I have loved long since, and lost awhile.

J. H. Newman



THE POWER OF INDECISION

Considering the intent of this article, the title is a misnomer, but purposefully so. The prophet Joel saw "multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision: for the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision" Joel 3:14. How much indecision was present among those numbers of people? Decision time is often a crucial point, but indecision may make it a valley of

fear and depression with feelings of hopelessness. If the multitudes in Joel's vision made the right decision, a "highway" Isaiah 35:8, would have been opened for them, and their dilemma would have been resolved.

Few people have consciously decided to forfeit salvation, but innumerable ones have perished spiritually due to indecision. By default, indecision is a decision many times.

Seldom have citizens of the kingdom of God deliberately neglected the welfare of Heaven's realm, but how much decay has occurred because of indecisiveness?

One must conclude that Satan repeatedly employs indecision, because he knows its power. Having entered the land of Canaan and conquered much territory under Joshua's leadership, the children of Israel came to a certain crucial point in their devotion to true religion. They were in the "valley of decision." Joshua no doubt perceived this and presented the remedy: "Choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" Joshua 24:15. Choosing the truth with commitment is the antidote of indecision.

On the other hand, the Spirit of God constantly holds forth the power of making a decision for the right, Isaiah 30:21. God has not left Himself without a subtle witness in man, even though mankind is unregenerate. When a man is really honest, there is something that hints to him what he ought to be or do. And furthermore, despite the tragic fall in the Garden, the faculty of choice was preserved free standing. God will not infringe on it, and Satan cannot hopelessly dominate it. But who stands to gain with indecision?

It has been said that a firm, wholehearted decision to get one's life right with God is 85 percent of the way to consecration or salvation. The remainder of the way is in following through to the altar of sacrifice. When one is wallowing in indecision and uncertainty, the mind is subject to being overtaxed with conflicting thoughts, resulting in confusion. The suggestion of hopelessness is just around the corner. But once a decision for the right is made, regardless of the cost, the buffeting ceases, the haze clears, and light begins to shine. Recently a young man afflicted with many tempta-

tions because of just such a state of indecision, found the answer: "I made a decision by faith that, despite my feelings, I was coming all the way." His spirit and countenance were brightened, and the testimony of grace to put off those unbecoming things was warm and clear. Decision is always the first step back to God.

Some people count the cost (Luke 14:25-30) of being a disciple of the Lord and find it too great. They then let the default value of indecision decide the matter. But the context of Jesus' teaching on counting the cost turns the coin to the other side: a person must make an unreserved decision by faith and then count the cost of discipleship lest he faint later on because of the unexpected. This appears to be the import of the Lord's words, "So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple" Luke 14:33.

The need for the spirit of wisdom that the "children of Issachar" had, "which were men that had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do" is being felt, 1 Chronicles 12:32. The challenges of the present day are certainly great and sometimes perplexing. However, one would be less than observant not to recognize some indecision among us. Inasmuch as indecision is known to relate to reluctance to bear the cross, it is not strange that some uncertainty and lack of clarity enters the picture. Military historians speak of the "fog of battle," which can disrupt the command chain and disorientate the troops. The army of the Lord may also experience the "fog of battle." The hosts of righteousness are pressed today on every hand, and the "camp of the saints" is "compassed" about with contrary spirits, Revelation 20:9. In this great battle, it can be expected that there will be some uncertainty and indecision. True, we must not be assertive in the flesh, and our steps must be "ordered by the Lord" Psalm 37:23. Nevertheless, as with individuals, so with the church. A firm decision and resolve to hold to the right, cross bearing included, will do much to dissipate the fog.

The standard of righteousness in Christ Jesus must be held up if we are not to be disorientated in the battle. That standard is faith in the sacrifice of Christ, true repentance, a resolve to forsake the world and all its lusts, self-denial and bearing the cross, and a commitment to walk the narrow way. All these points are the Lord's teaching.

Moses knew the power of decision, which is the real point of this writing. When there was confusion in the camp of Israel because of events that transpired in his absence, he caused a separation of the people. "Then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, Who is on the Lord's side? let him come unto me" Exodus 32:26. The decision that the people then made clarified the situation.

The power of decision supersedes the power of indecision.



CHRISTIAN COURTESY

The dictionary describes courtesy as "polite behaviour, thoughtfulness of others, a kindness, compliance."

We, as Christian parents, strive to teach courtesy in the home. We ourselves need to set the example in our everyday lives. Children watch closely how we react to strangers who drive into our yards and step into our homes. They observe our polite behaviour at the grocery store and how mother sometimes steps aside to let someone else be in line ahead of her.

Christian courtesy comes from an unselfish heart and pays attention to the needs of others. There is no end to kind deeds and actions that may be done. Usually it's been prayed for in the morning hours and doesn't come by itself, but it also needs to be cultivated.

How about when someone crosses our path? Are we still gracious and forgiving? There have been times when I made a mistake and stepped in the way of others. Can I apologize even if they give me a "mouthful"? Can I still swallow my pride and accept it? There are some valuable lessons to learn if we accept such rebuffs. Perhaps a soul is won for Christ by a simple act of kindness. Conversation is easily started when we're thoughtful of others.

Yes, Christian courtesy is more than just courtesy. It's giving of one's self and reaching out to others as Christ would have us do. It seems to come with the fruit of the Spirit.

Our life is an open book. Our driving, our business dealings, our shopping, our traveling, our very conduct needs to be Christ-like. May God help us take time to be a Christian. "And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" Ephesians 4:32.

THESE ARE THE THINGS

Not what we have, but what we use,
Not what we see, but what we choose—
These are the things that mar or bless
The sum of human happiness.

The things nearby, not things afar,
Not what we seem, but what we are—
These are the things that make or break,
That give the heart its joy or ache.

Not what seem fair, but what is true,
Not what we dream, but what we do—
These are the things that shine like gems,
Like stars in fortune's diadems.

Not as we take, but as we give,
Not as we pray, but as we live
These are the things that make for peace,
Both now and after time shall cease.

*From a book compiled by Aaron L. Toews, Linden, Alberta.
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