



the
Golden
Candlestick

BORN FROM ABOVE

Part 1

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INTRODUCTORY WORD

1. The need of the assurance of reality

When we come together as the Lord's people, I am not sure that we come with any clearly defined idea of the object of our coming together. We come because we are aware of spiritual need and desire to know what the Lord may wish to say to us. Our coming is governed very largely by general feelings and thoughts, but I think it is helpful if we just pause to try to define for ourselves the object of gathering, setting the whole matter out. I think I would suggest to you that it may amount to this. Firstly, we have a sense in our hearts that we desire and we need to realise the practical reality of that into which we have come as Christians, that we are not occupied just with theories, teachings, ideas, doctrines, but that the things with which we are concerned, the things in which we find ourselves, are very real things. The assurance of reality is one of the basic things our hearts related to coming together. There are so many conflicting voices, so many conflicting things in the world that create a sense of uncertainty, and even among Christians, there are so many dividing ideas and conceptions that the heart does sometimes cry out, is it all true, is it all real? Even while we know very deeply down reality and truth we feel the need of having our hearts constantly established and confirmed in the truth. That is one thing. I think you will grant me that that does so far define our purpose in coming together.

2. The need to understand more fully the nature of Christian life

We want to know and understand more clearly and fully the nature and the measure of that into which we have come as Christians. What does it all mean? What does it all amount to? What is the nature of all this with which we have come into contact in being brought into relationship with the Lord Jesus, and what are the ranges, the measurements, of it, and I would say over against that that Christianity has been made a very much smaller thing than it really is, a very much lesser thing than it really is, and there is not an adequate apprehension of the nature of this great thing which we call Christianity or I would rather say, this great Person, Jesus Christ. We want to know the meaning and range of it all, and to be quite sure this is something not by any

means as small as it is often made to appear, and as Christian measure, as we know it, seems to say that it is. I mean by that that we are so often painfully impressed with the smallness of Christianity as represented by Christians, and that the nature of Christianity, as we see it and know it, speaking generally, in Christians, is not really good enough — as we know it in ourselves. We want to know whether that is all, whether that is as far as it goes.

3. The need to understand the ways of God with us

And then there is a third thing which I think comes very near to our hearts. We want to know the meaning of the ways of God, that is the dealings of God with us. We are aware that we are caused to traverse strange ways, difficult, perplexing paths, that our lives are often very much hedged up with difficulty, perplexity, suffering, problems, that Christian life is not just an easygoing sort of thing. When you become a Christian, you have much of inestimable value and worth beyond all the values of the world, yet you realise that you come into a realm where things become difficult in many ways, problematic. You find that, in the hands of God, things are not easily understood, and the cry of the heart is for a knowledge of the meaning of God's mysterious and strange ways with us.

Am I right in saying that if we were to seek to define the object of Christians meeting together, those three things would at least have a place? Well then, let us believe that the Lord wants to meet us along those lines, to enable us unto this threefold understanding and enlargement; that we are in great reality, not theory; that what we are in as God's children, as God's people, is of immense and deep significance, and that there is an explanation to the ways of God with us. I believe that the Lord would come to us at this time along those lines. So this introductory word is intended to try and focus our thoughts and our hearts, to bring us from just a general coming together and waiting to see what may come. What are we after? What do we feel to be the need? Having suggested that those three things are our need, let us look definitely for the Lord's answer along those lines.

THE EARTHLY AND THE HEAVENLY MAN

What I am going to do may seem a very unusual thing, that is speaking on the basis of that which is almost exclusively used for the unsaved — “Jesus ... said ... Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born from above (RV, margin), he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). Of course, originally, as here, they so apply. But I am remembering that John wrote this many decades after the incident. The old man, the apostle who outlived all the other apostles, wrote this, and went right back to this early time and wrote it, not for the unsaved but for the church. John’s writings are undoubtedly for the church, and he wrote for the church. “Except a man be born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” I do not mean, of course, that he said to the church that it had to be born again, but he was laying down something of primary importance for Christians. You notice that I have changed the actual text — “Except a man be born again” — is the Authorised; “born anew” the Revised; but actually “born from above”, because the word here is the same word as in verse 31 — “He that cometh from above is above all”; the same Greek word “born from above”. I have said that it is an unusual thing to address Christians upon that basis, but the fact is that, in one way or another and in varying degrees, the whole of the New Testament is about that which is born from above, the nature of it, what it is, what it does, how it should behave and everything else. That is a sweeping statement, but it will stand investigation.

So we are going to read a section and dismiss this very unfortunate chapter division. We have to refer to it for convenience’ sake, but you will see how unfortunate it is. We go back into what is verse 24 of chapter 2 and go on to verse 13 of chapter 3.

“Jesus did not commit Himself unto them, for that he knew all men, and because He needed not that any one should bear witness concerning man; for He Himself knew what was in man. Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: the same came unto Him by night, and said to Him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that thou doest, except God be with him.

Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto Him, How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born from above. The wind bloweth where it will, and thou hearest the voice thereof, but knowest not whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit. Nicodemus answered and said unto Him, How can these things be? Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou the teacher of Israel, and understandest not these things? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that which we know, and bear witness of that which we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. If I told you earthly things and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you heavenly things? And no one hath ascended into heaven, but He that descended out of heaven, even the Son of man, who is in heaven."

Two men — the earthly and the heavenly

Now, in that section, we have two persons face to face, an earthly person and a heavenly Person. One word is used of them both, the word 'man'. "Jesus did not commit Himself unto them, for that he knew all men, and because he needed not that any one should bear witness concerning man; for he Himself knew what was in man. Now there was a man ...". I do not want just to pass over anything without its force striking you. That John put in that word 'now' is tremendously significant. For some time I puzzled over the place of Nicodemus in the gospel by John. John in his summary said he had written his gospel with the one object of showing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:31), and I could not see how Nicodemus fitted into that; but that little word 'now' linking with what had just been said and what follows is a key. "Now there was a man ...". And then as we go on we find that this word is used of the other, Christ, "the son of man". That title, as you may know, occurs some eighty-eight times in the New Testament, and eighty-four of the eighty-eight in the gospels, and eleven times in this gospel by John. Forgive this detail, but it is important. What I said just now about why John wrote this. This title, Son of man, when it is used of Christ, always has the definite article — "*the* Son of man". It is a title used of others in the Bible, but whenever it is used of anyone else, it is always without the article — 'son of man'. But when it is Christ, it is always "*the* Son of man".

The earthly man represented by Nicodemus

You have, then, two men, two people called ‘man’, and they are facing one another. On this side is the earthly man. Jesus does not commit Himself unto him. He knew all men in that category. He knew what was in that man, what he was made of, how he was constituted, what he was capable of. He knew all the constituents of that category, all men, man. And it is to that earthly man that these other words relate — “There was a man ...”, and John is really in the back of his mind saying and meaning, ‘Now there was an earthly man named Nicodemus.’ “That which is born of the flesh is flesh”, that is the earthly man. Verse 13 again, “No one hath ascended into heaven” — that is the earthly man. Perhaps you say, Well now, that is doubtful; Elijah did and Enoch did. But if you knew the exactness of the Greek here, you would know that the Greek says, “No man of himself hath ascended into heaven.” Elijah did not of himself, nor did Enoch of himself; but this One, this heavenly Man, ascended Himself. But this earthly man — “no man of himself”. Verse 19 — “This is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness.” Verse 27 — “A man can receive nothing, except it have been given him from heaven.” This is the earthly man, what he is made of, how he is not going to be trusted by heaven, what his limitations are, what he cannot do of himself, what he cannot receive of himself. ‘There was an earthly man’.

The Lord Jesus, the heavenly man

On the other side, there is the heavenly man. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” “Born from above”. Verse 12 -”If I told you earthly things and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you heavenly things? And no one hath ascended into heaven, but he that descended out of heaven, even the Son of man, who is in heaven.” Here is the heavenly Man. Verse 16 — “God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son” (the heavenly Man from heaven, given from heaven). “God sent not the Son into the world to judge the world”; God sent His Son. Verse 31 — “He that cometh from above is above all.” Then, of course, you want to read all those other passages later on. Take chapter 6 as a whole, or almost as a whole. “I am come down from heaven” (verse 38); “I ... came down out of heaven” (verse 51); “I am the bread which came down out of heaven” (verse 41). You know how much there is of it there, and especially verse 62 of chapter 6 — “What then if ye should behold the Son of man ascending where he was before?”

The earthly man at his best

An earthly man and the heavenly Man standing face to face. Now, these two are representative men. Look at Nicodemus. There is a touch of genius about this thing, in John's putting Nicodemus in here. Let us say there is the genius of the Holy Spirit. Nicodemus, a representative earthly man. As to his nation, he belongs to *the* chosen nation; out of all the nations, chosen of God, to whom belong the oracles (Rom. 3:2) and the covenant, a nation peculiarly and particularly related to God. Nicodemus belongs to that nation. As to his sect, he is a Pharisee, a man of the Pharisees. Pharisee is a Hebrew word which means separated by specific beliefs and practices. Within the chosen and particular nation, a particularly religious people or sect, you may say the very core of an elect nation; very strict in their tithing, eating and drinking, washings and rites; and they held very strictly to the belief in the natural immortality of the soul. Jesus said to this representative Pharisee — "Except a man be born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God." As to his position: a member of the Sanhedrin, a ruler of the Jews, that is, a member of the National Council. As to his character, he is no man to be despised. Let us get rid of anything like that in our mentality about Nicodemus. He is a man to be honoured. He is mentioned three times by John. He is a perfectly honest man. The second mention is when he raises the question in the Council — "Doth our law judge a man, except it first hear from himself and know what he doeth?" (John 7:51). The third time is when beloved friends were bringing their spices to the tomb and it says: "And there came also Nicodemus, he who at the first came to Him by night, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds" (John 19:39). He is out in the open now. He is an honest man. As to his spiritual condition he is blind, ignorant, helpless "Art thou the teacher of Israel, and understandest not these things? ... We speak that which we know, and bear witness of that which we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. If I told you earthly things and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you heavenly things?" Blind, ignorant, helpless — that is the representative man, the earthly man at his best in every way.

Features of the heavenly man

The heavenly Man's nationality is from heaven. "He that is from above is above all", above all sects, above all laws and regulations; that is what John is bearing out throughout the whole gospel; above all

ritual. His position is that of divine authority; “the Father hath given all judgment unto the Son” (John 5:22). “As the Father raiseth the dead and giveth them life, even so the Son also giveth life to whom he will” (John 5:21). His character is divine. His spiritual condition is over against that of Nicodemus; there is one word that sums it up — “knowing”. His present condition? — Nicodemus was blind, ignorant, helpless. Here is the Lord Jesus just the opposite. Knowing, and, because knowing, never being at a loss, never being in a quandary, never knowing an impasse. He knew all men; He Himself knew what was in man. “We speak that which we know”. “If I tell you heavenly things ...”, meaning that I could, I know them. “We speak that which we know.” He is knowing.

The heavenly knowledge of the Son of man

Now the point. Go back to chapter 1:48-49. “Nathaniel saith unto Him, Whence knowest thou me? ... Thou art the Son of God.” This attribute of knowing man in the Bible is locked up to God alone. It is only attributed to Jehovah, the Lord. You remember the words of Jeremiah — “I, the Lord (Jehovah), search the mind, I try the heart” (Jer. 17:10). I, the Lord, know. It is an attribute of God alone to know man in this way. “Whence knowest thou me? ... Thou art the Son of God”.

Now you see what I meant when I said John is putting two things together. Jesus is the Son of God; Jesus is the Son of man. The Son of man is the Son of God. Because He has divine attributes, He knew all men. You notice that this knowledge is both universal and individual. He knew all men, and knows what is in man. All men, universal, and man, individual. And this characteristic of Deity was the thing which was constantly coming out, for in this gospel by John this word ‘knew’ in this sense occurs fifty-six times. It is constantly coming out — His, what men would call, uncanny knowledge, His supernatural insight, that He was never at a loss for want of knowing what to do. He tested His disciples. “This said he to prove him: for he himself knew what he would do” (John 6:6). He was always precipitating impossible situations, and pushing them on to His disciples, and saying in effect, what are you going to do about that? We cannot do anything! Two hundred pennyworth of bread will not go very far in a crowd like this! — always helplessness because they did not know. And then He did a miracle, He knew. The heavenly Man over against the earthly.

Now, how are we going to bring this together for a present application? We are brought face to face with these two persons, one representative of the earthly at its best, the other representative of God’s only acceptable Man, the

only One who stands with God, the only One. He is alone with God, and all other men stand apart. Therefore you must be born from above. Except you be born from above, you cannot *see* the kingdom of God, enter the kingdom. There is a great divide between these two men, it cannot be bridged by argument, by discussion, by any kind of explanations sought by Nicodemus. You cannot get Christians from the one to the other. It is a great divide by irreconcilable differences, hosts of differences every day. There is the ‘cannot’ man. That word ‘cannot’ is final. “He cannot see”. The ‘cannot’ man is the earthly man. Here is the Man who can, the heavenly Man. John is showing this all the way through this gospel: when no one else can, the Lord Jesus can.

The earthly and the heavenly man in the individual Christian

Now our point is not just the *fact* of the difference, nor the fact that we must be born from above, but it is the *nature* of the difference. Everything for the Christian begins here. We have stated it, we always declare it. There is nothing at all until you have been born from above. But I doubt whether any of us have got very far yet in the recognition and understanding of the difference between these two men, and until we do understand that and mark the difference or the differences, we are going to get nowhere in the Christian life. You and I are still far more earthly as Christians than we ought to be; far less heavenly than we ought to be. The great divide between us in our natural life and our spiritual life is not so clearly marked as it ought to be, and that just opens the place for the understanding of God’s strange ways with us.

When we get into the realm of the Holy Spirit’s activities we get into the realm of the greatest, terrible reality. You cannot play with flesh, you cannot tolerate nature, the natural life; if you have come into the realm of the Spirit’s activity, the reality is terrible reality. If we admit carelessly, knowingly, persistently, habitually, any of the earthly, we meet no other than very God Himself. That is the reality of this difference. You at once begin to discover that you cannot get on. There is a wall, a barrier, you are brought to a standstill when you admit any of the earthly into what is essentially the heavenly. These two are so utterly apart with God that this natural cannot work with God; there is no playing with it. The very first thing is the barrier of the impossibility of the natural being brought into the spiritual, the earthly into the heavenly. That will explain all the confoundings. Nicodemus is confounded when he comes face to face with the heavenly Man, and if we are on natural, earthly ground in any respect, we are going to be confounded by reason of our relationship with the Lord Jesus.

God's ways to bring about the end of the earthly man

(a) On the negative side

And then what do the strange dealings of God with us mean? Sometimes we would like to run away from the reality, it is so real. God is so real, things are so real. They are working out according to theory. Then what is God doing if He has us in hand through His strange, mysterious ways, His deep dealings with us? He is just winding up the earthly, bringing it to an end, in order to make us those who are heavenly. "Born from above", not only as a beginning, but in fulness of growth and manhood, conformed to the image of His Son, and the course of God's dealings with us is, on the one hand, to confound us in our natural earthly life, and write over it 'Impossible!' That in spirit, in soul, in body, we have no power, no attributes, no qualifications for knowing or doing heavenly things. At our best, we are helpless, blind and in the dark. But that is the negative side.

(b) On the positive side

On the other side, the positive, God is working mysteriously and strangely to bring us into heavenly things in knowledge and understanding. It is true that we as children of God do know things that no one else knows, that the earthly do not know. We do know, maybe a little, but we do know in that degree what the natural man does not know, and our knowledge of things spiritual and heavenly is growing, slightly perhaps, but it is growing. By deep, dark, mysterious, painful ways, we are moving through into a realm where we are coming to see that we could never see and what no one could ever see but by a passage through death to a being born from above. Oh, we cannot explain all God's methods, we cannot give an answer to all the why's of God's ways, but what we do know is that we are passing through into a realm that is altogether new in the matter of knowledge, that is different, that is other. All the values of God are of this kind. You cannot bring your natural mind to the things of God and begin to play upon them and give them interpretation with any spiritual value. However much you study the Bible, the Bible is closed for real spiritual value to everyone who has not gone through death to a heavenly new birth. That has to follow, but understand that this great divide, these two men, they are two men totally different, and there is no companionship, there is no shaking of hands between Nicodemus and Jesus, there is no fellowship, there is no understanding, they belong to two worlds, they cannot speak one another's language. Even when One from heaven gives heavenly meanings into earthly things, the earthly man cannot see the heavenly meanings, even in earthly things, so utter is the difference.

The progressive disappearance of the earthly man dating from heavenly birth

The Lord is going to get rid of the differences where we are concerned. “Ye must be born from above”, and then the differences begin to go. The things which lock us up and limit us will go; things which are impossible are now becoming the very things of our normal life. We are learning, but oh, it is a deep way because this earthly man is so deeply rooted, he is always cropping up in some way or other. Understand what God is doing with you. God is working with us so that, as we move on this earth and through this life and leave this world, the one retaining impression will be — A heavenly man, a heavenly woman, has been on this earth! Not how much we have done or said, all our activities, but just the impression that we have left behind that a heavenly man, a heavenly woman, has passed through this world, has been recognised here, that is all. That is the explanation of God’s dealings with us. If you forget all the other that I have said, do not forget that. The one consequence that God is after is to leave this impression by our having been on this earth; something has come from heaven and registered its heavenliness here in this world. Oh, it may have been rejected, the reactions to it may have been violent. The more heavenly it is, perhaps the more violent the reactions to it will be. That is what John says about the Lord Jesus, but that does not alter the fact that Jesus passed through this world and left the impression of a heavenly Man, and that is the whole argument of the New Testament in every part, that believers are to be here, not for this or that or some other incidental thing, but to leave the impression of heaven here, that God should have a witness here, that heavenly things, things of eternity, things of the Spirit, are the things which matter. Do not think that it is a matter of how much preaching or teaching or Christian work you do. Those things may be accompaniments, but if there is not the presence of Christ, the heavenly Man, in those concerned and in what they do and in what they say, and if the one remaining thing when they have passed on is not — We recognised the Lord in that man, that woman — then we have missed the meaning of Christianity. Christianity is that. Therefore you must be born from above, because that brings in what is of heaven.

THE EARTHLY AND THE HEAVENLY MAN MEETING IN THE CROSS

Reading: John 3:14-21.

In our previous meditation, we were occupied with the earlier part of this chapter in which we saw two men looking at one another across a great divide between two irreconcilable worlds — the earthly man at his best represented by Nicodemus; the heavenly Man in all His complete difference and “otherness” — Jesus. As this chapter proceeds, we are brought to that great divide, that great difference and ‘otherness’, and made to see that it meets in the cross. The two men meet in the cross, and one disappears, so far as God is concerned, and the Other goes on. One, with all that he is as before God of impossibility, and the other as He is before God with all His possibilities, they meet here in the cross. Into this section, these few verses from 14 -21, the whole of the letter to the Romans is crowded, and we have to read that letter to see what it means in the first instance, in the fundamental instance, to be born from above.

No righteousness found in earthly man at his best

The letter to the Romans is a very comprehensive and thorough setting forth of what it means basically to be born from above, and therefore we shall have that letter in mind before us with this part of the Gospel by John. Nicodemus is representative of all that man would call good, splendid, presentable, acceptable with God, all that man would consider as not being reprobate, depraved. This man Nicodemus is led back in his own nation’s history to a point well-known by him, in a wilderness where serpents are rife, loose everywhere, venomous, deadly, spreading death through the multitude, through the nation. Then at the command of the Lord, a likeness of a serpent is made of brass and fastened upon a pole and lifted up, and the people are preached to by a priest who tells them of their way of deliverance by a look of

faith towards that serpent. And it is this splendid representative of that nation who is called upon now to look at that, and then, with a swift movement, is asked to pass from Numbers 21 onto another scene shortly to be enacted outside Jerusalem, where this One who stands facing Nicodemus will be lifted up as that serpent was lifted up, that this splendid Jew, this magnificent specimen of the nation, this ruler, this teacher in Israel might find his salvation, his life, only in the same way — by a look of faith at the Son of man lifted up, and he is left to make his own deductions from the implication.

The letter to the Romans gives us those deductions. The implications are in John. The deductions and consequences are in Romans. This man is regarded as the very embodiment of righteousness according to Jewish standards. He would not be in his position as a ruler and a teacher, a Pharisee, were it not that he was a man who passed all the tests of righteousness according to Jewish standards. The letter to the Romans brings us immediately face to face with this question of righteousness. And we find that, in those early chapters, a sweeping quest is made throughout the whole creation for this thing called righteousness. God is looking into the whole creation, sending out His messengers to find righteousness, and to round up all in whom righteousness is not found. In Romans we find part after part, section after section of man, mankind, is searched in order to find this righteousness. The net is spread worldwide, universally, to gather in all in whom righteousness is not found, and the net is seen to be closing in, narrowing down, from all men to some men, and then to these of the Jewish nation. The net is closing in, and there are none outside of it. It is bringing everyone, no one is escaping; they are all coming in this great net of condemnation, and in the end not a single man remains outside, not one is righteous, no, not one, all have sinned, and therefore judgment, through condemnation, is universal, and Nicodemus is in the net, and badly in the net.

Earthly man at his best identified with the serpent

Look at the serpent. What does the serpent signify? That old serpent, the devil (Rev. 20:2), the deceiver, the poisoner, the source and instigator of all iniquity, total and utter depravity. Nicodemus, that is you! A terrible thing for Nicodemus to swallow! It was a terrible thing for Israel to swallow! They would not swallow it. That is why they were so bitter, with a bitterness of devilish hatred against the Son of man. Total depravity. You will agree that that is so with the serpent lifted up, will you not? You were not prepared at the outset to agree that that is true about Nicodemus or yourself or many men known to you, but the Lord Jesus is not sparing anyone. He uses this

‘whosoever’. The world — not the Jewish world, not the Latin world, not the Greek world, they are all in Romans. This letter to the Romans touches all those three great world representations. You will find them all in the letter — Latins, Greeks, Hebrews. It is a comprehensive letter. The whole world, whosoever, the world. Nicodemus is in the net, all are in the net. Sin — “all have sinned” (Rom. 3:23). Judgment passed upon all men for all have sinned. Death — “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). That is John 3:14-21, and the letter to the Romans at its outset.

The death of the earthly man in the cross and the emergence of the heavenly man

But then the Lord has so ordered that Nicodemus is brought right up to that cross, and shown that although that is his nature in the sight of God, that is his state, that is his doom, it need not be literally and actually. It can be his representatively and substitutionarily. The Son of man lifted up, not Nicodemus will truly be there, but in a different way from judgment. So we find that this letter to the Romans leaves this whole world full of judged, condemned and doomed mankind, to the cross (chapter 6) of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Son of man lifted up, found now, still the heavenly Man, but having voluntarily taken the very place of this earthly man in his position and in his condition. “Him who knew no sin He made sin on our behalf” (2 Cor. 5:21). He was made a curse for us. And there in the Son of man lifted up is an end of that earthly man in his position and in his condition, the end of all that we said about that earthly man in our previous meditation, and the beginning of the heavenly Man. “If we have become united with Him in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection; knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him ...”. Raised together in the likeness of His resurrection: the new man, the heavenly man, introduced; the great ‘cannot’ over that earthly man, the great ‘cannot’, forever established and ratified in the cross. Remember that. Oh no, there is no serpent wriggling out of that cross, somehow getting round that cross and escaping onto the other side and reappearing. That serpent is finished with before God, and all that that means, everything which has his venom in it, his nature in it, is in God’s mind finished, ratified; the ‘cannot’ man nailed, the great ‘cannot’ established. We must lay hold of the fact that whatever we may find in ourselves as believers, even after faith’s acceptance of this identification with Christ in death, it belongs to the earthly man and is not accepted by God. The cross of Jesus Christ says, No! — forever, fully and finally. No excusing, no condoning. It is terribly harsh judgment, and

“If we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged” (1 Cor. 11:31 A.V.). We have to be ruthless with ourselves on that side, because God has been ruthless with Satan.

The serpent lifted up and the Son of man lifted up but they are identified in the sight of God. They are not two things, but one thing, so utterly has Christ entered into the work of Satan to destroy it. If He had not utterly entered into it, He could not have utterly destroyed it. And we are there as the earthly man whose place has been taken by the Lord Jesus in that utter way. See God’s attitude and the total judgment upon total depravity, repudiating and denying it, forsaking and abandoning it. God is not going to be with us when we begin to condone and excuse and say, This is just the old man, old Adam; we all have some imperfection! No, it is not God’s attitude. We saw in our last word in the previous chapter that God has only one Man in view and that is the heavenly Man. God does not commit Himself to the earthly man. “Jesus did not trust Himself unto them, for that He knew all men, and because He needed not that any one should bear witness concerning man; for He Himself knew what was in man.” And this was what He knew was in man — the serpent. He is not committing Himself to the serpent.

This is the meaning of holiness, the basis of holiness. We have been too easy with ourselves. The ‘cannot’ man is abandoned, and the ‘cannot’ is established forever, but the ‘can’ man is introduced, and He also is established in the resurrection.

The work of the cross entered into by living faith

The Roman letter, then, is condemnation without any escape. Then, through faith, justification; but faith in that One lifted up. It is the object which gives the value to faith. It is not some abstract thing called faith. No, it is the pinning of our entire destiny to Christ crucified and raised. No hope whatever otherwise, but all our hope in Him lifted up. The dark side and the light side. “Whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have eternal life”; this is justification.

The working out of the cross by the Spirit

That is the picture here, that is the setting. It only remains for us to make the application, to get into this, because this has not really been entered into. I am not saying this has not been seen as a truth, accepted as a truth, believed as a truth, preached as a truth, professed as a truth, declared as a position. No, all that may be, but because this has not really been entered into, we

have so much confusion, mixture, contradiction, inconsistency. Two things have got mixed up and there is no clear emergence of a heavenly Man; it is a mixed up man. I am not talking about sinlessness, I am talking about the introducing, presenting, and progressive growth of a heavenly Man, seen firstly in a clearly defined cut that something radical has happened and there is a basic difference. That person is not the same person that he was. If you right at the beginning met them, you are meeting something heavenly now, you are not meeting what you met before, there is a radical difference. And it does not stay there. That difference is going on, and you are meeting less and less of what you met before, and you are meeting more and more of what was never there before. The earthly is going where God put it, the earthly is being repudiated by a conscious teaching and direction of the indwelling Spirit of life, indicating what belonging to that old life has to be repudiated, pointing out what must go. There is something basically and fundamentally wrong when a Christian, after so long, is still guilty of the same natural, earthly things persistently that were there before. I am not only talking about gross sins, I am talking about the earthly man. He may be a Nicodemus; even Nicodemus is going to come to see that all is not well.

You have only got to call him by another name, Saul of Tarsus, of the strictest sect of the Pharisees, and that man who would pass every test according to Jewish standards of righteousness, would come in to say, “I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing” (Rom. 7:18). The Holy Spirit can do marvellous things in making us aware of what we are entirely blind to. I do not understand the persistence of blind spots in a Christian indefinitely, something persisting all the time that is obviously doubtful, questionable, wrong, harmful, unwise or indiscreet. Let us be careful. Do not think about anyone else, think about yourself. There are many things about us which would not be called gross iniquities that are still very harmful and un-Christ like, and certainly not the heavenly Man. What I am saying is this — in the heavenly Man there is a progressive check-up, and you cannot, if you are going on the heavenly way, indefinitely repeat those things which are not heavenly without knowing it. Oh no, you will know. It is as well we do. It may give us a bad time, but we would not have it otherwise. We would surely say, Lord, do not let me go on an earthly way, contradicting the heavenly without knowing it. The more heavenly we become, the more acute will be those lessons, the worse will be our bad times under the Holy Spirit’s hand, for the Holy Spirit is working, not to our estimate of the cross, but to God’s. But God’s estimate of the cross is that we by nature are utterly defiled and Christ is utterly perfect. He is working towards that conformity to the image of His Son which Romans tells us about.

Now then, one or two other applications. That is the application of the cross to the whole of the earthly man, and the relationship of the cross to the whole of the heavenly Man. Basically, a crisis, a divide, a mighty difference; progressively, transformed, changed. We are not just changed mechanically; God is so practical, the cross is so practical. We are only changed by the working of death in us to give more room for life, for Christ. The ways of God come in here again. The crucifying ways to our flesh, the terrible ways to our natures, all that against which we naturally revolt, under which the earthly part of us writhes, all that is God's way of bringing the principle of the cross home to make things more than theoretical, to make things practical. At any rate, it works that way. That is what happens, and the points at which that cross is applied are countless. I could never tabulate them if I tried. All of us differ so much; the change takes place on all manner of things. If I were to stop to illustrate, I would only spoil the picture perhaps because I should miss so much. But you have to say about people who are now living on the resurrection side — They are becoming so different, they used to be this, they used to be that, this used to be the thing about them, it was so difficult and trying, but they are becoming different, that is all that you have to say about it, but that is it.

The utterness of God's dealing with the earthly man, and the need of faith's appropriation

Having said that, let me focus upon the utterness of this thing. Remember that God's tense about this is the past tense. The past tenses of John 3:14 and onward are rather impressive, and the past tenses of Romans, especially chapter 6, are indeed inescapable. "Our old man *was crucified* with Him". Is it not true that the trouble with us is that we are so terribly occupied, obsessed, with that old man which was crucified, who, in God's thought and mind is dead and buried, and we are digging him up all the time and having a look at him, and trying to paint him up and make him look a bit better, and this is proved by our prayers. Listen to how people pray, and you will see how far they have got into Romans 6. Oh, what a miserable creature I am! Lord, you know all this about me, what a poor specimen I am, telling the Lord all about this corpse, and that kind of prayer gets nowhere. It brings death, darkness and misery in; it effects nothing. You know nothing about Romans 6, however much you could quote word for word all the written doctrine, however much you have preached about it or talked about it, if you are constantly going to bring up that wretched self-life before the Lord in public or private prayer.

What is the alternative? The people who know anything about Romans 6 are the people who are in prayer glorying in Christ Jesus. Oh, thank you, Lord, for Christ, for all that He means! They are rejoicing in Jesus Christ in prayer. It is a radical test. You start off praying, before you have got very far, even starting with this, somehow or other you cannot get many sentences out before you drop down to that wretched level, and you have denied your Christ, you have set apart the heavenly Man, you have gone back to the other side of the cross and nullified the Son of man. You have opened the door for death again, and Satan is going to encamp upon that ground and bring in his work which the Son of man was manifested to destroy. A true apprehension of Romans 6 means that our eyes, our faith and our hearts are pinned upon the risen Son of God, risen for our justification.

Three questions as a test of our position

Oh, I call upon you to call to mind the three great interrogatives of Romans 8:31. The first interrogative — “What then shall we say to these things?” “If God is for us, who is against us? He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not also with Him freely give us all things?” Look at the context of that. “What then shall we say to these things?” What things? “Whom He foreknew, He also foreordained to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren; and whom He foreordained, them He also called; and whom He called, them He also justified; and whom He justified, them He also glorified” (v.29,30). What are you going to say to that? says Paul. How is God for us? Whom He foreordained, whom He called, whom He justified, whom He glorified. God is for you in Christ. He gave His Son to establish that, to ratify that. What are you going to say about it? Oh, what a wretched thing I am! What a miserable, deplorable creature! Is that what you are going to say about it? “What then shall we say to these things?”

The second great interrogation, verse 33. “Who shall lay anything to the charge of God’s elect? It is God that justifieth; who is he that condemneth? It is Christ Jesus that died, yea rather, that was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.” “Who shall lay anything to the charge of God’s elect?” What is your answer to that? Oh, everything that you can think of can be laid at my door, every charge is true of me! As one of God’s elect? You have got to give a better answer to the question than that.

The third interrogation, verse 35. “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or anguish, or persecution, or famine, or

nakedness, or peril, or sword?” “Who shall separate us from the *love* of Christ?” Is the love of Christ to you stronger than sin, than Satan, than all the work of Satan? Tribulation, anguish, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword — is the love of Christ stronger than all that to you? You have not apprehended Romans 6 if it is not. If you have apprehended the meaning of the cross, you say, I am persuaded that none of these things shall separate me from His love. “Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us.”

Just the contemplation of those three great interrogations is enough surely to show us whether we really have entered into Romans 6, the chapter we know so much about. Then, be gone despair, be gone misery, be gone all that would say to this world that we are lost, hopeless, undone. Oh, be gone self-pity, be gone the love of having a problem, be gone all this speaking about ourselves and thinking about ourselves which only works out to draw attention to ourselves and make people sorry for us! God save us by His cross from it all! Yes, tribulation and anguish and peril and nakedness and sword, they are all real, they are all there, but with all our sufferings and tribulations, the question of our position with the Lord is not to be touched. We may be in heaviness through manifold trials; the apostle was there. We may have times of suffering when our spirits are cast down, but not because we have a question about our position with the Lord and the Lord’s love for us. Oh no, Romans 6 is deliverance from this earthly man in all these ways. It is so comprehensive, it is so thorough.

But what is the issue? Well, it is, as we said earlier, What are people meeting when they meet us? That is the test of where Romans 6 is with us. What people meet, whether they meet the other side of the cross or this side of the cross; whether they meet the earthly man or the heavenly Man. We are not perfect as to the heavenly Man all at once, but there should be a knowing of progress in this, that the heavenly Man is growing, Christ is *being* fully formed in us, the situation is changing, we are not met at the point where we were met so long ago. It must be. This is what Romans says as to the meaning of being born from above. Romans says that John 3:3 means this fundamentally, basically. The great change has taken place, and that change is being seen in development, if not by us as the subjects of it, by others as the observers. A change is taking place. From misery we are rising to triumph, from despair to hope and assurance, from darkness to light.

THE FOOD OF THE EARTHLY MAN AND THE HEAVENLY MAN

Reading: Joshua 5:10-12; John 6:4,48-50; 14:1-4.

Continuing along the line of our earlier occupation, the subject, in the gospel by John, is the displacing of the earthly man in favour of the heavenly Man. In chapter two we saw these two men facing each other, Nicodemus and Jesus, and I think we saw enough to make it quite clear that Nicodemus was representative of the earthly man at his best, and how that man is an impasse, utterly incapable of moving in the heavenly realm. On the other hand, there is Jesus, the heavenly Man; speaking heavenly things, doing everything out from heaven. Then we saw these two meeting in the cross, the earthly man passing out, the heavenly Man going on. So not only the gospel by John, but all the New Testament has to do with this displacing of the earthly man in favour of the heavenly Man, the supplanting of the earthly man by the heavenly.

Life by feeding

Now our particular occupation will be with formation after Christ, the heavenly Man, by feeding upon Christ. In that passage in the book of Joshua, we saw three feedings: the Passover, the manna, and the old corn of the land. The basic factor in feeding, whether it be temporal or spiritual, is life, and life in order to be able to go on. The Passover was feeding the principle of life in order to go out from Egypt; the manna feeding the principle of life to go through the wilderness; the old corn of the land to maintain position in the land by life. Feeding, therefore, on this principle of life is governed by progress towards God's end, which end is Christ, and the progress is conformity to Christ. You need not be told that here, in this gospel by John, the great principle in view is life, and here we have three feedings corresponding to those mentioned in Joshua.

The Passover of the Jews is mentioned quite a number of times in John's Gospel. At least there were three Passovers actually with which Jesus was connected in this Gospel. Chapter 6, the manna; and, although feeding is not mentioned in chapter 14, we have what corresponds to the old corn of the land, as we shall see. Then let us get clearly in view that the basic factor is heavenly life in relation to reaching God's end — Christ in fulness, conformity to Christ.

It is perfectly clear that Nicodemus cannot go on to God's end until he receives, through faith in Jesus Christ, the life by which he will be brought to God's end, which is Christ in fulness. We must come to these three feedings.

(a) The Passover — fundamental and continuous

You know the story of the Passover as recorded in Exodus 12 — the eating of the flesh, the first Passover. The thing I want to point out about the Passover is that it is fundamental and continuous. With the Passover you have something that goes on. It was in Egypt, it was in the wilderness, it continued in the land. It went right on through every regime of the history of Israel, excepting the exile. It was the great rallying point of the days of the division of the kingdom, in the time of Hezekiah or Josiah. It is something that is continuous, that is found wherever the Lord's people are. It is basic to their very life at all times, and that is because of its supreme significance. The Passover sets forth the judgment of God against sin and the destruction of death, and that is something that holds good, and that is a testimony which has got to be kept constantly in the heart of the people. It is something which is basic to progress towards God's end. That is the point.

The link between the Passover and the Lord's Table

There is a link, of course, between the Passover and the Lord's table. It was in the night of the Passover that the Lord's table was instituted, and it carried over the basic principles of the Passover, and that is why the Lord has desired and shown that this is something to be kept in perpetual remembrance, it is something to be observed until He comes. It is something that has to be there as a testimony in the heart of His people right on through all time and in all conditions wherever the Lord's people are, and it simply amounts to this, that you and I will make no progress at all in conformity to Christ unless that testimony is maintained continuously in our hearts, that sin has been fully and utterly judged in the Person of Jesus Christ, and that death has been swallowed up in victory in the cross of our Lord Jesus. That is elementary, but it is not so elementary as to be dismissed. The Lord says,

you must not dismiss that; this goes on from first to last, from beginning to end. There are no doubt many young Christians here today who would smile if I suggested that the time might come when they would be tempted to question their very salvation, their very acceptance with God, doubt the very foundation of their Christian life and come into clouds of darkness about the very love of God for their souls. You are today so joyful in your salvation, in your Christianity, that you smile if anybody says anything like that. You would retort at once, like Peter, 'Though all men forsake Thee, yet will I not forsake Thee.' You do not know your heart, and you do not know the devil. Our hearts, right on to the end, no matter how long we have walked with God, no matter how deeply we have come to know the Lord, our own hearts, that which is still of the earthly man, are still capable of questioning the fundamental love of God for our souls. Under the devil's intense pressure, under the trials to which we may be subjected, in the situations which the Lord may allow to arise for our testing and the perfecting of our faith, it becomes almost easy to raise fundamental questions about our salvation, and the most saintly servants of God, who have walked with God through long years of a long life, who have suffered and served and been greatly used, have on their beds at the end found themselves encompassed by dark clouds of question as to whether they were saved after all. That is not exaggeration. You have only to read the life of A.B. Simpson — and who will question that he was a saintly man of God, greatly used, a channel of immense blessing to the ends of the earth? He in his last hours was encompassed by darkness, so that a brother had to kneel at his bedside day and night to fight the dark clouds of doubt about that man's very salvation. The enemy never gives up trying to undercut this fact, that sin has been fully and finally judged in the Person of Christ. The Father vented unmitigated judgment upon His Son for us, and death was conquered and destroyed. So the Lord says, You will never go on, you will never arrive, you will never make any progress towards the full end of Christ unless this is maintained as a testimony in your heart.

We do not gather around the Lord's table just as matter of form, just to keep up something; neither because the Lord said that He would that we should do it until He come. Why do we do it if it is not this? There is only a short span of a week between today and on Sundays I hold in my heart strongly to this testimony, that Jesus has met the whole sin question, and the whole death question as the consequence of sin, on my behalf; I stand continually on that ground! To come to the Lord's table and to have questions about that sin question and about the consequence question (death) is to deny the Lord's table. We need it for deliverance from Egypt, we need it for triumph in the wilderness, we need it for maintaining our place in the heavenlies. It is

fundamental. We shall only make progress as we maintain this testimony, not as an ordinance, but as the basis of everything in our hearts. “There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

You notice with Israel, even when they were in the wilderness, out of Egypt, Egypt was still reaching out its octopus tentacles to bring them back. Yes, Egypt pursued not only outwardly to the Red Sea, but inwardly in their hearts. There was always this something seeking to bring them back and the maintenance of the Passover continually testified that Egypt was cut off, judgment had been vented and death destroyed. They were separated from all that by the Passover. And it is like that, this reaching out to lay hold of us, under pressure, trial or adversity to nullify the great work of the cross in our hearts. It is a spectre that follows us all the time, and the Passover is a testimony against its right to have any power over us at all.

(b) The manna — life sustained in the wilderness

As to the manna, the second feeding, which belonged to the wilderness, it was the testimony to the sustaining of life for progress in the wilderness. If they had not had food from heaven, they would neither have lived nor made progress. That, of course, is obvious. Here in John you have a multitude in a wilderness in that position, typically. They will perish, they will not come to that for which Christ has come unless something happens. He takes up this matter of Moses and the manna. He says the type failed. “Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died” (John 6:49). The type failed, but here is the true manna from heaven, “that a man may eat thereof, and not die” (verse 50). This is Christ the mystery, for the manna was a mystery. They said, “What is it?” (Ex. 16:15). It was something unknown, something for which there was no formula; the mystery of Christ as our supply from heaven in the daily walk where nothing whatever is offered for our succour and sustenance here — wilderness conditions.

The manna offered to faith

And this is something offered to faith. The Lord kept the manna on a faith basis very strictly. He never allowed it to go from one day to the other. He said, This is something that you will have to anticipate by faith anew, afresh, all over again, every day. You are going to have nothing that you can count upon, nothing that you can put by and say well, at any rate, we have so much; we need not worry about tomorrow. No, He kept them strictly on a day by day anticipation of faith. If they worried overnight, that was their fault. What happened in the morning was this — when they woke up, their attitude

was either, I wonder whether there is anything for us to eat today, or, God is faithful, we will go out and find His provision there for us; simple but very definite faith every day. This is the mystery of daily sustenance when there is nothing whatever upon which to rely here; Christ sustaining in wilderness conditions. You must read into that phrase — ‘wilderness conditions’ all that you know of heavenly life here, which has nothing in this world to maintain it, but everything against it — your conditions, your circumstances, your position, and nothing to help, and yet the mystery! I feel we are very slow to learn this lesson. We again and again come up against situations and circumstances where once more there is nothing to go on. It may be in ministry — nothing to go on. The Lord has not stored you up with messages and material a long way ahead. It may be in life, today or this immediate future offers nothing, and the need is so great. How are we going to face it and get through? It is like that in many ways. Just how are you going to get through? We can see nothing, and we are so slow to learn this lesson. Do we not have enough history behind us to say that the Lord did not fail? Every time He met the need, strangely, mysteriously, we hardly know how He did it, but He did it. I am talking about the spiritual life being maintained from heaven in a world where there is nothing but what is contrary to that heavenly life. How shall we go on towards God’s end? Oh, just in this way, the way of the manna. Well, here is a new situation; we have nothing whatever in ourselves with which to meet it, there is nothing around us at all that can stand up to this situation, but the Lord who has in the past, will on this occasion also, see us through. Although that sounds so simple, it is not so simple, because it seems that the trials, the situations, become more and more exacting as we go on, more difficult, more impossible. Faith is being more sorely tested; but we may feed on Christ, the heavenly manna, by faith. What do we mean by faith? Why, here is another day to be met, and there is nothing with which to meet it, but, Lord, I take You for this situation, for this need. Faith lays hold of You to see me through, that I go on and do not come to a standstill by these conditions. That is feeding on Christ by faith.

(c) The old corn of the land — the Lord Jesus, the firstfruits

The old corn of the land. In spiritual experience of course, there is not such a precise break between the wilderness and the land as there seems to be in Joshua, and that is quite in keeping with the New Testament. You know Peter’s writings for pilgrims and strangers; Paul’s for citizens of a heavenly country. We have an earthly side of testing and trial, of the perfecting of faith. But then there is that which corresponds to the heavenlies in Christ. John 14 brings this in. The Lord is going and He is saying, “Let not your heart

be troubled”, but you are being called upon now to live on a much higher level of spiritual life in the heavenlies. You are going to meet forces of evil in high places, all that corresponds to the book of Joshua. You are going to find that it is not only earthly trials and difficulties, but you are going to meet the forces of evil. There are two experiences common to Christians. There are the earthly trials, the wilderness experiences, things common to us down here, but there are other things as well. Some of us know those sheer forces of evil in the heavenlies, the extra realm of spiritual adversity, and we are going to be called upon to live in that realm, in the land, in the heavenlies. What food will get you through? What is the old corn of the land? I understand that it means that which is already there waiting. It is last year’s harvest, not something that has to be brought in. It is already waiting for you there, and, as I see it, it is this — the Lord Jesus is there already, He has gone on before, He is the firstfruits, He is already ahead of us in the heavenlies, He has sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in the heavens. We must feed on that, that Christ is enthroned above, that Christ is victor and is sat down, that principalities and powers and all these forces are already under His feet, subject to Him. That is something secured already in heaven by His having gone there. That is the old corn of the land, that is the food. In this spiritual conflict, this spiritual warfare, this situation so difficult to maintain, a heavenly position, because of all that belongs there, we need sustenance to go on. What is the sustenance, what is the food, what is the old corn of the land? It is Christ exalted, Christ enthroned, Christ already there. “Because I live, ye shall live also” (John 14:19). ‘I reign — ye shall reign.’ Feed on it, believe it, take it by faith, that you are not going to be brought to a standstill, it is not necessary for you to come to a halt. It is not necessary for you to die under the pressure of the enemy; Christ is there in the land, already in possession of the situation. Feed on that by faith, and you will go on in the realm which is the most difficult realm of all. Temporal trials may be great, earthly situations may be difficult, but these intensely spiritual ones of the heavenlies are far greater. But God has provided for every situation in order to get us through to His end — full conformity to His Son. This is how the earthly man is supplanted and the heavenly Man takes his place. Conformity to Christ, formation after Christ, by feeding upon Christ, Christ in this three-fold meaning — the Passover, the manna and the old corn of the land.

To be continued.