

He giveth goodly words
Genesis 49:21

Hear ... the words of my mouth
Deuteronomy 32:1

The Lord ... let none of his words fall to the ground
1 Samuel 3:19

Stand thou still a while, that I may show thee the word of God
1 Samuel 9:27

The words of the Lord are pure words; as silver tried in a furnace of earth,
purified seven times – *Psalm 12:6*

The entrance of Thy words giveth light – *Psalm 119:130*

WORDS OF PEACE & TRUTH

No. 83: July – September 2011

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The washing of water by the word – *Ephesians 5:26*

WORDS OF PEACE & TRUTH
(Esther 9:30 – see also Zechariah 8:19)
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Editorial

Throughout this magazine there is an emphasis on the greatness of God: the supremacy of His will, the sovereignty of His actions and our dependence on Him for everything. We live in a world where man and his achievements are extolled and God is increasingly marginalised. Man in his pride boasts more and more in what he can do, with scant if any acknowledgment of the fact that the things that he discovers and the powers that he harnesses, whether in nuclear physics, genetics, astronomy, oceanography or other fields, were ***put there by God!*** “O Lord, how manifold are Thy works! In wisdom Thou hast made them all: the earth is full of Thy riches” (Psalm 104:24). Looking forward to a day when the Lord alone shall be exalted, Isaiah enjoins us, “Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils” (Isa. 2:22).

“Consider the work of God,” says the Preacher (Ecclesiastes 7:13). It is good to do this not only in relation to the physical creation but also with regard to our moral and spiritual blessings. “I, even I, am the Lord; and beside Me there is no saviour. ... I will work, and who shall let (*hinder*) it” (Isaiah 43:11-13). Even as believers, we may place too much emphasis on ***our*** decisions and activities and too little on the sovereign actions of our great and glorious ***God***, whose judgments are unsearchable and His ways past finding out. “Our God is in the heavens; He hath done whatsoever He hath pleased” (Psalm 115:3).

I trust that the articles which address the questions of how God directs the paths of His children, How he renders testimony to man, whether or not man has freewill, and where faith comes from will help us to ascribe to God the praise and glory that are due to Him for “His wonderful works to the children of men” (Psa. 107:8, 21, 31).

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IT IS NOT IN MAN TO DIRECT HIS STEPS

“O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps” (Jeremiah 10:23).

It is, indeed, natural to us to wish and to plan, and it is merciful of the Lord to disappoint our plans, and to cross our wishes. For we cannot be safe, much less happy, but in proportion as we are weaned from our own wills, and made simply desirous of being directed by His guidance. This truth (when we are enlightened by his Word) is sufficiently familiar to the judgment; but we seldom learn to reduce it into practice without being trained awhile in the school of disappointment.

The schemes we form look so plausible and convenient, that when they are broken we are ready to say, what a pity! We try again, and with no better success; we are grieved, and perhaps angry, and plan another, and so on; at length, in a course of time, experience and observation begin to convince us that we are not more able than we are worthy to choose aright for ourselves. Then the Lord's invitation to cast our cares upon Him, and His promises to take care of us, appear valuable: and when *we* have done planning, His plan in our favour gradually opens, and He does more and better for us than we could either ask or think.

I can hardly recollect a single plan of mine, of which I have not since seen reason to be satisfied, that had it taken place in season and circumstances just as I proposed, it would, humanly speaking, have proved my ruin; or at least it would have deprived me of the greater good the Lord had designed for me. We judge of things by their present appearances, but the Lord sees them in their consequences; if we could do so likewise, we should be perfectly of His mind; but as we cannot, it is an unspeakable mercy that He will manage for us, whether we are pleased with His management or not; and it is spoken of as one of His heaviest judgments, when He

gives any person or people up to the ways of their own hearts, and to walk after their own conceits (Hosea 4:17; Rom. 1:24).

Indeed, we may well admire His patience towards us. If we were blind, and reduced to desire a person to lead us, and should pretend to dispute with him, and direct him at every step, we would probably soon weary him, and provoke him to leave us to find the way by ourselves if we could. But our gracious Lord is long-suffering and full of compassion; He bears with our forwardness, yet He will take methods both to instruct and to humble us, and bring us to a confession that He is wiser than we.

The great and unexpected benefit He intends for us, by all the discipline we meet with, is to break down our wills, and bring them into subjection to His. So far as we attain to this, we are out of the reach of disappointment; for when the will of God can please us, we shall be pleased every day, and from morning to night: I mean with respect to His good ordering. Oh the happiness of such a life! I have an idea of it; I hope I am aiming at it, but surely I have not attained it. I profess to believe that one thing is needful and sufficient, and yet my thoughts are prone to wander after a hundred more. If it be true, that the light of His countenance is better than life, why am I solicitous about anything else? If He be all sufficient, and gives me liberty to call Him mine, why do I go a-begging to creatures for help? If He be about my path and bed; if the smallest as well as the greatest events in which I am concerned, are under His immediate direction; if the very hairs of my head are numbered; then my care (any farther than a care to walk in the paths of His precepts) must be useless and needless, yea, burdensome to myself and dishonourable to my confession. Let us cast down the load we are unable to carry, and, if the Lord be our Shepherd, refer all and trust all to Him. Let us endeavour to live to Him and for Him today, and be glad that tomorrow, with all that is behind it, is in His hands.

It is storied of Pompey, that when his friends would have dissuaded him from putting to sea in a storm, he answered, "It is necessary for me to sail, but it is not necessary for me to live!" O pompous speech, in Pompey's sense! He was full of the idea of his own importance, and would rather have died than have taken a step beneath his supposed dignity. But it may be accommodated with propriety to a believer's case. It becomes us to say, It is not necessary for me to be rich, or what the world accounts wise; to be healthy, or admired by my fellow-worms; to pass through life in a state of prosperity and outward comfort; these things may be, or they may be otherwise, as the Lord in His wisdom shall appoint; but it is necessary for me to be humble and spiritual, to seek communion with God, to adorn my profession of the Gospel, and to yield submissively to His disposal, in whatever way, whether of service or of suffering, He shall be pleased to call me to glorify Him in the world.

It is not necessary for me to live long, but highly expedient that whilst I do live I should live to Him. Here, then, I would bound my desires; and here, having His Word both for my rule and my warrant, I am secured from asking amiss. Let me have His presence and His Spirit, wisdom to know my calling, and opportunities with faithfulness to improve them; and as to the rest, Lord help me to say, What Thou will, when Thou will, and how Thou will.

J. Newton (1776)

Extracted from the "Christian's Helper" 1906.

Fragment

(John 6:12)

In the present world we are learning that God has treasures of *grace* to meet our *need*, and in the coming world we shall learn His treasures of *glory* to meet our *joys*. *J.G. Bellett (1795-1864)*

Extracted from "Short Meditations on the Psalms" (Psa. 73.)

GOD'S TESTIMONIES TO MANKIND

ALL persons know something of natural faith concerning the affairs of this life, but natural faith cannot profit by a testimony about God. The Lord spoke in the parable of the sower of some who received the seed, but “because they had no root, they withered away” (Matt. 13:6); and later on we read: “Simon himself believed,” (Acts 8:13) but afterwards the Apostle Peter said to him, “Thy heart is not right in the sight of God” (v. 21). There was no work of God in these cases. Thus God must either give man up altogether or impart living faith to him. Thus faith is the gift of God (see Ephesians 2:18) and produces works (see James 2:26). It comes by hearing (see Romans 10:17), and is a divine operation in the soul. The new birth is a new beginning formed in a man, and then he becomes responsive to God’s testimony in whatever way that testimony may be borne. The testimony which God gives is always regarding Himself, but He has varied the manifestations of it according to different periods.

In Hebrews 11 we have a list of persons from the outset of man’s history, to each of whom some fresh testimony was given, and they proved their faith by responding to it. They were pioneers in the path of faith, because each one was called to follow some fresh light which had never been given to any one before. The special truth God gave to each of them, tested them as to whether they had faith to respond to it. Each of the persons as they came on the scene had the light of what had gone before, but it was the fresh testimony which brought out their faith.

With Abraham’s seed (the children of Israel) a *special* testimony began, the chief privilege of which was that they had committed to them the oracles of God (see Romans 3:2), which advantage was continued to them till they rejected their long-promised Messiah. When the Holy Spirit came down as a divine Person from heaven at Pentecost He formed the church, which became the depository of

the testimony of God, and then the gospel of Christ was sent out into all the world. There were no restrictions placed on the gospel – it was to be preached to every creature. Wherever the gospel was preached it tested the hearers, because it brought to them more light than had hitherto been given to them.

This testimony was very exclusive, for the apostles said, “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). It allowed of “*no other name*” but the name of Jesus; and *no other terms* than faith on Jesus. Thus it remains as the testimony for to-day wherever the gospel of Christ is proclaimed. The apostles wrote in their various epistles of the privileges into which believers in this gospel were brought, and all this continues, because it has not been withdrawn, nor any additional revelation given.

Thus God gave special testimony of Himself to certain individuals, as recorded in the Book of Genesis; then to a company of men who were to be blessed on earth, called Israel, the beginning of whose history is found in the Book of Exodus; and, later still, to a company who are called the Church, formed on the day of Pentecost, who are blessed with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places, the records of which are found in the apostolic epistles of the New Testament.

There still remains a question of great interest. What about the masses of mankind who have been without the privilege of special light? “God is no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34), and has from the outset of man’s history maintained a universal testimony to His wisdom and goodness. We read: “The heavens declare the glory of God ... day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge” (Psalm 19: 1, 2). In this way God calls the attention of men to Himself in His wisdom and goodness. Further, when men had turned to idolatry and God allowed them to walk in their own ways; “He left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and

gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14:17). Again, “That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after Him, and find Him, though He be not far from every one of us” (Acts 17:27; see also Rom. 1:20, 32).

Thus for some 6,000 years God has had to do with those who departed from Him, beginning with Cain and his family, but after the flood with the descendants of Noah. These turned to idolatry: they worshipped and “served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever” (Romans 1:25). Nevertheless, during this long period some turned to the Lord.

The Apostle Peter testified that “in every nation he that feareth God and worketh righteousness is accepted with Him” (Acts 10:35). So we read of such persons as: Abimelech, king of Gerar (Genesis 20:5); Jethro, priest or prince of Midian (Exod. 18:12); Hiram, king of Tyre (1 Kings 5:1); the queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10:1); the wise men (Matt. 2:1); the Ethiopian treasurer (Acts 8:27); Cornelius (Acts 10:4). These persons were all born outside the circle of special testimony, but they evidently used the light they had, and God gave them more by bringing them into contact with His favoured people. The last two obtained the light of Christianity, and no doubt got the full blessing of it.

There are millions of the human race who are to-day outside the present testimony of the gospel, but they still have the light which has shone during God’s past dealings with men. It is written, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness” (Rom. 4:3). With the testimony of the heavens and the fruitful seasons alone, no one could know anything about the salvation which faith in the gospel brings, but God counts every one righteous who believes. Those reckoned righteous from the dark places of the earth will be a witness to the faithfulness of God in giving them a testimony which has always been *clear enough for*

faith. Faith has always pleased God wherever it was found. Two notable instances of Gentiles having faith are given in Matt. 8:10 and 15:28, and Jesus called attention to them. He further announced that “many shall come from the east and west, and sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 8:11).

When God intends such persons to have the *further* light of the gospel of Christ, He either brings them to it in some providential way, or causes some of His servants to carry it to them.

Into which of the many families in heaven or earth (see Eph. 3:15) God may place these persons, scripture does not say; any more than where those who have died in infancy will be placed.

No man can help being born in the darkness of idolatry, but God has provided that wherever man is born he shall have some testimony regarding Himself, both from the heavens above (Psalm 19) and the earth beneath (Acts 14:17). And this testimony is loud enough to test him and demonstrate either faith or unbelief.

The privilege of being born in the full light of God, as revealed in Christ, cannot be over-estimated, and while those in the place of this light may not value it any more than those who are in less light, yet in the day of judgment each will be dealt with according to his works.

The basis of God’s actings with men has always been the same, that Christ “gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time” (1 Tim. 2:6), and redemption is by “the precious blood of Christ ... who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world” (1 Peter 1:18-20). So before Christ came to do the actual work on the tree, God acted towards men on the ground of that work which was *yet to come*.

Faith has always pleased God, in whatever degree of light it was found, because God had Christ in view, whatever ignorance there

was on man's side. Faith is the same whether found in connection with God's testimony of Himself in creation and providential goodness, or in connection with the clearer testimony in Israel in days gone by, or in the clearest testimony of the gospel of Christ. The beginning in each person is the same, but the *development* depends on the light God is pleased to give, at each particular time.

One result of receiving the light of the gospel is that the receiver is brought into the spiritual enjoyment which the gospel proposes; and another is, there is a great desire that relations and neighbours should know it too. Some think of the heathen who are ignorant of the present gospel, and who have only the light of creation and providential goodness, and they desire to carry to them the light of the gospel of Christ.

In this matter special guidance is needed, for while the commission was, "Preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15), and again, "That repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations" (Luke 24:47), yet direction both where and when to preach was special, as we read: "Go, stand and speak in the temple" (Acts 5:20); "Arise, and go toward the south" (Acts 8:26); "Arise therefore, and get thee down" (Acts 10:20); "Come over into Macedonia" (Acts 16:9).

In the matter of *direction* even restrictions were at times given, as: "Were forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia" (Acts 16:6); "They assayed to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit suffered them not" (Acts 16:7). Thus, in going to the heathen, direction is of the greatest importance. The devil is worshipped in idolatry, and he will not give up his place as ruler of the darkness of this world unless obliged to do so by the Holy Spirit causing men to be born anew. The Spirit directed the servants in the Acts to where He was working, and there were mighty results. We do not find conversions recorded in the Old Testament writings, although there can be no doubt persons were converted, but they came to the light

in a very gradual way. The dispensational darkness had not then passed, and the true light was not then shining. The death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, with the subsequent descent of the Holy Spirit, has brought out light so strong that those who received it at the beginning of Christianity were suddenly converted. The apostolic writers frequently refer to the manifest results of believing the gospel in the day in which they lived (see Rom. 1:8; 1 Thess. 1:8). This was plainly seen when a converted Jew gave up Judaism and the converted heathen gave up their idolatry. The work of God today is more amongst those who **outwardly** confess Christianity,* so that when they believe with the heart the change is not so manifest **before men**, although as real before God as at the beginning

Where the bright light of the gospel of Christ has not reached, there remains still amongst the heathen the same light which shone before Christ came. That light when received by any man in faith is counted for righteousness, but that does not of itself bring the person into new covenant blessings, nor into the church, but rather into one of the other families mentioned in Eph. 3:15 (read “every family” – *not “the whole family” [Ed.]*). The church was formed by the Holy Spirit on the testimony of the gospel of Christ; but God is sovereign, and may still work outside this particular testimony, as He did before it came.

God may frequently have ordered it that some one who had faith in God as Creator, and in His providential goodness, should be brought into the further light of the gospel, and so into peace and entrance into present grace, with hope of the coming glory. Such persons would belong to the church.

Since the apostles’ days the gospel of Christ may have been presented in a feeble and even corrupted form, yet it has brought light beyond the testimony of creation, and this additional light has

** This was written perhaps 100 years ago! – Editor.*

tested the hearers.

When once the gospel of Christ has been presented, men cannot go back to a former testimony; they either receive the gospel by faith and come into the present blessings of it, or they refuse it in unbelief and turn to what they like better.

Thus God's ways are past finding out, but as we know more of Him so we understand some of the wisdom of His ways: and "Wisdom is justified of all her children" (Luke 7:35).

Dr. G.W. Glenny

FREEWILL AND FAITH

In a discussion that took place recently over the radio concerning evil deeds and the suffering caused thereby,* it was asserted that "Christians believe that God has given freewill to everyone." Do they? What do we mean by 'freewill'? What does the Bible teach about it?

In the Concise Oxford English Dictionary free will is defined as "the power of acting without the constraint of necessity or fate." In Blunt's Theological Dictionary (1872) it is described as "an inherent power to refuse the evil and choose the good." When we turn to the Bible, however, we find that the expression 'free will' does not occur in good translations. It is entirely absent from the King James Version and the Darby Translation, while in the New International, Revised Standard and English Standard Versions we only have 'freewill' as an adjective in Exodus 35:29, Leviticus 22:23 and other passages in the context of a 'willing' or 'voluntary' offering. Not only is the *term* absent but it is difficult to find a passage in which the *concept* is taught – that is to say, *explicitly* set out. We can all make our inferences into, and deductions from, the

** This followed the tragic shooting of young people in Norway.*

Scriptures (and some of them may have merit) but is it not true that God has *plainly* told us all essential truth in His word?

It is true that sometimes in describing scriptural truth we use *words* that do not actually appear in the Bible (i.e. in accurate translations of it); this perhaps does not pose a problem if we have scriptural text which clearly conveys the *idea*. So, for example, we don't have the word 'substitution' in the Bible but if we read that Abraham offered up the ram "in the stead of his son," that is tantamount to the same; we might well say that the ram was offered as a substitute for Isaac. But to base a concept simply on what I claim to be the tenor of Scripture when it is not actually defined is a huge leap further and may open up scope for mere human reasoning. We have often been exhorted to think in terms of Scripture. But free will is not taught in the Bible either under that name or in other terms.

We do, of course, have passages which give us men and women making *decisions*, for example "Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision" (Joel 3:14) and in Acts 17:32-34 we have the various decisions that were made following Paul's preaching at Athens. But the simple fact of making a decision does not, of course, imply the existence of freewill.

On the other hand, there are several passages which rule out the concept, the most obvious perhaps being Romans 6, in which Paul states that we are all under bondage, "whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness" (v.16). The word "servants" or "bondmen" there is *douloi*, meaning slaves. Do slaves have freewill? Did Israel when slaves in Egypt escape from the dominion of Pharaoh by exercising freewill? God tells us that it was He who brought them out of the house of bondage (Exodus 13:3, 14), who "bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto Myself" (19:4). And is not that bondage a picture to us of the dominion of sin from which grace has delivered us (Rom. 6:14)?

Moreover, at the start and finish of that epistle we are told that the gospel is preached for the obedience of faith; that does not sound like an invitation to me to exercise my freewill in deciding between two alternatives.

Although the Scriptures must be our sole authority it is often helpful to see how others have seen the truth that lies there. J.N. Darby, in a letter written (evidently when he was feeling very tired) in 1861 said:

“This fresh breaking out of the doctrine of free-will ministers to the pretension of the natural man not to be entirely lost, for that is just what it amounts to. All who have never been deeply convinced of sin, all those with whom this conviction is based upon gross and outward sins, believe more or less in free-will ... but it completely changes the whole idea of Christianity, and entirely perverts it.

“If Christ came to save that which is lost, free-will has no more place. Not that God prevents man from receiving Christ – far from it. But even when God employs all possible motives, everything that is capable of exerting influence over the heart of man, it only serves to demonstrate that man will have none of it, that his heart is so corrupt and his will so determined not to submit to God (however much it may be of the devil who encourages him in sin), that nothing can induce him to receive the Lord, and to forsake sin. If, by liberty of man, they mean that no one forces him to reject the Lord, this liberty exists in full. But if it is implied that, on account of the dominion of sin to which he is the slave, and that voluntarily, he cannot escape from his condition, and choose the good – even while acknowledging it to be good, and approving of it – then he has no liberty whatever. He is not subject to the law, neither indeed can be; so that they that are in the flesh cannot please God.”

Later, F.E. Raven (1838-1903) said:

“And as a matter of fact, I feel doubtful if there is such a thing as free will with man, because where a man is dominated by the principle of sin, he is not free as to will. People talk about free will, but it is simply rubbish, because if a man is a slave to sin, which he is by nature, there is no question of free will, he is controlled by a principle which is beyond himself. The apostle John says, ‘the devil sins from the outset.’ Sin came into the world by man, but it did not originate with man. And if it is true that a man is by nature under the power of sin, then it is not a question of his will, but of sin that he is controlled by, a principle which he does not circumscribe. Again I say that there are spiritual influences at work, and so long as men are running in the current of sin and of the world, they are often carried by those influences a long way beyond what they intended to go. I think we should find plenty of instances of that.* I believe it accounts for many dreadful things which take place in the world; dreadful ends often had small beginnings. But people going in a certain current, have found that they were helped while they were going down the stream ...”

The observations of that man of faith and letters, William Tyndale (c.1484-1536) are perhaps also noteworthy. He taught that the natural man is so totally separated from God and blinded that he

“cannot see the goodness and righteousness of the law of God.”
“The will of man followeth the wit, and is subject unto the wit; and as the wit erreth, so does the will, and as the wit is in captivity, so is the will; neither is it possible that the will should be free, where the wit is in bondage.” “We are all out of the right way, every man his ways: one judgeth this best, and another that to be best. ... now when we say, every man hath his free will, to do what him lusteth, I say, verily, that men do what

** Perhaps the recent riots in the U.K. are an example of this – Editor.*

they lust. Notwithstanding, to follow lusts is not freedom, but captivity and bondage.”

By way of summary, in every kind of circumstance in which man has been placed since the fall, and no matter what testimony God has been pleased to render to him at different times, he has persistently shown an inability to choose good and refuse evil because he is the slave of sin. Through the fall Adam and Eve acquired (not freewill but) a conscience – and a bad one at that. This will always register the difference between good and evil, unless it becomes seared by being repeatedly overridden – as the needle of a compass will always point north unless it is overpowered by another magnetic field. But the ability to refuse evil and embrace good is another thing.

John Newton (1725 - 1807) wrote:

“By nature we are all dead in trespasses and sins, not only strangers to God, but in a state of enmity and opposition to His government and grace. In this respect, whatever difference there may be in the characters of men as members of society, they are all, whether wise or ignorant, whether sober or profane, equally incapable of receiving or approving divine truths, 1 Cor. 2:14.* On this ground our Lord declares, ‘No man can come unto me, except the Father who has sent me draws him.’”

Divine action on a soul is therefore needed to make it respond to God’s provision. Elihu said of Job, “God thrusteth him down, not man;” or, “God will make him yield, not man” (Darby Trans.) (Job 32:13). In the New Testament we have the words of the Lord Jesus Himself, who tells us that without being born again we cannot even *see* the kingdom of God – let alone *enter* it (John 3:1-8). This makes it quite clear that new birth cannot be the *consequence* of repentance and faith, but rather a condition *precedent*. Moreover,

* “The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God.”

as Nicodemus realised, we cannot cause our own birth; the Lord Jesus likened the action of the Holy Spirit in bringing new birth about to the wind which “bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.” There is plainly nothing of my will in this!

Moreover, the setting of that passage in John 3 is significant. At the end of the previous chapter some are described as having believed (I think Scripture treats people according to their profession – see the case of Simon in Acts 8:13) but Jesus did not commit himself to them because “he knew what was in man.” Then we have the teaching of new birth – not building on what is “in man” but a fresh work of the Holy Spirit. A work is needed in us before we can receive anything from God.

Sir Robert Anderson (1841-1918) wrote:

“When the gift of life was proffered us, we were conscious in accepting it that we did so freely, voluntarily. Since then, we have come to see that grace did not exhaust itself even in working out our deliverance at a cost so priceless, and bringing it within our reach, but that our very acceptance of the gift was the Spirit’s work, and as directly the action of grace as Calvary itself. But more than this, now that we have received the message, and are come within the scene of joy and blessing to which it bids us, we have to learn that, in a sense deeper and fuller still, grace is sovereign. The gospel of our salvation spanned the open door of grace as we approached it; above the inner portal, we now read the words ‘Chosen in Him before the foundation of the world.’”

If there were no such action of grace upon the soul to cause it to receive the gospel, how did a hardened, proud, aggressive man like Saul of Tarsus come to believe? One moment he was single-mindedly going against Christian believers; the next, he was on the

ground acknowledging the lordship of Christ. Surely it was the uninvited beam of God's grace from heaven that changed him. His conversion was, of course, quite dramatic, but surely the same principle applies to every case. Similarly the repentant thief: one moment he was cursing Jesus; the next he was saying "Remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom." What had happened? Surely divine light had entered into his soul. Without this we all have to say as to the Lord Jesus "there is no beauty that we should desire Him" (Isaiah 53:2).

But the question of divine light entering the soul brings us on to the subject of **faith**.

Faith has been described in different ways. F.E. Raven said, "Faith means light in the soul from God." In Hebrews 11:1 we read that faith is "the evidence (*or conviction*) of things not seen." So the dying thief suddenly received light from God and had a view of the Lord Jesus Christ coming in His kingdom (Luke 23:42). We may have the temerity to ask, why didn't God give the same light to the other man? – but we must allow God to be God and that surely involves His right to act sovereignly. "Who will say unto Him, What doest Thou?" (Job 9:12; Daniel 4:35). But we know that the Judge of all the earth will do right (Genesis 18:25), even if *we* cannot for the moment explain His actions.

So we have to ask, from where does this faith come – this ability to apprehend the things of God, to see that Jesus Christ is Lord, that He is all I need? Surely it can only come either from God or from within myself. But Paul says, "For I know that in me, (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing." To continue the above quotation from F.E. Raven,

"faith is the gift of God, and if God gives a man faith it means that God gives him light from Himself. Light comes in to man by faith; and faith means practically that a man, instead of being in the darkness of nature, is in the light of God."

That great chapter of faith, Hebrews 11, bears this out; there we have people who acted on the light that they had from God, whether Noah, who was “warned of God of things not seen as yet” and “prepared an ark to the saving of his house;” or Moses, who “endured, as seeing Him who is invisible;” or others of that hall of fame.

The key scripture on the question of whether or not faith is the gift of God is undoubtedly Ephesians 2:8: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.”

Various views have been advanced as to the correct interpretation of this verse. Some (including, it has to be said, Sir Robert Anderson, despite what we have already quoted from him) have claimed that “that not of yourselves” relates to “salvation” and not to “faith.” Some have relied on the difference in gender between the words “faith” and “that” (or ‘this’ in some translations – “and *this* not of yourselves”) – to argue that faith is not what is meant by “the gift,” neither is it included in it. I am not a Greek scholar but I find that those who have excelled in their knowledge of the language (I am excluding those who simply work by a grammar and a lexicon!) have no difficulty about that at all.

In his “Ephesian Studies,” Handley Moule (1841-1921)* says this:

“For, solemnly to recite again that great formula of blessing, by His grace you have been saved, by means of faith – by the reliance on His word which makes the provision a possession; and even that, the faith of your having come to trust Him, is not of yourselves, not generated merely of your unaided will; God’s is the gift of salvation, in all its parts, including the fact

** He was at different times Norrisian Professor of Divinity at the University of University and Bishop of Durham.*

that ‘thy faith hath saved thee’; it is **not the resultant of works**, not the outcome of your moral fitness and your moral efforts, (for you were dealt with as ‘dead men in respect of your trespasses’) **so that no one may boast**. Yes, the process was divinely steered all along on purpose to keep the saved ones off the quicksands of self-complacency, as if either their strength or their insight were to thank for their blessings; they were to be landed on the firm conviction that ‘all things are of God,’ and so to give thanks, now and for ever, ‘to Him who worketh all things in all’ His people.

In a footnote (which we cannot include for lack of space) he addresses the form and gender of the Greek words and allows two alternative constructions of the verse: (1) the gift relates to salvation “in all its parts” (including faith) or (2) it refers specifically to the immediately preceding item, i.e. faith; he prefers the latter interpretation.

His reference to salvation “in all its parts” is noteworthy. One doesn’t normally look to the world’s dictionaries for a description of God’s truth but one of the definitions of ‘salvation’ in the Concise Oxford English Dictionary seems quite acceptable: “deliverance from sin and its consequences, believed by Christians to be brought about by faith in Christ.’ Paul doesn’t exactly speak in Eph. 2:8 of salvation ***being brought to us*** (i.e. as a distinct commodity, grace and faith simply being the means of delivery) but of our ***being saved***. We cannot say that we are saved until we have exercised faith in Christ and then – when we are saved – comes the statement that this has not been of ourselves.

Here are a couple of excerpts from J.N. Darby, who was a Classical Gold Medallist from Trinity College, Dublin:

“All is the gift of God. It was not even through works that we had part in this glorious salvation, but by faith, and this again

the gift of God, that no man might boast. The glory of such a grace must all turn back again to God.”

(From ‘Notes on the Epistle to the Ephesians’ chapter 2)

“Poor sinners from among the Gentiles, and from among the disobedient and gainsaying Jews, are brought into the position where Christ is, by the power which raised Him from the dead and set Him at God’s right hand, to show forth in the ages to come the immense riches of His grace which had accomplished it. A Mary Magdalene, a crucified thief, companions in glory with the Son of God, all we who believe, will bear witness to it. It is by grace we are saved. Now we are not yet in the glory: it is by faith. Would any one say that at least the faith is of man? No;‡ it is not of ourselves in this respect either; all is the gift of God; not of works, in order that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship.

‡ I am quite aware of what critics have to say here as to gender; but it is equally true as to grace, and to say, “by grace ... and that not of yourselves,” is simply nonsense; but by faith might be supposed to be of ourselves, though grace cannot. And therefore the Spirit of God adds, “and that [not it] not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.” That is, the believing is God’s gift, not of ourselves. And this is confirmed by what follows, “not of works.” But the object of the apostle is to show that the whole thing was of grace and of God – God’s workmanship – a new creation. So far, grace and faith and all go together.

(From “Synopsis of the Books of the Bible,” Vol. 4)

Darby’s footnote may not make easy reading but at least we have two Greek scholars (Darby and Moule) interpreting the verse in more or less the same way.

William Cowper wrote

*Faith too, the blood-receiving grace,
From the same hand we gain;*

*Else, sweetly as it suits our case,
That gift had been in vain.*

It may be objected that faith being the gift of God would undermine our ability to speak to sinners as Paul exhorted the Philippian jailer “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.” But surely for us to proclaim the gospel and enjoin people to repent and believe it is a matter of obedience to divine command. Paul says, “Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season.” Am I going to turn round and say, ‘Only if I know that the hearers will believe the message’? Jeremiah (7:27) was instructed to speak to the people when he was at the same time told that they would *not* hearken to him. Surely *my* part is to announce the gospel and to leave God to do *His* work as it pleases Him. As the old hymn says:

I know not how the Spirit moves,
Convincing men of sin;
Revealing Jesus through the word,
Creating faith in Him.

Human reasoning would infer inconsistency between the command to obey the gospel and the absence of free will; or between the desire of God that all should be saved (1 Timothy 2:4) and the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit’s action on the soul of a sinner; or between the invitation to come to Christ (John 7:37) and the fact that “No man can come to Me, except the Father which hath sent Me draw him” (John 6:44). But *God* is infinitely beyond us and it follows, therefore, that in the *things* of God there will be much that we cannot reconcile in our tiny minds. We must let God be God and not try to circumscribe Him by our patterns of thought but content ourselves thankfully with what He has been pleased to show us in His word. If we cannot reconcile God’s sovereignty and our responsibility, so be it. “The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us, and to

our children for ever” (Deuteronomy 29:29). We can nevertheless be sure that the Judge of all the earth will do right (Genesis 18:25).

To be sure, when we are in heaven with Christ none of us will claim to be there because we made the right decision; we will all freely acknowledge that we are there *wholly* through God’s grace. God has arranged everything so that no-one can boast of what he has done (Romans 4:2; Ephesians 2:9); all glory must redound to God, “according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:31).

The Editor

POETIC PAGES

“Be Strong”

Joshua 1:5-9

Only be strong and courageous,
Trusting in Jesus the Lord;
He will not fail nor forsake thee,
Stedfast and sure is His word.

Only be strong and courageous,
Lift thou thine eyes to His face;
Bravely go forward and conquer,
Strong in the Lord and His grace.

Only be strong and courageous,
Cast not thine eyes around;
Look not within but to Jesus,
Where all thy help is found.

Only be strong and courageous,
Powerful the tempter may be;
Use thou thy sword – “It is written,”
Satan shall turn him and flee. / *P.T.O.*

Only be strong and courageous,
Let nought discourage thy heart;
No creature or tribulation
Ever shall Him and thee part.

Only be strong and courageous
Soon He is coming again;
Then through the endless ages
Thou with thy Lord shalt reign.

S.S.

Taken from the "Christian's Helper" 1906.

NOTE

The Editor trusts that the selection and composition of material for this magazine has been undertaken with the Lord's guidance and that the contents are of moral and spiritual value and appropriate to present needs. The only infallible statement of truth, however, is found in the Holy Bible and the reader is, therefore, urged to follow the practice of the Bereans, who "received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11). The Editor is always happy to receive comments and inquiries, and to consider suggested articles for inclusion in future issues.