

Jesus Christ is the Son of the Living God

What practical difference should that have for life?

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Matthew 13:54; 14:32; 16:15–18; 17:5, 24–27

We have good biblical precedent for sitting down from time to time and remembering the past. It was so with Moses and the Israelites. When he had got them as far as he could, within inches of the promised land, and could take them no further, Moses took advantage of the last hours that were given to him and called upon Israel to stand at that critical juncture in their experience and remember the past. Soon they would be over Jordan and into their promised land, but let them first stand still and remember the way that the Lord had led them so far and all his gracious acts and wonderful miracles.

They would remember the days of their progress, and their hearts would be filled with joy; and then at Moses' command they were to remember all the days of their stupidity and their sinfulness and their failings, lest when they got into their promised inheritance they should get falsely puffed up in their heads and imagine that it was their valour that brought them into the land. The grapes would seem tastier and sweeter to them if they were convinced in their hearts that it was only grace that had brought them there.

It was so in Israel's yearly celebrations, with the festivals that God designed for them.

Passover, the first festival in the year, took them back to the very beginning of their redemption as a nation out of the captivity in Egypt, that set them free and on their way to their inheritance. Tabernacles, the last festival of the year, according to the Pentateuch was another of those festivals that begged them to look back. With joy in their hearts they left their settled abodes (not a bad idea at any time of life, or in any country) and made themselves booths. They dwelt in these temporary structures for a while and looked back upon the past and all the way that God had led them. Now at long last they were in their promised land.

So shall it be with us when we get home to glory. When we see it all we shall say, 'Yes, we always believed it was going to be wonderful, but who could have believed it would have been as wonderful as this?' We shall look back with astonishment in our hearts to all the way the Lord has led us and brought us to our eternal inheritance. We shall remember the story of our redemption and the progress that by God's grace we were able to make. We shall not forget the days of our wanderings and stupidities and failures, but then it shall contribute to the overwhelming sense of the richness of the grace of God that at last has brought us home.

I won't tell you how many anniversaries I've celebrated of life here on earth. They mount up relentlessly, one every year, despite my attempts to ignore them. Some you look forward to for a long time, then they're no sooner here than they've gone, and we are launched on yet another uncharted stage in our pilgrimage towards our great inheritance.

I thought therefore that it would be a good thing if first of all I took you back in thought, not only to the origin of this particular local church, but to the origin of the whole church of God and to that foundation rock upon which it is built. We shall presently consider the programmatic words of our Lord Jesus Christ, 'On this rock I will build my church' (Matt 16:18), given in answer to Peter's confession of his deity. Let the exegetes argue how they will; it is clear enough from the context what that rock is upon which the church is built. It is the confession first given by Peter himself to the Lord Jesus, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God' (v. 16). So therefore I take you back to that great rock upon which the church is built historically, which is the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I want to do more however than simply remind you of the doctrine of the deity of Christ. I want, with Matthew's help, to go back to those early days when men first discovered that Jesus was none other than the Christ, the Son of the living God—Son of the owner and Creator of the whole universe. Until then they had known him as the man who worked with the plane and the saw in the carpenter's shop at Nazareth, the one with whom they walked the dusty roads or who travelled with them in their boat. They were dumbfounding days, full of astonishment, wonder and sometimes perplexity, as the evidence mounted and divine grace began to open their eyes to show them who this Jesus really was. We shall not look at it merely as a historical study—how did the first Christians come to realise that Jesus was the Son of God?—we shall look at it from a practical point of view and ask what that discovery meant to them in practical terms and what difference it made when they discovered the deity of the Lord Jesus.

Let's put that question to the Apostle John. 'Tell me, venerable apostle, you exhort us to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God; what actual practical difference does it make to you that Jesus is the Son of God?'

'It is where you find the secret of overcoming the world,' John would say. So let's see what John wrote in his epistle. 'Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?' (1 John 5:5).

The world is ever with us—one day with its apparent pleasures enticing us to be disloyal to God, another day with its hostilities, hating and persecuting us, trying to drive the believer away from God. Other days acting like a ton weight, not necessarily hostile to us, but making it very difficult for us to keep the commandments of the Lord. The world isn't geared to keeping the commandments of the Lord, as any businessman who knows a thing or two about this world would tell you. What is the secret of overcoming it?

'Oh,' says John, 'can't you see that Christian girl being led into the amphitheatre? Can't you hear the roar of the lions and even the crunching of the bones? What gives that slender girl the courage to surrender all she has for the sake of Jesus Christ? Here's her secret—she believes that Jesus is the Son of God.'

You see, if Jesus is the Son of God, and you sacrificed everything you had for him to your last gasp of breath, you've lost nothing really, have you? For you have everything in him, you

are 'heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ' (Rom 8:17). If he isn't the Son of God you'd be a fool to sacrifice anything for him; that's what it comes down to.

If you ask John therefore, 'What difference does it make to you that Jesus is the Son of God?' he would say, 'Here is my strength, and here is the strength of the Christian church to overcome the world.' Ever since I noticed that as a young man, I've got into the habit of collecting all the evidence I can possibly muster to prove it and maintain my faith that Jesus is the Son of God.

We shall not be following John in our study; we shall be following Matthew and using his help. As we relive those wonderful days when people were beginning to discover that Jesus is the Son of God, we shall ask what difference it made to them. With a preacher's prerogative I have chosen four things, among the many others, where discovery of the deity of Christ opened a new dimension of living, a new level of life that they had never known before.

1. *An experience of gravity losing its power (14:22–33)*

After Peter learned from our Lord himself the ability to walk on the water, he got back into the boat and said, 'Truly you are the Son of God.' He saw a new dimension to life in which the pull of earth's gravity lost its power.

2. *An enlarged horizon for evangelism (15:21–39)*

The Lord Jesus took them right to the borders of their country, where now for the first time in his company they came face to face with Gentiles. To their astonishment they watched him convert a Gentile, an unheard of thing to Peter. Then, as they climbed the mountain, there came hundreds and perhaps thousands of men and women from the Greek cities of the Decapolis, living in those northern parts where the Gentiles bordered the Israelites. Our blessed Lord healed them and blessed them and talked to them and *they glorified the God of Israel* (v. 31), which shows that they were Gentiles. It would be no significant thing if Israelites glorified the God of Israel. It was mightily significant that day when Gentiles in their hundreds glorified him, as they came under the power and blessing of the dear Son of God who was Israel's Messiah. It gave the disciples an enlarged horizon for their evangelistic vision.

3. *An extended concept of history (16:24–28)*

They learned now from the Lord Jesus, not merely about his first coming, but about his second coming. This present age shall not last forever; there shall be a glorious age to come for this sorry old world. The Lord Jesus shall return again with his holy angels in the glory of his Father, set up his kingdom and rule from shore to shore.

4. *An encouragement to change behaviour (17:24–27; 18:15)*

What, finally, did the discovery of the deity of Christ mean to these men in those first days? It supplied them with an altogether new motivation for behaviour. Their redemption price had

already been paid and they were now children of God; and just as they had been forgiven so they must forgive when they are wronged and the offender repents.

So we shall be considering these four things and, of course, I have my preacher's eye on myself first and then on you. While these are stories about the past, they are also meant to be about our present. I shall be asking myself and I shall be asking you, my brother, my sister, 'Do you believe in the deity of Christ? Tell me honestly, what practical difference does it make to you?'

An experience of gravity losing its power

What lesson did Peter learn that dark night when the waves were roaring and the wind howling, when in answer to the invitation of Christ he dared to get outside the boat and found that he could walk upon the water? To see the significance of it, perhaps we ought first to sketch in the context.

There was quite a hubbub of questions amongst his own people in Nazareth and beyond, as they saw the mighty works of the Lord Jesus. They said to themselves, 'Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter's son?' (13:54–55). They knew his mother and his brothers and sisters; they'd grown up with him and played games with him. They knew he was human, but their problem was, how did you reconcile that with these astounding works of power that he did? So they asked, 'Isn't he the carpenter's son?' and found as yet no answer.

It wasn't only the people of Nazareth that began to get perplexed. Herod the king got uneasy when he heard of him and of his miracles and his royal legs began to shake in the night. He said to himself, 'This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him' (14:2). It's interesting what tricks the ungodly man's conscience plays with him.

Herod had admired John the Baptist's kind of preaching. He didn't tickle people's ears with funny little stories and entertainment. He told Herod straight, 'It is not lawful for you to have [your brother's wife]' (v. 4). In the name of the coming Messiah, he dared to call adultery sin, and this wasn't a popular term to use in the court of Herod. Herod secretly admired John's manliness, but his so-called wife didn't and in the end, to keep her quiet, he tried to keep John quiet. He put him in prison, thinking he could exclude God from his life. At first he seemed successful, but on his birthday he put on a great feast for the lords and ladies; you know the story. Halfway through the feast Salome the daughter of Herodias came in to do her dancing and incited his lust. He was so carried away with his wine and his passions that he swore an oath that he would give her anything she asked for. Oh how big he looked before his courtiers—anything she asked for she could have, up to the half of his kingdom (see Mark 6:23). She went and consulted her mother and the mother said, 'Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter' (v. 8).

Herod was caught dallying with his own lusts. He had given his word; now he was obliged not to lose face before his courtiers. What a banquet it was, when the pièce de résistance was the gory head of John the Baptist on a platter. At least he was dead, thought

Herod, and dead men don't speak. And then he heard of Jesus and said to himself, 'This must be John raised from the dead.' That's a very interesting piece of modern psychology. Coming alongside Jesus makes people think of the eternal world. Can't you see the kind of terror that got hold of him? He tried to keep out the Word of God, but that great eternal world was coming in on him and he couldn't keep it out.

The world has to learn that you cannot keep God out of God's world. You can close up Jericho with all its walls and doors, but you will not keep the ark of God out of Jericho. You can shut up God's apostles and prophets in prison, but you will not keep God out of his world. When Jesus heard of Herod's interest, he turned his back on Herod's bright, beautiful, gaudy palace and its sophistication (Matt 14:13).

If people like that kind of entertainment with its ghastly result, well let them have it.

Our blessed Lord took the people in their simplicity out to the desert and, lifting up his eyes to heaven, he brought down the very blessings of heaven upon earth. He took the little boy's loaves and fishes, and in his creatorial hands they multiplied (v. 19). As the poet put it, "Twas spring-time when He blessed the bread; 'Twas harvest when He brake."¹ See them, seated there in that desert place on their comfortable grass cushions, being fed from the very hand of the Creator.

'They were days of heaven upon earth,' you say. 'If only we could see them again. If only I could have been with him when he called the little children and sat them on his knee, and when he fed the thousands. But my extraordinary fate is to be living in Belfast.'

There was something more to it, wasn't there? More and bigger and better than days of heaven upon earth. Something more that his apostles were soon to discover. He was not only the Messiah who could put on the messianic banquet and feed the hungry of earth, he was God's Son, the owner and maker of the universe. That night he sent the crowds away, told his apostles to cross over the sea, and he went up the mountain.

As his apostles rowed their boat in the darkness of the night, the waves began to rise and the wind howled. The going was tough. Through the darkness and the spray they saw a figure coming and overtaking them from behind. They thought it must be a ghost and cried out with fear. They believed in spirits; their opinion of spirits was that they were pretty insubstantial and they could walk on water. So when they saw this figure walking on the water they first of all thought it must be a spirit. As it came near and they cried out with fear, they heard the voice across the water: 'Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid' (v. 27). It was the Lord Jesus! They knew well that he was human, but how could he be walking on the water? When eventually Peter got back into the boat they found the answer rising in their hearts, 'Truly you are the Son of God' (v. 33). Not merely human, but divine.

That would be marvellous if that were all the story—Christ walked on water and demonstrated his deity. But there was even more to it than that, wasn't there? With his own delightful kind of logic, Peter was generally arguing things and missing all sorts of steps in the argument. When he heard the Lord's voice, 'It is I, do not be not afraid,' he said, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water' (v. 28).

¹ Thomas Toke Lynch (1818–71), 'O where is He that trod the sea' (1855).

I'm surprised that the other apostles didn't rebuke him and say, 'What are you thinking of, Peter? Our Lord may walk on water, but don't be so impertinent as to think that you can do what he does.' Mercifully they didn't say it, because our Lord's response to Peter was, 'Come!' I don't know how unsteadily he got out of the boat in those marvellous moments. If I'd been Peter I would have been a long while letting go of the boat. Eventually he let go of it, took one step then another and he was still up. He was learning to walk even as Jesus walked on the water.

I don't know what happened to gravity, but here was a walk and a level of living where gravity had lost a lot of its accustomed pull. 'It didn't last,' someone will say, 'and Peter fell.' I shall have something to say in a moment about that, but first let's be positive. He did walk some yards and showed that it was possible. It wasn't just human excitement and impertinence; this was according to God's intention. They had discovered that Jesus was the Son of God, he could walk on water and he meant them to do likewise.

You say, 'Not literally of course! What use would it be if all of us now were to go down to the lake and walk across it? It would create a stir in Belfast, but so what? I mean, walking on water, what *use* would it be?' Quite so, ladies and gentlemen, for the thing was a demonstrated parable, wasn't it? How wonderfully the Lord Jesus taught these men. By vivid illustrations he showed them a new dimension for life and prepared them for what was to happen after he died and rose again and went up to glory.

When at last Peter met Paul, Peter's comment was like that of so many congregations, 'Well that was good, but I didn't understand a lot of what he said!'

Just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand. (2 Pet 3:15-16)

Thank the Lord for that; for when things are difficult to understand that means there's a lot more in them than we get at the moment!

When Paul began to speak about Christ being now risen from the dead and ascended into glory at the right hand of God, angels and principalities and powers being made subject to him, Peter would be nodding his head and stroking his beard. 'Yes that's right, my brother Paul—I saw him go! From Bethany's hill I saw him literally rise up into heaven. Gravity was overcome that day, Paul.'

Then Paul would go on and say, 'Not only is Christ risen and ascended and seated in the heavenly places, but ponder the exceeding greatness of God's power towards us. When he raised Christ he raised us up too. God has 'seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus' (Eph 2:6).

I can imagine Peter saying, 'Yes, my brother, Christ is risen and gone up. You weren't with the Lord Jesus when he was here, but let me tell you what happened to us one night. It was after he had fed the multitudes, and we thought, "This is the Messiah he's brought heaven down to earth, and this is the messianic banquet." But that night he showed us something even more wonderful. He went up the mountain, and we had to cross the sea all

by ourselves in our fishing boat. The rowing was very difficult, Paul. We wondered why Jesus had left us alone; then we saw him coming, and he was walking on the water! It was a miracle; he seemed no longer to be attached to this earth, even though he was. He was defying gravity itself, Paul. I said, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come," and I got out and walked to the Lord.'

I can imagine Andrew or someone saying, 'Peter, tell the whole truth. You started to sink, didn't you?' (Somebody's bound to spoil it; they love doing that!)

'Yes I did fall, but the Lord saved me and pulled me up, and I walked back to the boat with him, arm-in-arm in fact. I really walked on the water with Christ.'

'I begin now to see what you mean, Paul. It was a picture, preparing us for this wonderful fact that Christ is risen and we're risen in him. He's ascended and at the right hand of God, so we are ascended in him and seated at the right hand of God with him. We walk in those heavenly realms, and it's not imagination; it is real. Life takes on a different dimension.'

If Christ were merely Son of God and not human it would be no wonderful thing at all that he's now in heaven, would it? If he's really human and Son of God at the same time, and he's in glory, think what it implies. In raising him, God has raised us up too and seated us in the heavenly places. Have you got over the shock yet of being there? You say, 'My dear preacher, you make it sound so easy, but I'm often living below that level.' So am I actually, and I have to tell you that I sink down more often than Peter did, but that doesn't deter the Lord, who is in the process of teaching us to walk where he walks in the heavenly places.

That doesn't mean that they lost hold of reality. Peter got back into the boat that night, and they continued at their work back on solid land. To be seated with Christ in the heavenly places doesn't mean that we take leave of earth. We still walk here, still get the toothache, and the waves blow and the wind shrieks, yet simultaneously we have a life that's linked with Christ to walk arm-in-arm with him already in the heavenly places.

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. (Col 3:1-3)

What a wonderful thing the mind is. God has given us a mind that can stretch to infinity. I can see with my mind not only what has happened but I can see what would happen. For instance, if I was standing on a tile floor and I had a cup in my hand, I can see what would happen if I let the cup drop.

You say, 'It would break.'

'How did you know that—can you see it?'

'If you let it go I know that it would fall and smash.'

'Well I'm not going to let it fall.'

'But I can see what would happen if you did let it fall.'

'You've got a marvellous mind then. Did you just imagine that? Can you think of any kind of possibility?'

'Yes,' you say, 'I can sit here in Belfast and think about the planet Jupiter out there, and in one sense I'm there. I can imagine the galaxy's light at the edge of the universe.'

God has given you a great mind, and me too. We're only partly linked to this earth, with a mind that can travel to eternity.

You say, 'Thinking about heaven is a mere fairy story; that's imagination run wild.' No it isn't, my dear brother, for that's the whole point. Jesus Christ is the Son of God, both human and divine; he is risen, and he is literally in glory. You believe that, don't you? That's not imagination, and if he's in glory then, in a very real sense, you are seated with him in the heavenly places.

May God make it real to us and teach us a level of life that the ordinary gravity here cannot pull down. It gave the disciples a new dimension while they were still on earth.

An enlarged horizon for evangelism

That is shown in Matthew 15, and again we look at the context. It starts off by telling us about a dispute that arose when the Pharisees complained to the Lord Jesus that his disciples were eating without washing their hands before meals. It was nothing to do with hygiene, but concern with 'breaking the tradition of the elders' (v. 2). They were very keen on all those food laws in the Old Testament and all the ceremonial washing. To them it was the whole essence of the religious life.

So keen were they on it that they had all sorts of rules and regulations far beyond what was in the Bible itself, like religion often does. Life to them was the meticulous keeping of all these rules—when to wash your hands before you ate, how far up the arm to wash and all that kind of thing. Christ allowed his disciples to eat and didn't insist on those rules. When the Pharisees challenged him, he not only rebuked them and showed them how unauthorised a lot of their interpretation of the Old Testament was and not according to the Old Testament at all; he went further than that. Using his divine prerogative as Son of God he cancelled the food laws completely. The disciples came to him and said, 'Lord, do you know that you've offended the Pharisees?' (v. 12).

'Let them be offended,' said our Lord. There were bigger things to do, weren't there? In view of his later role, it's interesting that Peter still wanted an explanation (v. 15).

Those old food laws and ablutions were given by God in the days of Israel's spiritual infancy. You mothers will know better than I, who am merely a bachelor, how to teach children about moral cleanliness and what a filthy thing sin is.

You say, 'Dear bachelor, first of all you have to teach a child what literal filthiness is. When he comes to the table with his hands full of mud, you say, "No, you can't eat like that".

"Why not?" the child asks.

"Well, don't you see that it's dirty?"

'So you must first teach him about literal dirt. When he's got the idea of literal dirt, then you begin to get the idea across that certain behaviour is dirty in a deeper sense.'

So did God with Israel. First of all he taught them their infant lessons and used physical things like literal water and literal animal sacrifices. He taught the basic rudiments to Israel in their spiritual infancy. Now, with the coming of the Son of God, a new stage in history had arrived. God was about to lead his people out of their infancy into their spiritual adulthood. Even a great mathematician probably began by learning to count with coloured bricks. That's how they taught in my infancy—no wonder they didn't get far! One brick and one brick

make two bricks. I discovered later on that it didn't matter whether it was bricks or gold bars or people, the same principle applied. Then I learned to be abstract and say 'one and one'. You see how I was progressing.

I began to do some simple equations, but then I stopped because things got too difficult! You have to start with the simple physical things and work up to the deeper things.

God led them from literal and physical cleansing to ceremonial cleansing and then to the real thing. Not mere external ceremonies, but the real thing. The days were coming when Peter and the believers in Israel would be asked to step out of their spiritual infancy into adulthood. No longer relying for their holiness upon mere external ceremonial ablutions; learning as grown up sons of God to be led by the Holy Spirit of God, they would be free to leave the shelter of the Israelite nation and go out to the Gentiles.

Because this was what lay ahead, Christ began to teach them this lesson. 'Those old physical ceremonial laws are finished. They belong to your infancy; now you'd better learn to be grown up.' So he took them up north, to Tyre and Sidon (v. 21). There they met a woman. She was a Canaanite, an absolute Gentile. Can Gentiles get converted? This was news to the disciples. Jews could get converted because they were by definition saints; they were the people of God. But could Gentiles get converted? So they listened with both ears as this Gentile woman came to the Lord. She said, 'Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon' (v. 22). Here was real uncleanness. A Gentile—a child of wrath (Eph 2:3), and her daughter grievously afflicted with an unclean spirit.

Could Christ heal a Gentile? Perhaps Peter was about to tell her, 'Look here, you are a Gentile. You've got your dispensations mixed up, and you can't come to the Son of David. Don't you understand that it would be doctrinally wrong? You'd better keep quiet, woman!' That wouldn't really have made a good beginning for a gospel message.

But he didn't have to say that, for our Lord was already talking. She kept on asking, and he had ignored her apparently, so eventually he said, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel . . . It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs' (vv. 24–26).

Then, with astonishing faith, she said, 'Yes Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.' Astonishingly, she didn't turn round and say, 'How dare you call me a dog!' She said, 'Yes, Lord, it's right what you say. I know that I'm not a sheep, but I've come to believe that you are the Son of David, Israel's Messiah. If you are the Messiah, then the grace of God that you've come to bring us is so bountiful that I can't believe that no crumb would ever fall off the table for us Gentiles.'

With delight in his heart our Lord had achieved his purpose. "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.'

I wish I could have seen Peter's face at that moment. How was this Gentile cleansed? By ceremonial washing? No, her heart had been cleansed by faith.

Shortly after that our Lord took them up the mountain, and once again there came great crowds of Gentiles, bringing their sick folks to be healed. The blessed Jewish Messiah healed them, 'and they glorified the God of Israel' (v. 31). It was an unusual happening in our Lord's life, but once more you can see how our Lord was preparing Peter. After Pentecost he would

have to be taught that lesson again, when he was sent to Cornelius the Gentile and God had to give him a spectacular object lesson to show that the food laws were finished (Acts 10).

Peter was free to go out to the Gentiles. As he preached the gospel to them, about the Lord Jesus who died and had risen again, the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentiles, and God purified their hearts by faith.

His fellow apostles weren't quite so sure. It took a little while for Christianity to adjust itself to the discovery that Jesus is the Son of God. 'What are the implications?' you say. If Jesus is the Son of God, then his salvation must be big enough for the whole of God's creation. There isn't one person upon the face of the earth, nor has there ever been, that God has not loved. He made them all and loves them with a maker's heart and he gave his Son for them so that they might be saved.

God help us, lest at any time we should be so engrossed with the little inner details of rules and regulations—important as they are in the church—that we lose our concept of who Jesus is. He is the Creator, the Son of God who loved his vast world of men and women, whoever they may be. An appreciation of the deity of the Lord Jesus shall enlarge the horizon of our evangelical enterprise. May we not be satisfied until the whole world has heard of Jesus.

Discovery of the deity of Jesus opened to the disciples another dimension of life and extended the horizon of their evangelistic mission.

An extended concept of history

When our Lord first told Peter that he must go to Jerusalem, be rejected and crucified, Peter rebuked him. Peter thought that there was just this one age, and he was hoping that Christ would be successful in it; the thought that our Lord would be rejected was one of unmitigated disaster. If Christ were to be rejected, he would lose everything he had invested in him.

It was in that context that our Lord Jesus took Peter, James and John up the Mountain of Transfiguration and gave them a vision of the Son of Man. Six days before he had told them: 'The Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father' (16:27). It revolutionised Peter's concept of history when he learned that there was not just this age, there was another age to come.

For Peter it had raised another conundrum. Our Lord said, 'Whoever would save his life² will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it' (16:25). That sounded very strange to Peter. Had not all the evangelical prophets told him that he had to save his soul? What was Christ talking about now, telling him to lose it?

How could he make sense of it all? But now the conundrum was solved. There's not just one age. There are two ages—the present age and the age to come—and you have to make up your mind which age you are going to live for. Christ has saved your soul, in the sense that you are forgiven, born again and redeemed, but if you live for this age you will lose everything that you invest in it. If you live for that age you will keep everything that you invest in it.

² Greek, *psyche* = soul/life.

Our souls are interesting things, aren't they? If I were to ask you, 'Is your soul saved?' I hope you would say, 'Yes, of course my soul is saved.'

Then suppose I asked you, 'Where do you keep your soul? Have you got it in a box in the bank for safekeeping?'

So you say, 'Let it stay there until the Lord comes. When the Lord comes I'll say, "Half a minute, Lord, I've just got to go to the bank and fetch my soul. It's saved there in a vault. I'll just collect it and then I shall be ready to come home."'

You don't talk like that, do you? Your soul isn't one of those things you can put in a box. A soul is a life; it's got a time element to it and energy. It's got love and ambition and abilities of all kinds. Souls are things that you have to spend; you don't keep them in a box. Your life is redeemed but you've got to use your life; your time is redeemed but you've got to spend your time; your love is redeemed but you have to spend it on something. What are you going to spend it on?

Our Lord is now rejected,
And by the world disowned,
By the many still neglected,
And by the few enthroned;
But soon He'll come in glory!
The hour is drawing nigh,
For the crowning day is coming
By-and-by.³

Having risen from the dead, our Lord shall one day come again with the glory of his Father and with his attendant angels, 'And then he will repay each person according to what he has done' (16:27). If I believe that, what difference will it make? It will give me a new motivation and an enlarged concept of history. It will constantly alert me as to how I should spend my soul—my life, my love, my time, my energy, my everything, lest I should at times become like Demas, who loved this present age and invested his life in it, only to find at length that he had lost it all.

An encouragement to change behaviour

Jesus and his disciples came to Capernaum. Peter was out as usual in the marketplace or somewhere and those who received the temple tax came to him and said, 'Does your teacher not pay the tax?' (17:24).

Peter replied, 'Yes'. When he came back to the house our Lord spoke to him.

'What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?'

'From others,' said Peter.

'Yes,' said our Lord, 'then the children are free, aren't they? Would the king demand that the prince should pay tribute to live in the palace?'

³ Daniel Webster Whittle (1881).

There's a sense in which the Lord is challenging Peter about this matter. 'Then why are you telling the temple tax collectors that I have to pay taxes to go into my Father's house?'

How like Peter we are. He believed in the deity of Christ, but he hadn't worked out its logical implications. We too believe in it with all our hearts and then five minutes down the road we discover that we haven't worked out the implications either. 'I don't have to pay taxes to enter my father's house, Peter. Don't you really know who I am? I'm the Son of the Father, and as for paying redemption money I don't need to be redeemed.'

So what was Peter to do? 'However, not to give offence to them,' said our Lord, 'go to the lake and cast a hook and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel.⁴ Take that and give it to them for me and for yourself' (v. 27). He didn't have to pay it, but if he refused the crowd wouldn't understand and they would think that he was insulting the God of that temple. That magnificent discovery was going to revolutionise Peter's life. He discovered that the Son of God loved him and paid the redemption price for him when he didn't have to.

What practical difference does it make in the life of the church? When my brother sins against me, what shall I do? (18:15). How can I refuse to forgive him when he comes and asks for forgiveness? If Christ has paid the redemption money for me, how then can I in my turn refuse to forgive my brother?

I was in a conference at one stage, and the organisers had a little bit of trouble. They were going to invite elders and teachers from many different areas to come, and they had to put them up. Several of them had to share two or three to a room, and they had a problem. How could they put in the same room two men who wouldn't speak to each other? They were believers; can you credit it? How often this kind of thing has happened. We profess to believe 'in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal 2:20). He forgave me all my debt, but then I turn round and refuse to forgive someone who has repented and asked for my forgiveness. The discovery of the deity of Christ ought to bring a new motivation into our behaviour.

God bless our meditation, that we may have a firmer grasp on the deity of Christ as an objective doctrine. But more than that—may we learn increasingly in our own experience the difference it actually makes to living when we discover that Jesus is the Son of the living God.

⁴ A silver coin worth 4 drachmas.

About the Author

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