

“STRAIGHT AHEAD LIES GLORY”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Mt. 6:19-24; 7:13-20

From the pen of a little-known poet, Cale Young Rice come a few lovely lines which describe the adventure in which we have been engaged during the past few weeks. An adventure that has led us close to the heart of God.

“There is a quest that calls me
In nights when I am alone,
The need to ride where the ways divide
The known from the unknown.

I mount what thought is near me
And soon I reach the place,
The tenuous rim where the scene grows dim,
And the sightless hides its face.

I have ridden the wind,
I have ridden the sea,
I have ridden the moon and the stars,
I have set my feet in the stirrup seat
Of a comet coursing Mars.

And everywhere,
Through earth and air
My thought speeds lightening shod,
It comes to a place where checking pace
It cries, ‘Beyond lies God.’”

For the past four weeks we have shared in such an adventure as Mr. Rice describes. We have “mounted what thoughts were near us” and have allowed them to lead us into a newer, deeper, brighter, better understanding of who God is.

We have picked up the trail left by his footprints in the sod. We have seen him revealed in the majesty and wonder of nature. In the lives of great men. In the language of the Bible. In the faith of our fathers.

We have walked where Jesus walked. We have looked at his life. Studied his teachings. Knelt beneath his cross. And, we have come away with the unshakable awareness that God becomes clearest when we see him in the person of his Son, for whatever else God may be, he is not less than Jesus.

And then, as we have dwelt upon the promises of his never-failing presence, we have discovered that, while God becomes clearest in the Son, he becomes nearest in the Holy Spirit. In the person of the Holy Spirit, God steps over the human boundaries of time and space, and comes to dwell in our very hearts. To *be* with us and *empower* us even as he is with, and empowering, all other believers wherever they may be.

It’s been a glorious experience, this seeking after answers to the question, “Who is God?” It’s also been a taxing one. There have been times, as we thought together, I have wished for the knowledge of the angels. Or the tongue of Isaiah touched with a coal from the altar on high. Then, perhaps, I could have done a better job of helping you to know who God is.

But this earth-bound speech of mine is too clumsy. Too poor. Too limited. And, time after time, I have come to the end of my store of adjectives and superlatives only to discover we haven’t *begun* to plumb the depths of the wonder and meaning of all God is.

And yet, acknowledging our ineptness, our inability to express what we really feel, we must go on to say that because of our seeking we now know, perhaps better than ever before, that God is!

And that he is the rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

One day Aubrey De Vere, a Swiss nobleman, was visiting Wordsworth. The English poet was very fond of the hills in his home country and jealous of them. In the course of their conversation he said, “The Alps are higher, of course, but then they are almost enshrouded in mist.” His visitor agreed. A bit testily, Wordsworth continued, “The clouds hide the Alps from your eyes.” To which De Vere replied, “True, but then you do *know* the Alps are behind the clouds, and that makes a difference.”

Yes, all the difference in the world! And though we come now to the end of our sermon in five parts with many loose ends dangling, many questions unanswered, many thought-paths still unexplored, yet we can say with a deep assurance that we know God is! And, though there are times when our doubts and uncertainties cast great clouds over his face, we know he is behind the clouds, and that makes a difference. All the difference in the world!

We come now to what I shall call the “So what?” section of our five-part sermon. That part which relates to the question, “What’s this got to do with me?” The answer is, plenty! Some important and inescapable implications are hinged on our new knowledge of him. For one thing, we now have the assurance that, because God is --

What Ought To Be Can Be

There isn’t one of us who doesn’t have some secret vision of a better life. A life crammed with meaning and direction. A life full of power and peace. A life which, in every sense of the word, is abundant and full and free. We are all, in the words of Edward Markham, “Conscripts of a mighty dream.” Now that we know God is, and that he is the rewarder of them that diligently seek him, we also have the great assurance that *that* life of which we dream, that life that *ought* to be *can* be. For, we are more than conqueror through him who loves us.

This last year Dr. Leslie Weatherhead completed forty years in the ministry. On the occasion of

his anniversary someone asked him,

"What lesson have you most clearly learned in that time?"

Without a moment's hesitation, he answered,

"I have learned that life only works out one way, and that's God's way. All other ways," he said, "are either dead ends from which one must turn back and try again, or else they lead to a precipice. Outside God there is only death. Never forget," he said, "life was made for God."

Weatherhead continued --

"An automobile was made for roads. If you drive it into a swamp or ditch, it will stop. It wasn't created for that. You must drag it back on the road again. And, if you try to live your life for selfish purposes, for pleasure or gain or lust, then life breaks down. It wasn't created for that purpose. And, the frustration, boredom, irritability, or depression which sometimes grip you, are simply warnings that life was made for God's purpose, not yours, and that you cannot find your rest until you rest him."

All of us know enough about physics to know that when you bring a magnet near a pile of iron filings, they seem to get agitated and move around. But, if the magnet is brought close enough, the filings leap up to close the gap and are held securely by a power greater than their own.

You and I are like those iron filings. We move around excitedly in a considerable tension, for whether we know it or not, we are under the influence of Jesus Christ. He disturbs and challenges us every day of our lives. When we get close enough to leap the gap between our life and his, redemption comes and we are held securely by the power of the Holy Spirit, a power greater than our own.

We have new life in God. A life of depth and meaning and purpose. We have the great assurance of what ought to be can be. Straight ahead lies glory, if we just stop at the cross, and turn right!

The Challenge Of A Deeper Life

But along with a word of comfort, there is a word of challenge. In addition to the blessings we have received from God, there are the obligations we owe to God.

You see, my friend, if God is, if through him and the grace of his Son, Jesus Christ, we have become creatures of eternity, if we have been assured that through his strength and guidance the life that ought to be can be, then don't we owe him something in return? If there are gifts, ought there not also be a sense of gratitude expressed to the Giver? As someone has pointed out,

“If a man invents a machine, the government gives him patent-rights entitling him to returns on his investment. If an author writes a book, he is entitled to royalties on his writings, simply because they are the creation of his mind.”

And, if we can put it that way, God is entitled to a return on his creation. To royalties on his work. Why? Because they are, or should I say, *we* are the product of his mind and love.

Just A Place For Christ

You may feel you repaid God in full when you gave Jesus a place in your life. But that is not so. It's too shabby and stifling a concept of what it means to be a Christian. It isn't enough to just reserve a wee, small place for Christ on your schedule. Or in your budget. Or in your thoughts. It isn't fair to become so preoccupied with the many other interests and affairs of life you relegate Christ to some cobwebbed corner of your life. And yet, how many of us give him little more, and sometimes not as much status as we give our other concerns.

I know you don't deliberately reject or repudiate him. You simply allow other matters to push him from the center to the circumference of your life. You want God, alright, but you want him on your terms. That's human! All of us tend to leave God out of the picture when things are going along smoothly. But when we are in trouble, when sorrow or pain or some other difficulty comes, then we demand his immediate attention. An old Indian described this human tendency in

a crude but accurate way, “Plenty happy, no pray! Gottem stomach ache, heap God!”

Yes, we miss the idea completely if we think of God as a kind of glorified errand boy who is handy to have around, but someone we restrict to the backdoor, or confine to a little used closet of our life. That’s not Christianity at all. It is a sad mockery of the real McCoy. If we bear Christ’s name and share in Christ’s blessings, we must give him more than “just a place.”

A Place Of Prominence

Nor is it enough to give Christ the place of prominence in our life. It is a decided improvement, but it is not enough.

To recognize God’s sovereignty in ninety-percent of our experience, while we repudiate him in the other ten-percent is a far cry from the totality of commitment which is the basis of real joy.

Somewhere along the line, the devil succeeded in getting us to believe that, if we really take Christ seriously, we will miss out on all the fun of life. He has “conned” us into believing we should attempt to work out some sort of comfortable compromise between Jesus and the world. But Christ makes it perfectly clear that *that* just cannot be done successfully.

“No man can serve two masters,” he said.

It isn’t easy to hand one’s self over to Christ one-hundred-percent. But, believe me, it’s far easier than becoming spiritual schizophrenics, which is what the devil would have us become. We can no more live two lives successfully, the life of a Christian and the life of an earthling, than we can go two directions at the same time.

Straight ahead lies glory! Not off on the side roads, the blind alleys, or the cul-de-sacs of life. As Dr. Weatherhead discovered,

“Life will only work out one way and that’s God’s way. All other ways are either dead ends from which one must turn back and try again, or else they lead to a

precipice.”

Paul said,

“You are not your own, you have been bought with a price.”

And no one who has ever faced the cross and its implications, can consider himself free from Christ’s right to demand his time and talents.

We are bought with a price.

When they drove the nails into his feet, he bought our feet with all of their ability to walk and run and climb.

When they drove the nails into his hands, he bought our hands with all of their ability to lift and touch and hold.

When they pressed the crown of thorns upon his brow, he bought our mind with all of its power to think and to believe and know.

When they cast the spear into his side, he bought our heart with all of its capacity to feel and live and love.

“You are not your own, you have been bought with a price.” And, you belong to the buyer. You belong to the One, who with his own life’s blood, paid that price. You owe your very life to him, and you have no right to shove him out. In fact, when you do, you are toying with disaster.

A few years ago in one of his newspaper columns, Billy Rose told the story of an Albany surgeon whose telephone rang at two-thirty one morning. He dragged himself out of bed, and when he answered the phone, he heard the voice of a friend who was superintendent of a hospital in Glenn Falls, New York, some sixty miles away.

The caller told of a boy who was dying in the hospital and for whom surgery was the only hope. He explained they thought they could keep the boy alive for an hour and a half, and that this surgeon was the only one within driving distance of the hospital who was qualified for this operation.

The surgeon agreed to come. He hung up the phone, put on his clothes and hurried down to the garage to get his car. He drove down the street to the boulevard, down the boulevard to the corner where it intersected the highway to Glenn Falls. The traffic light on the corner was red, and as he waited impatiently for the light to change, the car door at the far side of the front seat, opened and a man slid in beside him and shut the door. The doctor looked at his uninvited passenger and saw a man about middle age, wearing a dirty, brown cap pulled low over his eyes, a brown suede jacket, a sport shirt opened at the throat, and a pair of grey slacks. In his hand he held a gun.

He said two words, “Drive on.” The doctor did as he was told, and whenever he would try to engage the man in conversation his reply was “Just shut up and keep driving.” When they came to the city limit of Albany, the man with a gun said, “Pull over and stop.” The driver stopped. Then the man said, “Get out of the car.” Risking his life, the doctor tried to explain that he was a surgeon on a emergency call, but the man forced him out of the car and drove off.

The doctor went to the nearest house, awakened the family, and used their telephone to call a taxi company in Albany. The taxi took him as fast as possible to his destination in Glenn Falls, but more than two hours had elapsed since the phone had first roused him from sleep. When the taxi delivered the doctor to the hospital entrance, he raced up the steps, through the door and was met by the superintendent who greeted him with these words, “You’re too late, the boy just died.”

Crestfallen, the surgeon explained about the robbery of his car, but his friend said they could talk about it later over coffee. “I want you to come in here to the waiting room. The boy’s father is here, and it will comfort him if you will explain how hard you tried to get here.”

He entered the waiting room to find only one occupant. There sat the father of the boy, head bowed, shoulders shaking with the convulsions of his grief. In his hands he twisted a dirty, brown cap. He wore a brown suede jacket, a sport shirt opened at the throat, and a pair of grey slacks.

There was the father of the boy who had pushed him out of the car the only man in the world who could have saved the life of his son.

The parable is clear, and it makes a point we must not casually sluff off --

“We are in grave danger of pushing out of our lives and our culture the
One personality and power who can save us.”

And why? Because we think our way is better. We want to be our own master. We want to rule our own destiny. We want him to serve us, rather than our serving him. And, in trying to impose our will over his, in shoving him out of the arena of our life, we are in danger of losing the very thing we so desperately desire, a life full of meaning, purpose and peace.

Making Christ Pre-Eminent

What’s the answer? Well, it certainly doesn’t lie in just giving Christ a *place*, or even the place of *prominence* in your life. Rather it lies in making him *pre-eminent*! Lord of all!

It doesn’t matter what you believe, if what you believe doesn’t matter.

But when you give Christ *pre-eminence*, when you make him Lord and master over *all*, then what you believe does make a difference. The most wonderful difference in all the world. The difference between life on a lower level, and life at its best.

“I had walked life’s path with an easy tread
Had followed where comforts and pleasure led,
Until one day, in a quiet place,
I met the Master face to face.

I had built my castles and reared them high,
Their towers had pierced the blue of the sky,
I had sworn to rule with an iron mace
When I met the Master face to face.
With comfort and wealth and ease as my goal,
Much thought for my body, but none for my soul

I had entered to win in life's mad race
When I met the Master face to face.

I met him, and knew him, and blushed to see
That his eyes, full of sorrow, were fixed on me.

I faltered and fell at his feet that day,
While my castles melted and vanished away.
Melted and vanished, and in their place
None else could I see but the Master's face.

My thoughts are now for the souls of men,
I've lost my life to find it again,
E'er since that day, in a quiet place,
When I met the Master face to face.”

Have you met him?