

## According to Plan

An Introduction to the Life of Christ  
by C. L. Parker

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(from the introductory chapter)*

### ACCORDING TO PLAN

Foreword

Chapter 1	Introductory
Chapter 2	The Grace of the One Man, Jesus Christ
Chapter 3	The Creation
Chapter 4	Adam to the Flood
Chapter 5	Abraham to Malachi
Chapter 6	The Word Became Flesh - He Emptied Himself
Chapter 7	Jesus Bar-Joseph
Chapter 8	'For He Hath No Form Or Comeliness'
Chapter 9	'My Father's Business'
Chapter 10	A Sharp Sword
Chapter 11	A Polished Shaft
Chapter 12	The Banks of Jordan
Chapter 13	The Crucible of God

**THANKS.** MY APPRECIATIVE thanks are due to those kind people who helped me by correcting and typing the manuscript for this book, among them Mr. Elisha Thompson, Miss Lily Hewett, Miss E. F. Dodgson, my daughter Faith and my son John. I know it has been a labour of love, and a desire to spread the unfolding of the Scriptures as revealed to my dear 'C.L.'

May the Lord greatly bless each one of them, and all those who feel the lovely impact of the Holy Spirit as they read. **Your Sister in the Lord,** **Phyllis H. Parker.**

### FOREWORD.

THIS MANUSCRIPT lay penned but not finished for a number of years before my father's death because, as he says in his introduction, 'For a day-to-day biography (of Christ) there are no materials, and only a small number of days are even mentioned.' He had, I think, intended a short life of Christ, but with many another found the chronological problems connected with it a rather formidable barrier to a connected narrative. He got no further than the Wedding Feast at Cana, and for the purposes of publishing this material as a complete study in itself my mother has decided to use the sub-title 'An Introduction to the Life of Christ', and to take it to the point where Christ emerges Victor from the contest with Satan in the Wilderness, prepared and proved, and ready to enter upon His Public Ministry.

I have heard my father mention, with amusement, the rather pompous young man who, upon his celebrated father's death, used to raise aloft a copy of the Scriptures in the pulpit and say, with hushed voice and bated breath, 'My father's Bible!' All I wish to say about *my* father's Bible, the fairly new one he was using at the time of his death, is that certain pages in the second half of Isaiah are very thumb-marked indeed in comparison with the fairly clean state of the remainder of the sacred volume!

He seemed in his last years strongly drawn to those passages of Scripture to which Christ Himself must often have turned, those verses in chapters 42, 49, 53 and 61 of the book of Isaiah portraying so vividly the course of His earthly life from the Womb to the Cross. In these Christ saw traced out before Him that long period of hidden preparation to be followed by a time of mightily-anointed Ministry: this to end in eventual rejection and apparent failure accompanied by a strong temptation to discouragement; this when overcome was to lead on to that final act of purposeful sacrifice at Calvary, having as its glorious and eternal fruit a full and free salvation to offer to all men.

It was not just the comforting fact that our Saviour had so truly sat where we sit, and was thus fully equipped to lead us into a personal experience of victory, that drew my father back again and again to these passages. Nor was it even the liberating truth that against all odds He had triumphed absolutely, and so made eternally secure our Heavenly future. It was rather that breath-taking glimpse into the loving heart of the

Triune God which this prophetic commentary on the earthly pilgrimage of the Son afforded him. To have a God as utterly unselfish as this—totally dedicated to the happiness of His Creation; perfect in wisdom so that every detail of His redemptive plan was settled in Eternity past—this brought unceasing wonder and delight to my father.

And so it seems fitting that the last of his writings to be published should be a full-length portrait of the Son, a re-creation from Scripture of all that befell Him from the moment that His Father revealed to Him His plan to create. 'He that hath seen me hath seen the Father', Jesus said, and this book is sent forth with the desire that hearts might be drawn closer to both Father and Son. ***John L. Parker Sheffield.***

## **1 Introductory.**

JESUS of NAZARETH made it abundantly clear during His earthly ministry that He regarded those few years of life in Palestine as a mere interlude in His real life. He knew whence He came and whither He was going, and it is impossible to regard His earthly life as a self-contained whole, having its own meaning. It is only when it is considered as a small—though vitally important—part of a larger plan that its true significance is seen. It was but a small specimen, open to human eyes, of a life of obedience to His Father which had been and was to be eternal, and it is only as a part of a larger whole that its importance can be understood. Only in the Ages of Ages that are yet to come will the real effects of those few years be made manifest. Viewed as an earthly life, it may seem to be most disappointing; as He said Himself, He had spent His strength for nought and in vain. The very nation He had come to save did but plunge more deeply into sin, and was soon to experience its most fearful and prolonged disaster. The Gentiles to whom the Good News was sent have done little better with it, and are soon to plunge into a darkness of sin and destruction past remedy.

If, however, we lift our eyes and look backwards to that holy conversation before 'Time' was, when He laid down His life upon the altar of God's justice, and then look forward to that eternal Kingdom of the blood-bought which through ages shall expand in ever-increasing development, we marvel that we could have been so blind as not to see in those short years of struggle the seed-plot of all that is glorious, all that is marvellous, all that is eternal. The man who buys his packets of seeds from the florist does not purchase seeds but, by the eye of faith, a bed of flowers! And he who studies the life of Christ must not fix his eyes upon the seed but in faith envisage the flowers that were in the mind of the Creator before 'Time' was. It is the Eternal One with whom we have to do, veiled for a time in Adam's flesh, shrouded for a time from our mortal eyes by the clouds of Heaven: but for all time to be the centre of our lives and the hope of the Universe.

It may be that the bare attempt to write of His life is folly; and yet the Bible is given not to mystify but to reveal. He stands before us as One who asks a verdict upon evidence set before us. May those who have given us the picture of Him in the Book be heard and gain the verdict: 'Truly this man was the Son of God'.

For a day-to-day biography there are no materials and only a small number of days are even mentioned. Mountain tops and valleys are visible indeed, but a consecutive history and accurate dating are beyond us. Yet for a picture of His Heart, an understanding of His ways, a knowledge of His aims, we have all that we need. On which day He fed the five thousand we know not nor care: but we do know that He was filled with compassion for them. The day when Lazarus fell ill is concealed from us, but not the tears of Jesus. When was the day on which the carpenter of Nazareth first realised that He was God? We know not. But that He did so, and by His knowledge justified many by bearing their iniquities—that we know, and are content.

## **2 The Grace of the One Man, Jesus Christ.**

WE ARE TOLD ENOUGH in the Scriptures of what happened before the creation to know that in the foreknowledge of God the whole plan of the ages was laid before the Godhead. The vast possibilities were seen, but also the great dangers inherent in any scheme which had to take account of the free-will of angels and men. A creation in which wise and loving creatures would enjoy eternal happiness could easily turn into a nightmare of selfishness and cruelty in which all the aims of the Creator would be frustrated. One fool can destroy much good, and the possibility of reckless sin had to be taken into account. Magnificent though the scheme was it could not be put into operation unless its success could be assured.

It is at this point that the record of the life of Christ begins for us, and we catch our first glimpse of His nature. For it was made plain to Him that only at His expense could the plan proceed; only if He was willing to bear the consequences of any sin which might arise to wreck the universe would His Father be justified in creating.

When Abraham had split the wood, he looked into Isaac's eyes in deep emotion and disclosed God's will that he, Abraham, should sacrifice him upon that wood. So must the Eternal Father have looked at His Only Begotten Son as He disclosed to Him that this glorious plan all depended upon His willingness to die upon a

cross when sin should enter. Only if He would promise to die could the Father promise that the Creation would end in Eternal Life. On any other terms it might well end in a catastrophe of destruction and misery. God, as well as man, must count the cost of anything He might undertake lest He be unable or unwilling to pay the price of success.

The first sight we are given, then, of the Son of God is as of a Lamb slain before the foundation of the world; by the gracious sacrifice of Himself enabling His Father to bring into being an Eternal Universe wherein the inhabitants should for ever enjoy perfect felicity. The Cross was lifted upon His shoulder from the beginning and daily carried till at length He sank beneath its weight upon Calvary. He gave to His Father's plan that complete and enthusiastic devotion which was expressed in the words 'I delight to do Thy Will, O My God'. Together with the Holy Spirit they went forward to an undertaking which through long-suffering, sorrow and sacrifice was to culminate in the bliss of the New Heaven and New Earth. The pain of One would be the grief of all. The Spirit would know what it was to pray with unutterable groanings, while the Father's heart was torn in sympathy. Each member of the Godhead would love to explain to men and angels the nobility of the other Two; for love seeketh the glory not of itself, but of another.

We may pause here for a moment to contemplate the courage of the Lord. As Isaac faced the shock of his father's disclosure and steeled himself to lie down upon the altar, so the Son of God heard words from His Father's lips which demanded from Him the supreme sacrifice and utmost devotion. His earthly life was to contain experiences of such a nature as would bring the bloody sweat to His brow at the contemplation of them. He was to have the painful lot of living in the likeness of sinful flesh, and the still more awful tasting of the pains of disembodiment and death in Hades. Pain, suffering, hatred, contempt, misunderstanding, loneliness, fear and shock were all to be His portion—which could so easily be avoided, but only at our expense. The setting of His face as a flint began far back: the disciples only saw on earth what had long ago been plain in Heaven, that in the hour of danger and difficulty the Son of God stood as a rock and faced it with unflinching courage.

It was here too, before the Ages began, that the Sanctification of Our Lord began. An undertaking so vast, so difficult, so dangerous, demanded from Him His whole endeavour, and ungrudgingly received it. From that moment He pleased not Himself, but gave Himself unreservedly to that work which He was called to share with His Father and the Holy Spirit. Deep called to deep, and was answered from a whole heart and soul. The One to Whom the responsibility for so great a work was to be entrusted could allow no other interests to enter His Heart and Life. From henceforth the creation was to be His sole preoccupation. Created by His Father with His co-operation, it was in the fullest sense to be for Him. From Archangels to sparrows His mercies and His attentions were to be ever-present. He must neither slumber nor sleep, but in complete devotion bear it upon His shoulders and upon His heart.

Stress is laid in Scripture upon one other motive which entered into the Lord's heart and enabled Him to go forward in so difficult a path. There was at last to arise out of this vast undertaking a company which should be peculiarly His own. Described variously as His Brethren, His Bride and His Church, they were to be the first fruits of the New Creation; those who, lifted into a position above that of man or even angels, should sit upon His Throne and share with Him throughout Eternity the Government of this vast universe. This was His treasure hid in the field; not a responsibility to be carried on His shoulders, but rather those who would share the load and lighten the burden, playing their part with Him in whatever the Ages of Eternity should bring forth. Here He would find His full satisfaction for the travail of His soul: here would be those to whom He could forever communicate all that His Father should say to Him, from whom He would have no secrets, upon whose loyalty He could count throughout Eternity.

### **3 The Creation.**

NO 'GREAT MAGICIAN' waved an irresponsible wand, nor did an astonished worm emerge from some primeval slime! No, it was upon the solid foundation of the self-devotion of the Son of God that there sprang into being the start of the Creation. The Heavens appeared; and the sequence of the Ages had its beginning.

Gathering up the few references we have to this period, it seems that the Angels were created and then trained for their work of ruling the earth which was later to appear. Head of them all, and most receptive to the mind of God, was Lucifer, the chief friend of the Son of God. Out of that companionship there emerged a soul perfect in wisdom, and able to undertake the most difficult tasks and to stand at the head of his companion angels.

To him and them the Lord entrusted the earth, which sprang into being in such a way that they could not restrain their shouts of joy. From him, and them, the Lord received the first of those stabs of treachery which were later to pierce His heart so continually. So well had Lucifer been trained by the Son of God that he successfully accomplished the task entrusted to him; but out of this success was born, not gratitude to the God

who gave it, but pride: and the awful thought of supplanting his Benefactor entered his mind and then his heart, and there began in Heaven that jealous hatred which after long ages of relentless continuance will find its fearful reward in the eternal darkness of Hell itself. The one wronged is doubly hated. Satan aspired to equality: Christ, whose deity made it natural, rejected it. (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:28.) It was with pangs of the deepest regret that the Lord had seen His erstwhile friend fall like lightning from Heaven: no joy was to be found in that fearful ruin; but rather in the anticipation of those who, faithful unto death, would find their names written in Heaven, and rise to take his place and bring comfort to their Saviour.

As the Lord contemplated that beautiful earth now waste and desolate through the insensate folly of pride and sin, there must have been in His heart a realisation of the desperate need for His atoning death which held the only means of bringing light out of darkness, hope out of despair, and success out of failure. The treachery of Lucifer was the first nail in the Cross of Golgotha.

#### **4 Adam to the Flood.**

AFTER THE LAPSE of unknown time had sufficed to drive home to the hearts of all who beheld it the tragedy of pride and disobedience, the Son of God arose to seek another friend with whose aid He could repair the ravages of the past. The Earth was set in order once again and man was brought forth in the likeness of God, that in the cool of the eve, and in daily conversation, the heart of the Son of God might be healed and refreshed by the love of Adam and Eve. His delights were with them, we read, as He began once more to educate him who should have dominion over the earth.

What grades there are of love! Who would put into the same category fair and foul weather friends! Adam and Eve should be given an opportunity of proving themselves and realising the goodness of their God. Accordingly Satan in all his treachery and bitter hatred was allowed to enter Eden that the experience of his wickedness should fill them by contrast with a deeper comprehension of the Love of God. The slander of a friend arouses in us the greater determination to go to his defence. Speak against a lover to his lass, and we but drive her closer to his heart! So God, who had given to Adam and Eve all they had, might well have expected to find them up in arms against His slanderer.

Again the former tragedy was repeated. So wicked grew the earth that from Cain to Lamech, and Lamech to the flood was a rising crescendo of violence, till in mercy God put 'finis' to this tale of man's inhumanity to man, and swept away the ungodly into destruction. Yet two things should be considered at this point: the institution of a long line of blood sacrifices that was to end at Calvary; and the picking out of a few friends whose loyalty withstood all attacks.

Just as the rainbow was to bring to God's memory His covenant with Noah, so this constant repetition of animal sacrifices must have spoken continually to the Son of God of that human sacrifice which was to take their place; so that again He daily took up His Cross in His heart, and slowly moved toward His own execution. Not otherwise could He have asked Peter to undertake a ministry that was to end in tragedy, and cast its shadow across the light of every day. The Son of God, too, knew from experience what it meant to live in the constant expectation of suffering and death.

To balance this debit side, however, was the beginning of a long line of friends, who by their confidence in Him would warm His heart, and heal the wounds inflicted by the treachery of others. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Job stood as pure gold in the midst of dross. The history of the human race was to prove the value and the rarity of gold: but here were the beginnings of that company who would repay Him for the travail of His soul, and the sorrows of His experience. To Enoch at least was imparted some knowledge of the course of history which was to bring to earth the Son of God with ten thousand of His Saints. To Job was given the inestimable honour of shouting into the heart of Satan those triumphant words 'Though He slay me yet will I trust Him'. What music in Christ's ears! What ointment to mollify His wound at Adam's hand!

The Scriptures say that at this time the long-suffering of God waited. Already He was tasting, from a safe distance, the contradiction of sinners that was later to blow full blast against His soul and body, branding Him as a deceiver unfit to live amongst honest folk, and drawing from Him the cry 'How long shall I be with you and suffer you?'

So severe was the sorrow of His soul at the sight of so much obstinate cruelty as to bring Him nigh to rejection of the whole plan upon which He had embarked. It repented Him that He had made man, and filled Him with shocked grief that He must destroy the works of His own hands. Truly the sorrows of Christ began before His ministry in Palestine! Long-suffering *means* long suffering.

#### **5 Abraham to Malachi.**

THE FEARFUL JUDGMENT of the Flood led humanity not to the arms of a forgiving Saviour but to the defiant gesture of the Tower of Babel. As a result the Lord gave up the race to its own devices and sought Himself out a man who should value His friendship and fulfil His will. Such a one He found in Abraham, the father both of the Lord's earthly people and of His Heavenly Family. Here was one whom alone He could call His friend out of all the teeming multitudes of men.

Abraham was willing to leave home, and finally kindred, if only he could follow His Friend; and came to such a pitch of loyalty that he could taste the same heartache that the Father knew. It seems as if in the fearful scene on Mt. Moriah God Himself was moved to admiration of the magnificent courage and obedience of father and son when faced with sacrifice and conflict. Not easily did Isaac steel himself to face his fate, nor Abraham take up the horrid knife. The Heavenly Watchers saw in miniature a replica of their own conduct in that pre-Creation hour. How wonderfully close were God and man drawn in the common facing of a like ordeal! Friends need more than a liking for each other: there must be a common ground of experience between them before heart can beat with heart. So in later years Paul was to ask for a sharing of His Lord's sufferings that his comprehension of His Soul might be the fuller! Here, however, was the seed that later was to bear such rich fruit in a long line of men who 'knew' the Lord.

Even in the Old Testament to 'know' the Lord meant to have one's life filled with the deepest emotions and the strangest experiences. Let Elijah, Jonah, Caleb or Jeremiah tell of what it meant to them to have known the Lord! Let Christ speak of His joy in finding those who could bear to share that holy burden and that great sorrow which brought the Spirit of God to groanings that cannot be uttered. No sooner did the Son of God find a friend than He would send him forth to be a faithful messenger who should bring rest to His godly soul. His eyes ranged continually over the world looking for such men: Paul in his sorrowful statement that he had no one like-minded to send to the Philippians is but echoing the words of the Lord in Isaiah 6: 'Whom shall I send? Who will go?' How difficult for God to send forth His loved servants to sorrow, rejection, suffering and death, to put into their mouths words that they could only speak at peril of their lives. It was not only the sacrifice of dumb animals day by day that reminded the Son of God of His own coming death: it was the sufferings of His human friends that kept ever fresh in His mind the fact that His own time to enter the arena was soon to come. Indeed, from time to time an instalment of His adventures to come was sent down to be put amongst the Scriptures that later were to be His guide and stay. The warnings to Jeremiah and Ezekiel of the sort of people to whom they were to minister struck to the heart of Him who later was to face the same people and suffer a worse fate. He was one of the watchers of Daniel Chapter 4. How profound His interest in the heroic exploits of His friends. Amongst all the Heavenly spectators of the human drama none was so absorbed as the Son of God Himself, who was soon to tread the same stage and display a greater faith. As Job, Joseph, Rahab and Esther played their breathless parts in the Divine Drama, their every thought lay open to the entranced eyes of Him who loved them. If Heaven was plunged into gloom as David betrayed in one stroke his faithful soldier and his loving God, yet also it knew the ecstasy of appreciation as Micaiah strode back to his prison fare, the only 'man' amongst them all; or Daniel opened his deadly window 'as he did aforetime'. With what joy has the Lord turned and said to the angels those words which one day He will address in person to some of the actors in the human spectacle 'Bravo, Bravo! Well done'.

So close had been His interest in human affairs that at times He had participated personally in them. He had experienced the horror of Sodom, shared a meal with Abraham and Sarah, walked in the Fire with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. At other times, though not visible Himself, He had acted visibly: had written upon Belshazzar's wall, and upon Moses' tables; had withstood Balaam's ass, muzzled Daniel's lions, and prepared Jonah's whale; had poured down fire from Heaven, and sent a chariot for Elijah. The Old Testament is a record of His Doings: His sorrows, joys, anxieties, long-sufferings, deliverances are all depicted there, that they who read may know their God and understand His ways. The record closes with a clear promise that the spectator at a distance was about to become an actor on the stage. This tremendous announcement was followed by silence from Heaven, a silence which lasted four hundred years, as if all creation awaited this stupendous act in breathless anticipation; and God Himself was amazed at this supreme condescension.

## **6 The Word became Flesh—He emptied Himself.**

MANY YEARS AGO Hudson Taylor doffed his European clothes, and with them his European life, and put on Chinese clothes and a Chinese pigtail that he might live a Chinese life and win Chinese souls for His Master. Years before that, a band of Moravian missionaries took the only means open to them of reaching the negro slaves of America with the Word of Life by selling themselves into life-long slavery to their tyrannical masters, so that by living the life of slaves they might gain slaves for Christ.

Such actions, magnificent as they were, pale into insignificance when compared with the incarnation of the Word of God, that by taking upon Him the flesh of men He might live the life of man and reconcile men to God. The contrast between the life of the Son of God in Heaven, and that of the Son of Man in Nazareth, is so extreme as to defy description. Yet it is put before us as something which we should consider, and from which we may learn much about Our Saviour's heart. We should therefore ponder all that is told of this event: for it

was shown us not to mystify but to enlighten us, not to repel but to attract us. The Holy Ghost came not to disappoint us but to lead us step by step into all truth. It is the fact that man was made in the image of God that enables us to enter into His thoughts and into His feelings. It was the same fact that made the Incarnation a possibility. The mould into which the soul of the Son of God was now to enter was of the same form, though of infinitely slighter proportions than that in which He had hitherto dwelt.

There is a phrase in Mark 14:33 which may aptly be transferred to the time before the Incarnation. It is said there that when the shadows of Calvary began to fall upon Jesus of Nazareth He began to be amazed. So different is realisation from anticipation, even to God Himself! The Lord Jesus had been contemplating, facing, foretelling and explaining Calvary throughout His ministry, but the first actual approach of the fact so far exceeded His thoughts as to beat Him to His knees in an agony of conflict.

There must have been some such experience for the Son of God when the time came for Him to implement the promise made before Creation. Hitherto it had been words and thoughts; now it was to be actions and feelings. No doubt the Moravians had thought it all out upon their knees in their own chambers, but it was different when the money was paid, and the manacles clamped, and the whips might fall!

There lay before the Son of God a mighty change of experience. Hitherto His person had been inviolate. His home secure. His vision of His Father unobscured. Now He was to lay aside His immunity from pain and suffering, from the unforeseen chances of human life, and launch His frail barque upon an unknown sea of untasted experiences. Above all, He was to put Himself into such a position that Death itself should be His portion. The Son of God was to lay aside not only His Body but also His Spirit, and enter into the sufferings of the damned, before He could again revert to the Glory which He shared with His Father from the Beginning.

To sustain Him in this fearful adventure was the knowledge that He came not of Himself but was sent by His Father, not upon some self-chosen escapade like the fallen angels who also left their first estate, but to do the will of Him who sent Him. He had known from eternity what it was to live in trustful dependence upon His Father. Now that hidden life was to be manifested to men, and He who had obeyed Him in the light was to trust Him in the dark, that all might know that He came to live and die because He loved the Father. In Hebrews 2:13 is given the badge of Divine Sonship worn by all the Royal Family: their faith and hope have been in God.

There is a purely human courage which enables a man to face danger through confidence in his own right arm, his own resources of soul and body. There is another courage which rests not upon itself but upon the Love and Power of another, the courage of Faith in God. This it was that nerved the Son of God as He faced the Incarnation.

Before the actual Incarnation, however, there was to be, as it were, a 'disrobing' of the Son of God. In Paul's vivid phrase 'He emptied Himself' (Philippians 2:7), and thus became poor for our sakes. The Son of God was to live on earth a purely human life with all the disabilities that that entailed. He was to know experiences and trials which are impossible to God in His fullness: for He was to be tempted, to be weak, to suffer and to die. Therefore He laid aside His wisdom that He might know what it was to grow in wisdom; His power that He might learn to depend upon the power of the Holy Spirit; His immortality that He might taste death for every man. In other words, He emptied Himself of everything which might give Him an advantage over any other man, and became 'the man, Christ Jesus'.

It has sometimes happened that a man has left his home to go to business in the morning as usual, and at midday found himself in a hospital ward wondering who he is and what he is doing, a victim of amnesia. While the attack lasts he is wholly dependent upon the words of others for knowledge of his past life. His mother, his wife, his business associates can each supply him with a new memory; and, if he can believe them, he can piece together his past life incident by incident, conversation by conversation.

Some such experience was the lot of the Son of God. There came a moment when He laid down even His consciousness of self, and with it his memory, and became an embryo in Mary's womb, to wake up to the slow mental growth of an ordinary baby. How inconceivably great a step for God to take!

Or, again, it has often happened that a vigorous athlete has been stricken with some foul disease and heard from his doctor's unwilling lips the news that never again will he feel strong or be healthy; that the best he has to hope for, after a painful operation, is the life of an invalid and a lingering death. So has he laid himself down to be anaesthetised, knowing that when he awakens the old life of prowess will be over, and the one of invalidism begun.

So the Lord of Glory was faced with the fact that after He had emptied Himself He would wake again to consciousness in a poor body without any beauty, and live out a lonely life amongst a sea of enemies, until

even that was extinguished in the darkness of Hades and the company of the damned. And this He did, not in ignorance, but having followed for centuries the sufferings of those who, like Himself, had put their trust in a Living God, and earned the hatred of the ungodly.

The friends who bid farewell to the missionary at the railway station know full well that in spite of choruses and hallelujahs the life that lies ahead is strange and hard and maybe dangerous. Their hearts are full, their prayers are promised, their imaginations stirred. How must the Angels, both good and bad, have wondered as the departure of the Son of God on this voyage to earth began. Gabriel had already had a hand in the preliminaries, and carried down to Zacharias, Mary and Joseph the first news of the coming event. Simeon too had received advance information. On the other hand Satan was already forming his plan to destroy the young child at birth. There should be no room in the inn save in the cattle shed; and if the babe survived that insanitary birthplace, Herod should be roused by the Magi's enquiry to cut Him off with the jealous sword. All Heaven indeed was agog with interest as the day of the amazing adventure drew nigh: only earth was wrapped in the sleep of ignorant unbelief; earth which had been warned centuries before that such a Son should be born to them, a Son Who should be the Mighty God.

How tremendous that last moment, when with supreme confidence in the Almighty Father, the only-begotten Son lost hold of Himself and fell asleep on the bosom of Jehovah, to wake again in the arms of Mary!

### **7 Jesus Bar-Joseph.**

DOWN UPON THE earth there was a small band of people whose expectations had been aroused to the highest pitch. The miraculous appearance of Gabriel to Zacharias, and the subsequent miraculous birth of John were known to all the hill country of Judea. The priesthood in Jerusalem also knew of the astounding experience vouchsafed to one of their number, and the words of the Holy Ghost had accompanied it. It had been stated that John should be filled with the Holy Ghost from his mother's womb: indeed had he not leapt in it at the approach of Mary! What manner of child should the Son of the Highest be when Mary's womb gave up its secret, and the Almighty manifested His Well-Beloved! Their minds doubtless turned back to Samson, to Samuel, to David, all great men in their youth and leaders of the nation. If the sons of men were so remarkable, what might not be expected when the Son of God appeared!

How eagerly did Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zacharias look into their children's faces as if to see some sign of the secrets that lay within: how often did they tell over the words of the Angel and ask each other what manner of children they might be! Zacharias determined at any rate to send his boy away from the temptations of city life to live as Elijah had lived apart from men in the desert, that he might more easily fulfil the prediction that he should move in the Spirit and power of Elijah.

Joseph and Mary, after the exciting events which followed the visit of the Magi, seem to have made no such special provision. They returned to Nazareth and there resumed the life that had been so rudely and fantastically interrupted. The child grew up in the common home of a village carpenter, rated at that time as the least important member of a village community. There was no money to make any particular provision. The gifts of the Magi had enabled them to take that expensive Egyptian journey, but now that was all spent, and the family was dependent upon Joseph's scanty wage. Their difficulties were increased by the need for providing for brothers and sisters of Jesus, who came in a steady stream until they numbered seven or eight. From every point of view it was a hard struggle, and the Almighty seemed strangely unconcerned.

There was also the very real difficulty connected with Jesus' birth. They hardly knew how to speak of it. After the preliminary excitement of the first months in Judea and Egypt was over they were obliged to come back to the very different atmosphere of Nazareth, a village noted for the debased condition of its inhabitants. No angelic hosts here, no prophecies from noted saints in the Temple! Only the steady round of an ungodly village with a nose for scandal. However the difficulty solved itself one day. A neighbour who happened to look in remarked that Jesus grew more like his father every day. The time for the truth was on them like a flash—and as quickly passed by.

Before the disavowal—"But he is God's son, not Joseph's"—was made, the neighbour had taken her way, and the village understood that Joseph did not deny paternity. The little scandal was soon forgotten in a fresh nine-days' wonder, and Jesus bar-Joseph took his place in the life of Nazareth, as one born before he should have been. For if Jesus was not illegitimate, he was God—and who could believe that in Nazareth?

### **8 'For He hath no form or comeliness.'**

A BABY OF course is only a baby, and you never know what he will become as he grows up. But as the years began to pass Mary could no longer conceal from herself the bitter and unexpected truth that Jesus did not seem to have anything particular about Him. Certainly He was not handsome; nor had He any athletic prowess

to mark Him out from His companions. Most strange of all, there seemed to be no evidence of any supernatural power about Him. The apocryphal Gospels with their stories of a miracle-working playmate show clearly enough what the human mind would expect of God's Son as a Child. Surely the Son of God would be marked out from the very beginning as surpassing all other boys in His country! After all, Samuel was only human and yet at a very early age he became the prophet of Israel upon whose words the whole nation hung: David was the national hero in his 'teens, and his father was only Jesse! Strange, strange! Perhaps it was as well that they had allowed Him to be called Joseph's son. (Even His cousin John had been filled with the Holy Ghost from the Womb). No one would expect very much from a carpenter, even if he were a royal carpenter: and anyhow Joseph descended from Jechonias (called Coniah in Jeremiah 22:24-30), upon whose seed Jehovah had pronounced a curse!

Of course it was perfectly true that He gave no trouble in the home; He was astonishingly obedient, and as for love of the Scriptures there had never been His equal. He simply devoured them and was asking continual questions that they could not answer; there wasn't too much time for Bible reading with so many mouths to feed and so much work to be done. Really, there were more important things to do than to delve into Leviticus all day long! Leave that to the Rabbis who were paid to do it.

There were those visions of course, and the wonderful words that had been uttered: time was when Joseph and Mary were continually talking about them. But you can't keep on talking about things that never seem to happen. All the excitement was over, forgotten by all, and life had to be lived. Well, of course, we won't forget them altogether and we can't help thinking, thinking, when the day's work is over: but we won't talk about them any more. If only Jesus had done something wonderful, or been more striking or—oh well, what's the good! He's what He is, and it can't be altered. Thank God He's a good boy in the house, and doesn't give any trouble ...

In some such way faith faded into unbelief, and the tragedy of Isaiah 53 took place. The Lord of Glory was unnoticed and unrevealed, for His Father had ordained that He should grow up as a tender plant and as a root out of a dry ground with no form nor comeliness, nor any beauty to make Him desirable as a national leader. The Son of God passed His early life in this wretched village unobserved and unrecognised; a pleasant enough youth with nice manners and a godly turn to His conversation, but not in any way remarkable, or likely to stir men's hearts for a national crusade. His brothers and sisters accepted Him as one of themselves, the eldest of the family of course and extremely kind, but a bit of a religious fanatic, and even a prig—and of course there was the unfortunate fact that He was born out of wedlock. The House of David still wearied God, and missed the verse addressed especially to them (Isaiah 7:13).

How was it that the Son of God could escape the notice of the sons of men with whom He lived so intimately? There must have been something unusual about Him surely: there was indeed, but it was something that seemed to them to be of little or no value. He was obedient, both to God and man! At a time when the foreign invader held sway over the Promised Land, and his soldiers and tax-gatherers were in every village, who wanted obedience! No, rather give us daring courage, another Gideon or a Jephthah! Obedience—all very well for girls: we need someone who can disobey the Roman Emperor and set God's people free.

Yet the Almighty had other ideas for His Son, for God's thoughts are higher than men's. To the One whose Creation had been wrecked by lawlessness, whose every endeavour had been frustrated by man's disobedience, whose world was in chaos and whose kingdom in bondage, there was no higher virtue than simple obedience to His Word: and He was prepared to elevate to His Own Throne all who were ready to obey His Word, and renounce their own ambition.

There had been, and still is an age-long controversy with God about His Law. Since Adam's days men had disobeyed it, and declared that it could not be kept. It was too hard for humans, beyond their power. Even the softened law that proceeded from Moses had proved unwelcome to them. None had ever kept it, nor even could keep it. God was unreasonable to expect it, to give man free will and then expect him to withstand all temptation and yield that will in perfect obedience to another.

God had to answer this challenge; and He answered it in His Son. Jesus should lay down everything which could give Him an advantage over others; should come and live a purely human life with purely human resources; should know every temptation that the world, the flesh or the devil could contrive; should be handicapped by every difficulty of life; should be poor, despised, a failure, the Son of God living the life of a poor village carpenter: and yet should, through it all, obey, and prove that any man who made use of the Grace of God could keep His Law. It cost Him tremendous struggles. The wilderness, the Mount of Transfiguration, Gethsemane all bore witness to that. It could not be done easily—but it could be done.

By this victory Jesus of Nazareth plunged the whole world into inescapable condemnation. No longer could man say that God had asked the impossible, or find refuge in the Fall of Adam for their own disobedience. The



simple truth was out: man sinned because he wanted to, not because he must. The first man who wanted with all His heart to obey—obeyed. There was everything in His circumstance to make Him rebellious: He was denied the privileges which many children had. God's Son had less than man's son, lest He should be accused of favouritism, or told that His Son only obeyed from 'cupboard' love, the taunt that was flung at Job and magnificently rebuked.

Further than this, the office for which Jesus was destined, that of High Priest, demanded that He should be in all things like those to whom He was to minister, that He might have that true compassion which only comes from a like experience. He and His brethren must have the fellowship of similar temptations, like fears, equal shocks, and parallel adventures. If the Son of God was ever to lead, it could only be because in all the changes and stresses of life He surpassed all His brethren. Theology has often with unreasoning piety deprived Jesus of Nazareth of His real glory, and put Him into a sham fight which He fought with advantages which made victory easy. The incredible doctrine of the two natures has succeeded for centuries in mystifying the intellect of believers, and saddening their hearts. How can I, a man, take example from One who was God, with all the tremendous advantage contained in that fact? Of course God could live sinlessly, of course He could work miracles, of course He could not be overcome.

Take heart O thou whom Christ is not ashamed to call a brother. It is true that it was God who did these things: but it is equally true that it was God emptied, God living a human life for thirty years, God voluntarily bereft of all His advantages for your sake; God praying to God, God needing succour from God and overcoming through the dependence of weakness; God who only knew victory because the Grace of His Father came to the rescue of His own weakness; God who, like Gideon, was strengthened by the appearance of a mere angel, and fortified by a meal provided, like Elijah's, by angels; God who, like Paul, knew that when He was weak then was He strong. Your fight was His fight, your resources His resources, your difficulties His difficulties. Even His flesh He took from David and Adam through Mary's womb; His body grew up with all the normal difficulties of adolescence and manhood. He was indeed at all points tempted as you are—yet, unlike you, never overcome! From the beginning He set His face as a flint to obey God, and He obeyed Him to the end.

### **9 'My Father's Business.'**

IF EVENTS TOOK some such course as just described in that little village of Nazareth, what about the Babe Himself as He awoke upon Mary's breast? What has the Scripture to tell us about His experience of life? Very little in words; a great deal in illumination.

After the emptying of the Son of God it was of course necessary that He should again become full. A baby could not do the work of God: that was for a full grown man. The Scriptures tell us that at the age of twelve years Jesus was being filled with wisdom, and that at thirty He was full of truth. Whence came this filling, that was to make Him the image of the Invisible God?

When a citizen of one country moves to another he often sends on in advance the furniture and luggage that he used in his old place of abode to his new home, that he may be surrounded again by his own belongings. When a child is to be born, long before its actual birth busy fingers have been filling the bottom drawer with the clothes the little one will need when it appears. The parents make all provision for the long-expected treasure of their hearts.

So when the Son of God moved from Heaven to earth He had sent on the thoughts of His mind before Him, that when He awoke He should find His own spiritual furniture around Him. When the Almighty Father sent His Son to be born of a Virgin, He had before that birth filled the bottom drawer with all the truth that His Son would require. The last little garments were contained in Matthew 1 and Luke 1 and 2.

The Word of God had through the centuries been sent down upon the earth book by book, truth by truth. The past, present and future of the Son of God was therein contained, so that the mind which had emptied itself upon that fearful morning might find its own thoughts awaiting it in its new home. Thirty years it took to complete the transference but at the end of that time Jesus of Nazareth had absorbed the wisdom which He had had as Son of God in Heaven, and was filled with all the fullness of God. The facts and history of the past which had been His by knowledge and experience were now to be His by faith: He, like us, was to walk, not by sight but by faith: He, like us, was to be dependent upon the written Word of God and the grace of the Holy Spirit, that He might be an example to His brethren who should also live by faith. During His earthly ministry His constant appeal was to the Written Word of God; after His Resurrection He explains His victory to Cleopas and the other by a reference to the description of His earthly life sent on before in Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms. The Greek of Luke 18:31 reads 'and all things that are written through the prophets to (or for) the Son of Man'. The Old Testament was written primarily not for us but for the Son of God who should find His life in believing every word that had proceeded from His Father, and been spoken by the Son of God through the

prophets to Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary. It was as if by means of the Scriptures the mind of the Son of God slowly penetrated the heart of the Son of Man until the identification was complete.

It was the tragedy of His early life that, while He was filling up with the wisdom which came by faith, Joseph and Mary were leaking out what faith they had had. At the age of twelve the boy Jesus felt compelled to make a protest at the treatment He was receiving in His home. As He was to say sorrowfully in later life, a prophet is not without honour save in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own home.

The time had come in His experience when He realised that the prophecies and visions which had immediately preceded and followed His birth were but echoes of the prophecies uttered centuries before by Isaiah and the other prophets. The staggering fact, made known so directly to Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zacharias, that He was the Son of the Highest, had entered His mind and heart.

What a tremendous shock it must have been to the son of the carpenter of Nazareth to realise for the first time that He was God the Creator! Those who are born again find it difficult to realise that they too are Sons of God: but what of Him who was the Only-Begotten Son of God? How could humanity sustain the unbelievable grandeur of Deity; how could flesh face the awful responsibilities of God? We know not how much more of the truth had as yet burst upon Him, but we are given a clear statement of His understanding of His divine nature.

It was of course the custom of all Hebrew parents to watch eagerly for any signs of spirituality in their children. Those who showed promise in this way were naturally sent at an early age to the Bible School in Jerusalem that as the pupil of one or other of the great Rabbis they might learn the Hebrew language in which God's Word was written—unintelligible to the ordinary Jew, who spoke Aramaic or Koine. So Saul was sent that long journey from Tarsus that he might sit at the feet of Gamaliel, who sat in Moses' seat, and be taught the Word of God. Great sacrifices were made by parents of such children to give them every advantage of education. Hannah had deprived herself of her son's companionship at an early age that he might serve the Lord in His Temple. She felt that the son so divinely given should be given back to the Giver.

It is almost incredible, yet a fact, that no such thought seems to have entered the minds of Mary and Joseph concerning Jesus. So utterly had their faith died that they had no higher destiny for Him than that He should carry on 'his father's business' in Nazareth. Against this wet blanket of unbelief the boy Jesus had fought in vain. In the village, in His home, everywhere, He was known as Joseph's son: but He knew full well His Father's real name; it was Jehovah.

At the age of twelve or thirteen it was customary for a Jewish youth to take his own spiritual stand, as one who was now bound to obey the Law and be responsible to God. And this Jesus did in such a drastic fashion as might be calculated to jerk His family into recognition of the truth.

When Mary and Joseph returned home to Nazareth, for that was their home, Jesus tarried in the House of God, for that was His Home! In doing this without telling them He caused them great anxiety and agony of mind. They looked for Him everywhere but in the right place, so dull was their spiritual perception. As He said to them, 'How was it that you didn't know where to look for me? Where would you naturally look for a child but in his father's house? Why did you call Joseph my father when you know quite well that my Father is not Joseph but Jehovah?' We read that so completely had they lost grip that they could not even understand what He meant! Mary and Joseph had both forgotten the words of Gabriel; twelve years had been enough to dull their memory of that extraordinary occurrence. Mary had taken the first steps on the path that twenty years after was to lead her and her family to feel that Jesus was mad, and to try to interfere with His ministry—and to earn the rebuke that the strangers around Him were nearer to Him in spirit than His own mother. How sad that amongst the women who followed Him from Galilee, and ministered to Him, the name of His own mother should not appear.

Can we measure the fight of faith in the young mind of Jesus, as against all discouragement around Him He held on to the Word of God? How dear to Him must have been Isaiah 9:6-7; 7:14; 49:1-3; and the words of Gabriel and of the shepherds! Jesus of Nazareth founded His life, as Jehoshaphat had done, upon faith in the words of the prophets. He built His life upon the rock. Mary kept many words in her heart, but out of the abundance of the heart the mouth should speak; and Mary's mouth spoke lies, which overwhelmed the truth within her heart and led her into unbelief. From henceforth to Mary, Jesus' father was Joseph; had she not said so in the very Temple of God before the priests of God? How necessary to Jesus was Isaiah 53:1-3! There He found the explanation not only of His own peculiar experience, but of His neighbours' blindness. He was to grow up without saying or doing anything to attract attention; to be deprived of all that man would look for in the Son of God. As He found Himself entering into the actual experience of rejection and unbelief, whilst His heart might be broken, His faith would be strengthened and His mind at rest. And so He returned to Nazareth to spend the next eighteen years in obscurity and the daily round of a tradesman's life!

## **10 A Sharp Sword.**

CHRISTIANS VERY OFTEN experience the difficulties of living in the midst of an unbelieving family before whom they may not have free speech. Faith longs to speak, is at its best upon a ready tongue: but here was the Son of God obliged to live in a home that was full of unbelief and antagonism; from day to day to hear all around calling him Jesus bar-Joseph, and expecting Him to enter into communal life as such. At His brothers' and sisters' weddings as one of the family; in the synagogue on the Sabbath as no one in particular; in the shop as an artisan in a small way—how could He continue to believe that in reality He was God Incarnate, responsible for the Redemption of the Universe, the long-awaited Messiah of His people?

He stayed Himself upon Isaiah 49:1-12. Here was the blue-print of this period of His life, here was the forecast of His hidden years, and also their explanation and enlightenment. He needed this time that He might become a sharp sword and a polished shaft, a workman that needs not to be ashamed, a servant that never disobeys.

When once He came forth upon His Ministry He must be able to say that though Heaven and earth would pass away, His Words would abide: He must be able to challenge anyone to find a fault in His obedience. As a Sharp Sword He could call Himself the Truth, as a Polished Shaft One who came not to do His own will, but the will of Him that shot Him from His Heavenly bow. Elijah had been shot into the midst of Samaria, but swerved aside to a cave in the desert; Jonah had been shot to Nineveh, but had glanced off to Tarshish. Here was one who had been shot to Calvary, and to Calvary He must go.

Accordingly these long years spread out before Him as years of Bible study and submission of spirit. His submission to Joseph and Mary did but produce in Him a yielded spirit which in later life never rebelled when the Word of His Father opened up some particularly painful scripture. In Isaiah 50:4-9 is the record of this daily discovery in the Bible of that which lay before Him, and of His difficulties in receiving it. If the spirit rejoiced in the Word of God, the flesh was weak and needed to be mastered by a face set as a flint. If Paul had to buffet his body to bring it into subjection, much more the Son of God, before whom lay Calvary and Hades.

Again, it was in these formative years that He read not only of Calvary but of the glories that should follow. As He told Cleopas, He had but trodden a path clearly laid down for Messiah, a path which they should have recognised as easily as He. Was there ever a day when He led His disciples to the Mount of Olives that Zechariah 14:4 was not in His heart? He left this earth from the very spot that is one day to receive Him back again. As the Scriptures laid out before Him all the glories of the Millennial Reign, all the joy of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, all the happiness of the Ages of the Ages He set his face as a flint to win through, to bear the shame for the joy that lay before Him. The rest of His life from Jordan to Eternity lay before Him in the sacred page, if not in tiny detail at least in broad outline. His High Priesthood in Psalm 110, His Royalty in Psalm 2, His Marriage in Psalm 45, His Ministry in Isaiah 61, His Return in Isaiah 63.

The very words He spoke, the parables He uttered, were culled from the Word of God in the Old Testament. The parable of the Vine from Isaiah 5, the parable of the Good Shepherd from Ezekiel 34, Psalm 23 and other Scriptures. Micah 7:6 burst through His lips in Matthew 10:36. Hosea 6:1-3 inspired His certainty of Calvary, the Resurrection on the third day, and Pentecost. It was all in the Book, and after thirty years it was in the Christ of God. The Book had made the Babe of Bethlehem what He had been before He left Heaven: the written Word had formed the Incarnate Word.

The modernist has made great play with the Kenosis theory, but the Plerosis has escaped him.\* His ignorance of the Scriptures has led him into the same misapprehension of the nature of Christ as that which clouded the minds of the men of Nazareth and Jerusalem. They saw only the carpenter of Nazareth; they missed the Word of God that had been poured into that humble person: they were so obsessed with the ordinariness of the earthen vessel that they overlooked the treasure within. As with the critics, their minds were so filled with the darkness which they loved that they could not see the Light of the World, nor value the Pearl of Great Price. Christ explained their sinful condition by the fact that they knew not the Scriptures. The Light He had was for them too; in Luke 24 He called them fools and slow of heart for missing what He had seen. What a lesson lies here for the Christian of the Last Days!

The Book has been so designed by God that only the patient student can hope to understand it. It is like a jigsaw puzzle in which each separate piece must be found and fitted into its right place. It is here a little, there a little, precept upon precept, line upon line, so that the human reader is repelled by the difficulty of making it all out, and falls backward into ignorance. It takes a man who is prepared to dig for truth, as another digs for gold, with his whole energy and desire to find the wisdom of God and the understanding of the Almighty.

Such was the Son of God. The first thirty years of His life were spent in digging, digging, digging till He knew what every Rabbi could have known if he too had been prepared to dig. But the Pharisees had taken

away the Key of Knowledge. The leaders of the people alone knew the Hebrew which enabled them to read the Scriptures in the original language. How Christ, deprived by his parents of the tuition of the Rabbis, learnt that language we know not. His critics were amazed that He understood it, though He had not been to their schools. He must have taught Himself, as many another humble Christian since His time has taught himself Greek and Hebrew, yes and a dozen languages on the mission field too, that had never been put on paper—from a love of the truth and a desire to please their God. And when in conflict with those who sought to upset Him in argument He had the right answer ready; the sharp sword cut through the net of lies and gave Him victory.

\*Greek: Kenosis—emptiness                      Plerosis—fullness

## **11 A Polished Shaft.**

HOW OFTEN IN those hidden years must the Tempter have tried to bring upon Jesus a feeling of frustration, of uselessness! Young men are most at home in action, not in patience, and here was a young man who did no miracle, preached no sermon, saved no soul, for the first thirty years of His life. But He came not to do His own will, however good, but the will of Him that sent Him: and it was written in the Book that His Father was to send a Messenger before Him who should prepare His way. How eagerly must He have awaited the appearance of His unknown kinsman, how hard to let the best years of His life pass by in apparent helplessness! The very book He read told of Samuel and David, of Joash and Josiah, who long before their thirtieth year had done great things for God—and here was His Own Son doing nothing. Yet it was also written that Moses the great Leader of the Old Covenant had failed at his first attempt, and that Joseph had spent his best years as a slave in Egypt learning to rule first a large private house and then a large public institution as a preparation for ruling Egypt. Must not He who was to rule the Universe undergo severe training for such a destiny? And so the shaft was polished until neither devil, brethren nor admirers could deflect Him from the path of strict obedience, an obedience which won Him the Name which is above every name. He learned by years of patient endurance that God values patience above success, and obedience above ability.

Yet in addition to all this there came into His heart during these years such a love and compassion for His people, the people of God, that He could rightly be called Israel. As the Kings of England and France were called 'England' and 'France' by Shakespeare, so was Jesus called 'Israel' by the God of Israel. Year after year the pitiable condition of the Jews was borne in upon Him, their corrupt priesthood, proud clergy, famished souls and oppressed bodies. Everywhere He looked there was spiritual starvation and political oppression. The years He had spent listening to dull expositions of the Torah in the synagogue of Nazareth, attending Godless Passovers in Jerusalem, hearing of false Messiahs in Palestine made Him long for His opportunity to preach the Gospel of the Grace of God to them—indeed to tour Palestine, as Wesley was later to tour England, putting the Light into every city, town and village. As year after year passed and His eyes saw the degradation of Nazareth and Galilee (it was no accident that His Father put Him there in a village out of which no saint could be expected to emerge), there in Nazareth which was soon to attempt His murder He tasted to the full the deterioration of human nature without God, and needed not that any should warn Him about it: He had endured it in His own Person. The condition of the Priesthood was of course common property at this time. The Sadducees were little better than the Borgias. the Temple as worldly as the Vatican, the populace as ignorant as the heathen. There grew from day to day a livelier desire to purge this Augean stable, to have a spring-cleaning in His Father's House, to let people see what God had intended the Temple to be. The zeal of His Father's House was gnawing at His heart.

Who can imagine the burden that lay ever more heavily upon the heart of the Man of Sorrows during those years of hidden contemplation, when none but Himself knew what He was thinking, planning, resolving? There lay at the back of His heart through it all a consuming love for His Father and a deep understanding of His sorrows. He determined to reveal His Father to men, that all might see the glory of His character and the power of His might. He realised that this was a people deceived and robbed, blind and imprisoned: and if the people of God were in such a state, what of the Gentiles, sunk in ignorance and debauched by vice? Though they could not be reached by His earthly ministry He was comforted by the knowledge given Him so often through the prophets, that after His death He was to be God's salvation to the ends of the earth. We can only imagine the thoughts of Elijah before 1 Kings 17 by his recorded actions afterwards. The ministry of Jesus that is recorded, and the prophetic word of God, lay bare to us the understanding, the zeal, the determination, the apprehension, the joy, the expectation, the compassion, the anger and the assurance that, as it were, came to the boil during that long apprenticeship, and finally burst forth in a service that never rested until He could cry triumphantly 'I have finished the work Thou gavest Me to do'.

With a yet keener eye He saw the sin of Israel, and, past that, of the whole world. Here was a problem to be solved not by wisdom alone, but by the suffering of a shameful death. Already He had lifted daily upon his shoulder the Cross first assumed before the foundation of the world. To Him the opening of ministry meant the beginning of death: and the Messenger who called Him out was to greet Him with the words 'Behold the Lamb of God that beareth ... the Sin of the World'. He knew that by entering upon His ministry He was putting His first foot upon a path which could only end in Calvary.

## **12 The Banks of Jordan.**

THERE CAME A day when that long apprenticeship was over. His Father had sent His herald before His face, and John the Baptist was raising the people of Israel to a high pitch of expectancy. Excitement was abroad, all minds were agitated, men were making restitution, confessing their sins, looking for Him who should come. But the One who laid down His chisel and plane for the last time, and bade farewell to a reluctant and apprehensive family knew no such tumult. Calm and rock-like and free from the iron restraint of years, He came to Jordan with His people's sin upon His shoulders, and their salvation in His heart.

As Ezra rent his garment and his mantle, and plucked off the hair of his head and of his beard and sat down astonished at the sin of his people, so did the King of Israel confess in Jordan the sin of His people before His Father. Doubtless John was astonished when his unknown kinsman approached him and, in answer to John's question about His sins before he baptised Him, confessed that He had none; and drew from John's lips the cry 'I have need to be baptised of Thee!' John did not realise then that it was the true High Priest standing for His people before an outraged God. Christ knew the shallowness of this mass movement, knew that their repentance was but a shadow, knew that their past sins were to be immediately surpassed by the murder of God's only Son; and in this knowledge bore them to His Father, as a parent might make restitution for an erring child before an offended neighbour, being far more upset himself than was the actual offender. And as His head disappeared in Jordan's stream was there no vision of that day when He, and His brethren after Him, should be buried by baptism into actual death?

It had been perhaps the most inexplicable and trying part of His life that hitherto the Son of God had had no more supernatural power than His neighbour. He had been quite unable to meet the needs of Israel by prophecy or healing or acts of power, such as had accredited Elijah or Elisha. So far as that was concerned He might as well not have been there. The tide of national suffering flowed on and on unchecked by the wondrous deeds of God. He must have felt like Gideon—'If the Lord be with us, where be all His miracles?'

Yet He had read in the Scriptures that He was to be anointed by His Father for His ministry; and now that His apprenticeship was over He was to receive those supernatural tools wherewith to do His work.

Further than this, He had lived for thirty years in the faith that He was the Son of God: alone He had clung to the Scriptures on this point in the face of universal unbelief. No tongue had refreshed His soul by calling Him God's Son: no knee had been bent before Him in adoration. 'Is not this the carpenter?' was His daily meat. But now there was to come to Him not only power in abundance, but also Divine recognition. He who had not received witness from man was now to receive it from God. The great contest was over; His faith was justified. The words 'Thou art My Beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased' set God's seal upon the struggle of His life. The anointing of the Spirit filled His empty hands with blessings, and He was ready to go forth upon His ministry in the Power of the Almighty.

We may pause a moment to gather up what truth we may about Jesus of Nazareth as He passes through this astounding experience. Here is no enthusiast hurling Himself blindfold into a crusade which might cost Him His life, hoping that His nation would fall in behind Him and by His aid bring about a wonderful Kingdom of God upon earth. No, here is Jesus of Nazareth in the full faith and understanding that He was God manifest in the flesh, entering upon a short career ordained in every detail by His Father and plainly described through the prophets. His past lay open before Him, His present was equally plain, and His Father so clearly pictured in the Book that He could talk simply and in detail about what He would do after He had risen from the dead. (If He went so frequently to the Mount of Olives with His disciples, was it not because Zechariah 14:4 had declared it to be the place of His triumphant return?) His future was as present and real to Him as His actual present, for He believed what He read, and faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

His astonishment was, not that He Himself understood so clearly, but that those around Him were so much in the dark. His book was their book; they too were the children of the prophets, who had spoken so plainly of the plan of God. Here is no mighty thinker lifted above the common ruck of men by sheer power of intellect, but simply a humble believer, accepting without question what was given freely to all, and walking in the light provided by an All-Seeing Father. He should have come to a nation full of holy expectation of its Divine Messiah, eagerly looking for the running out of the time foretold in Daniel 9, and longing for the One Upon whom Jehovah would lay their sins, that He might carry them away into a salt place not inhabited. There was nothing He knew which they could not have known: the Almighty had revealed His Salvation plainly, in picture, in writing, in straightforward language so that no believer should be in any doubt about what to expect. Yet in actual fact the nation walked in gloom and anguish and in the shadow of death. 'O fools', was His cry 'and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have written. Ought not Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?' If Isaiah had understood the suffering of Messiah and the glory that should follow, should Peter and James and John be ignorant?

Christ was no young visionary thinking this and imagining that, the child of His age responding to the current hopes and ambitions of His people, and finding bitter disillusionment at the end of His life. He was the Son of God walking in the light along a path long laid down for His feet in Moses and the Psalms and the Prophets to a triumphant conclusion that should bring to pass every desire of His Father's heart, and vindicate the love and wisdom of His great act of Creation. God was in Christ; His Word had taken possession of His mind: though the Son of Man's feet were in Galilee the head of the Son of God was in Heaven, and the unseen was as visible to Him as it had been to Micaiah or Ezekiel. For what they saw He believed, as we may also do.

Before we take our leave of Jordan's waters, there remains one topic to consider more fully. It was said by Lord Acton that 'All power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely'. There is in fact no test of character as final as the acquisition of power. Then is the soul displayed in its true colours, and its real desires are uncovered for all to see.

The carpenter of Nazareth lived in obscurity with but little chance of attracting anyone's attention, or indulging any ambitions that His soul might cherish, beyond those possible to a village tradesman. But now the Son of God was to issue forth with all power in Heaven and earth! What kind of a showing would He make? How would he appear when no inward desire could be withheld, no course of conduct however magnificent or wayward be opposed? Then shall we see that inward soul of God and discover for ourselves the secrets of the Divine Nature. All will be laid bare before the world when God comes forth in power. When power came his way, the house-painter of Austria revealed himself in his true colours: how would the carpenter of Nazareth fare under the same pitiless exposure of His soul?

### **13 The Crucible of God.**

FOR THIRTY LONG years had Jehovah's Elect Servant been trained for His service; the sword had been sharpened, the shaft polished. At Jordan's banks the last finishing touches had been given, and the Divine Instrument was ready for the appointed task. Yet one thing remained. The final examination must be made lest any hidden flaw should be there, only to appear at some later stage and cause disaster. There must be no question of failure when the salvation of the world was at stake.

The Holy Ghost therefore drove Christ out into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. John the Baptist had roused all Israel to meet Messiah: the crowds were gathered by the banks of Jordan to hear His voice and do His bidding. The young men spoke of a successful revolt against the Romans; the old men remembered the valour of the Maccabees, and dreamt of David.

But the Spirit of God took Jesus out of all this human excitement that there, in the silence of the desert, His Father might see the secrets of His Son's heart laid bare before Him under the knife of the great Adversary. He who had watched the struggles of Job, Joseph, Jeremiah and Ezekiel must now Himself be tried to the uttermost that in all things He might have the pre-eminence, even in severe temptation.

The stage was well set; the instruments of torture prepared. The body was worn down with lack of food, the mind strained to the uttermost with the threat of wild beasts by day and night. The very solitude of the desert weighed on His mind as He thought of the multitudes by Jordan. There, there was work to be done: there, there was honour to be gained. But here there was nothing but sand and scrub, the hooting of owls and the jackal's cry. How could a man save Israel here in the wilderness? Was this the life for the Son of God? Why, Herod's son had more to look forward to than He. Thirty years had left Him with an excellent knowledge of carpentry, a perfect understanding of the Scriptures, an empty purse and the tolerance of a family and village too dull to realise that God had been living in their midst and sharing in their life. He had attempted nothing, moved nobody: He had no followers, had aroused no hopes. The great things spoken of Him in His babyhood had thus far failed to materialise, and time had washed expectation out of every heart. He had no form nor comeliness; there was nothing in His physical make-up to arouse enthusiasm. And here He was week after week in this inhospitable desert, the target of temptation from every quarter, apparently useless to God and man. He was no prophet like Samuel or Elijah, no warrior like Gideon or Jephthah, there was no dead lion or bear to look back upon to justify the expectation of slaying a Goliath—in fact there was nothing but the life of a blameless carpenter, a voice from Heaven and the Scriptures.

And into this well-prepared arena strode the great Slanderer himself, bright, shining and apparently prosperous. The conflict was joined, the struggle began ...

'If Thou be the Son of God' ... so had the voice from Heaven asserted but a few days ago; but how ridiculous it sounded now! How could He in His one robe, half-starving, and without a follower, be the Son of God? Surely this shining being was a Son of God in his splendour, his power and his liberty. No one had ever called Jesus the Son of God since Gabriel had announced it years ago, and Zacharias and Elizabeth and Simeon and the shepherds had echoed the cry. But that was long ago and all who had heard the story had agreed that

a mistake had been made somewhere. This was the son of the carpenter, royal if you please but thoroughly human and, if the truth be told, not much of a prince. How well He knew the common opinion, and here was this glorious angelic being ramming it home!

But there steals into His mind the memory of a whole company of people, the Chosen of God, who had also been led into a wilderness, and found nothing to slake their thirst but water, or satisfy their hunger but manna. This was one of His Father's ways, designed to drive home the great lesson that the spirit was more important than the flesh, and the Bible more necessary than the dinner table. He would learn that lesson well, that in the days to come He would never question His Father's love, when food was short and beds hard to come by, and money non-existent!

What was this? 'Command these stones that they be made bread' ... ah, but the power with which He had been but lately entrusted was for the blessing of others, not Himself. If He once descended to use it to help Himself He would end up as Gehazi, a leper, or a Solomon better housed than His God. The time would come when He would make loaves by the thousand, but they would be eaten by others, not Himself. Twice would He show that the Son of Man could make bread in the wilderness, but not thrice. How vile was this insinuation that His Father was not looking after Him properly; His soul was well fed and full of meat. He understood well His Father's ways, as had Moses. His body? All in good time the Angels would feed Him as they had Elijah: but in the meantime He had more important matters in hand; there was a world to be saved, a Father to be pleased. If Moses and Daniel had known what it was to go without food, if Israel's armies had lived on the shortest of commons for forty years, could not the Son of God put up with a little deprivation, if His duty called for it?

'Man doth not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God'. It was His adversary who was starving, not Himself! It was Satan whose soul had died from lack of food for all his splendid appearance. So might one admire the magnificent appearance of Caesar's latest charioteer or favourite gladiator, only to discover in conversation the filth of a sewer and the poverty of an illiterate. While Satan spoke of bread Jesus thought of rivers of sparkling water which should flow from the belly of His friends; while Satan mocked at obscurity Jesus was thinking of the day when He should be the cynosure of every eye, the terror of His enemies. So did the Scriptures arm the Son of God against the Slanderer of God!

What a struggle it had cost the lad Jesus eighteen years ago to leave Jerusalem, the City of His Father, and go back to Nazareth, that hateful village, none will ever know. Every year His heart was stabbed afresh as the Passover came round and He entered and left that sacred Temple as any ordinary nobody, caught up in the thoughtless crowd, that saw no deeper than the outside of ritual and nationalism. Never had His Father enabled Him to remain behind in the learned Rabbi's society, never had a door opened to Him to join the select company of those who, like Simeon and Anna, gave themselves to the God of Israel and spake often of His Name. It seemed heart-breaking, incredible; He had lived in the wilderness of Nazareth with nothing but manna to eat.

But now in a flash He finds Himself upon that commanding minaret of the Temple from which He can survey the whole scene beneath Him. Gone the scrub, the sand, the loneliness. Here He was in the pulsating centre of the national life where all the important people lived and worked. Here was the High Priest's home; there Herod's palace. There was the abode of Nicodemus, and beneath His feet His Father's House. If He could but impress them with some display of miraculous power He would find Himself a national hero, the fulfilment of all their age-long hopes.

'Cast yourself down. It will be quite safe if you are your Father's Son as you claim to be. There is Scripture to support you: "His Angels will bear Thee up lest Thou dash Thy foot against a stone". Here is your chance to make a grand entrance, an unforgettable debut. Israel has had other great leaders enabled by God to do marvellous things, which have accredited them to the nation. Moses held back the Red Sea; Joshua, Jordan. Barak defeated Sisera, Hezekiah saw Sennacherib discomfited. But this! This is unique! No one has ever done such a thing before. You will have the long desire of Your heart to enter Jerusalem granted in the most striking possible way. No one will henceforth be able to doubt that You are God's Son: You will be universally accepted.

'As a matter of fact, You won't doubt it yourself any more. You have waited a long time in obscurity; if I may say so, Your Father hasn't done much for You so far. Have You yet achieved anything except the ability to carve a pretty tenon? Strike out, Man, bring Your Father to the point: let Him know that You are straining at the leash, and want to be off upon Your life's mission. You're getting on, thirty years old aren't You—much older than Samuel or David. Let Him know that You are grown up now, and tired of playing about; force His hand: He daren't let You down.'

But the shaft had been too well polished to fly aside. Here was One who came to do Another's will, to be perfectly obedient. If His Father wanted Him to be in a wilderness He would stay, and all the temptations in the world would not lure Him out. As for His lack of achievement, the time was soon coming when Palestine would

ring with the accounts of His compassionate and powerful acts of deliverance. But never should any story of self-advertisement or personal aggrandisement be told. For here was One who came to seek another's glory, not His own. And so as with Ezekiel the vision faded, the scene changed, and He was back again amid the scrub and the sand, the owls and the jackals.

Yet, though twice baffled in his endeavour to corrupt the Son of God, the Arch-Tempter had one more attack to make upon His loyalty to His Father. It was all very well to offer to make Him King over Israel and the whole earth. But was not the price asked excessive? Solomon had been raised to the throne of Israel, but he had arrived there in the normal way, through inheritance and living in the palace, and becoming accustomed to the respect and grandeur due to the heir to the throne. But *this* road, through poverty, rejection and crucifixion, was absurd. Satan had never asked such things of anyone to whom he had handed over the kingdoms of this world. He had given them to Pharaoh, to Nebuchadnezzar, to Alexander and Caesar, and the only payment he had ever asked was that they should acknowledge him as their Master, and walk in his ways. If Jesus would do the same He too should reap the same reward ...

But Satan had nothing to offer that Jesus wanted. Jesus desired the love, not the fear, of His subjects. He desired to please His Father, not Himself. He cared nothing for thrones and pomp and circumstance, but would rather gird Himself with a towel, and wash His subject's feet. He would ride into His capital on a colt's back—not surrounded by chariots and soldiers and weapons of war. And so, baffled, the tempter retired for a season and left the Son of God triumphant on the field.

Triumphant, yes; but also exhausted with the long conflict, so that He who was God yet needed the ministry of Angels to succour Him.

For it was as Man that He had overcome the Devil, that He might learn to be a faithful High Priest to those who would be in similar need of rescue on the battlefields of life. It is not only the Christian who is to be 'strong in the Lord and in the Power of His Might', but also the Christ. Twice again, on the Mount of Transfiguration and in the Garden of Gethsemane, would He need and receive the supernatural strengthening which only God can give, and without which no one can overcome. We must continually remind ourselves that, although Our Lord was God, He was God emptied of His Divine advantages; He was God living as a Man. Yet, though He was a Man, He was a Man Who believed that He was God manifest in the flesh with all the disadvantages of the flesh, a Man who like ourselves had to live by faith in the Word of God, in which He found His past, present and future graphically depicted; a Man open to pain, sorrow, weakness and even death. He died with Psalm 22 upon His lips, and arose upon the strength of the second Psalm.

There lay in His well-stocked heart the perfect programme of His Father's plan, sent down from Heaven through the Prophets, though now dusty with the disuse and misunderstanding of the centuries. The Son of God looked forward to the Salvation not only of a nation, but of a world; to a happiness not of a lifetime but for Ages of Ages. That handful of obscure Galileans! Nay, they were going to join His Family, and be responsible with Him for the safety of the whole Creation. Galileans indeed! They were the beginning of a new Race of Sons of God, whom He would one day call His Brethren, or even His Bride.

And so, upheld by His Father's hand to the end, He passed through the Grave and the Resurrection, once more to take His place at His Father's right hand, the struggle over, the battle won!

**NOTE:**

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