

SIMPLE
FAITH

by
Grace
Thompson

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DEVOTIONAL TALKS
by Grace Thompson

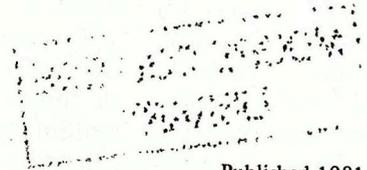
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

“In quietness and confidence shall be
your strength.” *Isaiah 30.15*

Mrs. Grace Thompson, now in her ninetieth year, has been engaged in Christian work for 72 years. Training in responsibility for others came early in life to Mrs. Thompson as one of a family of 5 children whose father lost his life at the gold diggings in the depression of the eighteen-nineties, and acceptance of responsibility has been a persistent quality of her life.

As a girl she was a member of the Christian Endeavour Society, an organization to which she acknowledges a debt of deep gratitude for the training in Christian leadership it gave her. In 1925, in her early married life, she became a founder member of the Normanhurst Presbyterian Church where she was Superintendent of the Sunday School for 15 years. But her great contribution to the life of the Presbyterian Church was in the leadership of the women's organisations, whether as an office-bearer or as an inspiring speaker.

In 1947, as President of the Associated Guilds of N.S.W., she took an active part in the talks that led to the merger with the Women's Missionary Association and, finally, to the formation of the Presbyterian Women's Association in 1954. In 1951 she went to Melbourne to assist in the formation of the P.W.A. of A. and was for three years Liaison Officer for the Federal body, a role which afforded a useful outlet for her skill as a letter-writer. She also served a seven year term as Secretary of the Women's World Day of Prayer and was at the same time Secretary of the Dorcas Committee.

In recent years she has been living at Nowra to be near her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren and there she has continued her involvement in the life of the Church. She is still expressing her “simple faith” in addresses in churches and still active in the P.W.A.

BEAR YE ONE ANOTHER'S BURDENS

In recent times we have heard so many opinions expressed concerning the correct application of our Australian constitutional laws and the conventions regarding them, that I feel it is with relief, that we, as Christians, can turn to the teachings of Jesus regarding the law as it applies to our daily lives. There is no confusion here, for our Scripture Readings (Luke 10.25-37 and Galatians 6.1-10) give a definite guide to problems which most of us will meet in life.

Our thoughts will be around the advice of Paul to the Christians in the town of Galatia, to bear one another's burdens. For, he tells them, in so doing, they will fulfil the law of Christ. And what is that law? It is recorded that Jesus upheld the law as given to Moses: "Thou shalt love the Lord, thy God, with all thy heart, mind and soul" and then added a lesser-quoted "and thy neighbour as thyself".

For those listening, who were versed in the law and the prophets, this human angle was not usually referred to, and it was not surprising that one in the crowd said to Jesus: "Who is my neighbour?" In reply Jesus told one of the most wonderful stories ever heard. We know it today as the story of "The Good Samaritan". It has been familiar to us since Sunday School days, and the name "Samaritan" has become, through the centuries, synonymous with good works. There are societies named for this man and we, ourselves, are often asked to be a "good samaritan" and do this or that charitable deed.

In this story we see a classic illustration of ordinary people being confronted with a situation which needs involvement in the affairs of others. The main lesson, it would appear, is that Jesus wanted to show that involvement does not mean to be involved only in the affairs of those near and dear to us, or to those of similar beliefs.

Help needs to be given without discrimination against race, colour or creed. When the Spirit of God has entered our hearts, we begin, deliberately, to identify ourselves with our Master's interest in other people, and He is interested in every type of person. In our work for Him, we should not let our imperfect judgement be our guide, but, when there is need, be ready to do what we can to help bear another's burden, fulfilling His law.

Are the three types of people whose reaction is shown in this parable typical of life as we know it today? In a similar situation would representatives of our church and society as we know them, pass by on the other side? Perhaps, in their own minds, the priest and the Levite in the story, had legitimate reasons for so doing. In their day, there were so many rules and regulations, that maybe the priest felt that he must touch nothing unclean as he would have to attend purification ceremonies before acting in his office, and time was limited. The Levite, a representative of the Law, perhaps felt he ought to keep the appointment he had made, and could not be delayed by this situation. The Samaritan, however, has no thought but to help the injured man. Whatever his business was in taking the journey, he put it aside until he gave assistance, because his first reaction was compassion. This emotion overruled any sense of urgency about his own journey. With medical assistance, care for the man's future and kindness, he proved a real neighbour. In reality, of all three "passers-by" this Samaritan could, perhaps, have been excused from helping, because we are told in the New Testament that "the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans". No thought of discrimination entered the mind of the "Good Samaritan", however, and he is thus, forever, the symbol of a good neighbour.

As we study this story, we are challenged to remember when did we face a situation similar to this, and what

was our reaction? Did we pass anyone by who needed help, telling ourselves that if they had belonged to our church or community, we would have given help quickly? Even if they had belonged to our own nationality, would we have organised help? None of these considerations should have entered into the situation. By Jesus' law of love we were involved, and should have acted without any discrimination. It has been a difficult thing, at times, to really love the people of a race with whom our nation has been at war, and some have been prepared to avoid those who have overstepped the bounds of proper conduct. But Jesus paid no heed to conventions. He saw the need of every person, outcast or foreigner, and let His love go out to each one unconditionally. Just as it was hard for the Jew, in the time of our Lord, to accept the despised tax-gatherer as his neighbour, so it is hard for us, in our society, to accept the fact that the drug addict, the prostitute, the drunkard are our neighbours whenever they need help to carry their burden.

The story is told of a traveller who fell over a precipice. He was able to hold on to an outcrop of rock and call for help. There passed by a Buddhist, who, on hearing the call, peered over the edge and advised the man to pray for help, but did nothing. One who was a follower of Christ came along, and immediately involved himself with the one who needed help, and so fulfilled the law of Christ.

In giving this advice about bearing the burdens of others, Paul does not mean that we are to relieve people from helping themselves whenever possible, for, later in the letter, he says, "Every man shall bear his own burden". Our involvement should come when we see someone bearing a burden too heavy for him. In this connection, a story is told of a missionary in a native village. He saw a small boy carrying what appeared to him to be a very heavy

baby. He said to the little chap, "That is a heavy burden you've got there", to which the boy replied, with a smile, "O no, sir, he's not a burden, he's my brother!" From this little story I think the lesson comes that helping to bear a burden can bring great joy. The fact that someone is willing to share in some worrying situation is of great help and many a person's life has been brightened by the knowledge that someone is caring and helping to bear some of the weight of the burden.

A great philosopher has written, "God has furnished us with constant occasions of bearing one another's burdens, for there is no man living without his failings, no man without his load of trouble, no man so sufficient as never to need assistance, and none so wise as never to need advice. Therefore, we should feel ourselves under the strongest compulsion to comfort, relieve and bear with one another".

It would appear that every day in the life of an ordinary person reveals occasions when we can help bear some burden, if only we are tuned to the needs of others. In thinking of the way our Lord spent His days during His earthly ministry, the great preacher, Henry Drummond, voiced this thoughts like this: "Christ simply went about doing good, He did not stop life to do something religious, or said to be religious. His life was His religion. Each day, as it came round, brought its ordinary ministry, each village along the highway had someone waiting to be helped, His pulpit was a hillside, His congregation once was a woman at the well. His work was everywhere, His workshop was the world".

It is possible to bear someone's burden without actually being conscious of so doing. A minister was sitting on Albury railway station when he was approached by a stranger, who asked to shake hands with him. In explanation, the man said he had been an alcoholic and had

joined A.A. On attending a function the night before when the minister was the speaker, he was assailed with the temptation to take a glass of liquor from the tray as it was passed around. Looking anxiously around the hall for help, his glance centred on the speaker. "What he takes, I will take," he thought, and, as a glass of soft drink was taken, the moment of temptation passed, and he was able to keep to his promise. So you see, although unconsciously, help in bearing a burden was given. It behoves us to live always as if our lives were an example to others, reflecting the life of our Master who eased many burdens.

In our church and community life, there are many opportunities to bear burdens for others, and an army of devoted workers is organised to carry out tasks of practical Christianity. They belong to the group of whom the Master said, "In as much as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, My brethren, ye have done it unto Me." Very often, when an appeal is made for help, many selfish people say, "I do not want to be involved; you do not know where it will lead". Those who answer the call know that it leads to a sense of fulfilment that is unknown unless one gives of one's very self to the cause of Christ.

If you recall the miracles of our Lord, those involving personal human need gave Him great joy, to relieve the suffering, to see sight return to the eyes of the blind, health to diseased bodies, sins forgiven and faith restored. All these involved the giving out of His strength and spirit in loving service.

I close with this verse of a New Year hymn. May its ideal of Christ-shared burden-bearing enter our hearts.

Another year is dawning,
Dear Master, let it be
In working or in waiting
Another year with Thee. *AMEN.*



MOTHER'S DAY

For over 80 years, people in many countries of the world have set aside this day on which to especially remember their mothers. I read in the Reader's Digest some years ago that the lady who began this day of remembrance was so upset at the commercialisation of the day that she withdrew altogether from the celebration. We know too well that the day has been commercialised and sentimentalised, but, at the same time, it has done good in many ways. So often the daily dependence on the mother in the home is not realised, and it is good that on this special day, some return is made to mother for her guidance and help. We are all aware that the giving of gifts on this special day does not in any way make up for neglect or lack of consideration on the other 364 days of the year. Some would say, "Why a special day at all?" The best reason of all for the day is that it is associated supremely with God and the worship of God. Many go to a service on that Sunday of the year, perhaps only to please their mother, but who knows but that it may lead to regular worship. In the eyes of many men without any creed or belief, Mother has been from childhood a symbol for God, often the only one they knew, especially when they knew that God meant a great deal to her.

There will be times when the wisest of mothers will be utterly at a loss what to do for the best, or what to say; but there will never be a time when she will be in the least doubt about how she ought to live, just because she is a mother, with a mother's responsibility. The quality of her life will tell far more in the long run than any words she may speak. God never gives a woman a greater pledge of His love than when He gives her a little child. To prepare the child for his place in society is important, but to prepare the child to serve God in society is more important still, and what a wonderful experience. I read an extract from a book written by Victor Hugel and this is

what he says "We doubt whether there be anything in the world more gladdening to the heart of a mother than the ideas and thoughts awakened by the sight of her infant's little shoes." In all of motherhood, taken seriously and at its highest level, there is a great responsibility, spiritual as well as physical. To nourish the body which a child has, is a responsibility; but to nourish the awakening soul which a child is, proves a great responsibility for the one nearest to the little one, and that is the mother.

While there are a few mothers mentioned in the Old Testament, not many are given prominence in the New Testament. The mother of James and John, you may remember, came to Jesus with the request that her two sons might be given places of prominence when He established His kingdom. She thought, of course, that it was an earthly kingdom He had come to proclaim. Very natural, of course, that a mother should make such a request, for all mothers like to see their children make a success of their life. In Paul's letter to Timothy, we read that Paul says how fortunate Timothy is in that he had been taught the Scriptures by his mother and his grandmother.

When we read the record of Mary, the mother of our Lord, we come to see motherhood at its best. With a great sense of responsibility and strength of character, Mary received the news that she, a simple peasant girl, had been chosen to be the mother of a divine Son. Her first reaction was to burst into song, expressing the glad wonder that filled her heart. "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God, my Saviour, for He hath regarded the low estate of His hand-maiden", was the burden of her song, and it has been preserved over the centuries for us and our inspiration.

After the birth of Jesus, accompanied as it was by the mysteries of the angel's songs, the visit of the shepherds, the star and the Wise Men, Mary knew without doubt that this, her Son, was of divine origin. We see her attending to His needs as we ordinary mothers attend to our babies,

surrounding Him with love, which followed Him through His childhood, youth and manhood. Her sweet spirit created the atmosphere which encompassed Him in the home at Nazareth. Her prayers kept heaven very close about Him, and her hands guided His feet, and her life guided His character. What a mission this was for Mary, the mother of Jesus, and it is also the mission of all mothers who would lead their children in the right path through life.

Little is known about the home in Nazareth, but small incidents recorded reveal that it was a home in its true sense. We read that Jesus returned to the home, and "was subject to his parents", a necessary lesson in obedience. We also read that Mary kept the sayings of Jesus in her heart in just the same way we, as mothers, keep the sayings of our children. We catch glimpses of the home life in these sayings of Jesus. He said, on one occasion "As one whom His mother comforteth", and we can imagine the small boy falling in the cobbled yard of the home and running to his mother to be comforted. Also He said: "One does not put new cloth onto an old garment", and we picture Him holding up the heavy lid of the clothes chest while Mary hunts for a patch. Jesus, perhaps, would point to a piece of similar design, but Mary would say, "O, no, that is new. We do not patch an old coat with new material". Again, thinking possibly of chickens He had once kept in the yard of His first and only earthly home, He said in mourning over Jerusalem, "O, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered you as a hen gathers her chickens under her wing, and ye would not." Sweeping the floor to find the lost coin, putting yeast into flour to make bread, are some other references which would only arise from a real home atmosphere, a home where the love and security so necessary for the balanced growth of the child would be found. Mary never failed to follow Him with her love, for we know that she followed Him to the cross. Her

reward, although she did not need one, was that Jesus thought for her comfort, even while suffering, for He said to His loved disciple, John, "Behold thy mother", thus ensuring a home for this mother who had so cared for Him.

In a little book of poems I have, there is one which tells of the Gospel according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, but the writer goes on to say:

"But the Gospel I love, and the Gospel I know,
As more plain and more real than all other,
Is the Gospel I learned a long time ago,
The Gospel according to Mother."

Do our children hear from our lips of God's love for them, or do we leave it to the Church and the Sunday School teacher? Happy the child who can say that he heard "The Gospel according to Mother".

It matters not whether the home be rich or poor, the ideals of our Christian living can be upheld. I read somewhere that "a home never rises higher than the mother who is in it". What a responsibility! As mothers, we must keep the high standard of conduct in the home. Sad it is when a home is described as one child did in a school essay when she said, "Home is the place where we wait for mother to come back in the car so that we can go out in it." Thackeray wrote in "Vanity Fair" that the word "Mother" on the lips of little children means God to them. We are the highest thing they know, so it can be seen that the influence of a mother cannot be calculated. Again, what a responsibility it is to be a mother. We need to depend on the amazing grace of God to carry us through as it would not be possible to reach the highest without God's help.

Most of the great men in the world pay tribute to the influence of their mother's training in their youth, and many a story is told of brilliant students who reach a high standard because of the self-sacrificing love of their

mothers. One story comes to mind of such a student who arranged that his mother should come from a remote village in the hills, to Glasgow, where his graduation ceremony was to take place. It mattered not to him that his mother was poorly, even shabbily clad in comparison with the fine clothes worn by friends and relatives of the other students. Proudly he led her to the platform, and requested that the medal he had won should be pinned to her dress. He told the gathering that it was her sacrifices which made it possible for him to attend the University. How proud she would have been of her son that day, not only because of his brilliant pass, but because of his resolve that his mother should receive the honour he felt due to her.

Years ago, it was the custom in small homes to have framed mottoes or texts on the wall, and one I remember well was: "What is Home without a Mother" but it is said these days when the phrase "child delinquency" is used so often, we find that it is not always the child who is to blame, but a lack of parental control and guidance in the home life which have caused the trouble. It is most important that mothers earn the respect of their children if they would have their love; for love, without respect, is but a poor imitation. In Proverbs we read "A woman must look to the ways of her household if her children are to rise up and call her blessed". The sacrifices which this entails bring their own reward in the passing of the years when Mother is loved and respected to the end of her days.

Perhaps we should look at some types of mothers who, through lack of ideals, really hinder the proper growth of their children in the home. Someone has listed them as, first, the Indulgent Mother, who gives her child anything he wants, regardless of whether it is good for him or not; the Stupid Mother, who trains her child to think that all there is in life is to have a good time; the Selfish Mother, who is so taken up with sport and pleasure that she has not the time to give her child the companionship

and attention he needs; the Possessive Mother, who so dominates her child that he cannot use his own initiative even in small things; and, lastly, the Social Climbing Mother, who is so busy teaching her boy "who's who" that she fails to teach him "what's what", who is so busy keeping up with the Joneses that she fails to instil into her child good principles of living. I am sure that you and I have met some of these mothers, but we must look to ourselves in case any of these faults in motherhood lie at our door.

Mother's Day is meant to be spelt with an apostrophe "s", for it is an intimate, personal affair. To everyone there is only one mother in particular, and, if her influence in the home has been for high ideals, then she will always be remembered. Emerson has written "a man is what his mother makes him", and J.M. Barrie, the great writer and philosopher, wrote "One had only to look into the eyes of my mother to know she was born to show beautiful things to men and to inspire them with noble thoughts". Another little insight into the influence of a mother on her family is this. A man said to his friend that he was amazed to know that there were two bishops in a family he mentioned, to which the friend replied "I take it, then, that you did not know their mother, or you would not be surprised".

In a small book written by the Rev. D. Button some years ago, the writer says that some mothers should have their names written in all capital letters, some in smaller letters and some written off as women who have children! I expect that the real mother instinct is missing in this latter type. We have met all of them, and can only hope, if we are mothers, that we qualify for the type written in all capital letters.

As we close our meditation on Mother's Day, may our thoughts go back to that home in Nazareth, where Mary made a real home for our Lord Jesus Christ.



LETTERS

When studying the concordance of my Bible one day, searching for a reference I needed, I came across this item in one column: "Letters - remarkable ones". In looking up some of these letters, I found them very interesting as well as remarkable. It is surprising the number of letters which passed between kings and rulers of nations in those ancient times; political matters, war and various other things were the subjects discussed. We will look at some of these letters later, but first let us consider letters in general.

Most people like to receive letters, but not all like to take the time and the trouble to write them. If you will pardon a personal reference, for over forty years I was an honorary secretary in the women's work of our church at either local, state or federal level. I found the work of writing letters both rewarding and delightful, and many friendships were formed because of this correspondence. Perhaps that is why I have always had a great regard for Matthew, who, when called to follow Jesus, left his desk as a tax-gatherer, but took his pen with him. Matthew recorded for us the life of Jesus as he saw it during those three years of close companionship with the Master.

Letters may have a great influence on the course of our life. That leisurely walk to the letter box may bring you most unexpected news. It may be news that brings you great joy or, alternatively, some sadness, but there is always an air of mystery about that sealed envelope, especially if you do not recognise the handwriting.

I am reminded of the late Rev. Dr. Boreham, a great Presbyterian minister of yesteryear and the writer of many books of essays. He was living in retirement, and, as he was sitting in his garden, the postman brought him a letter on which was a Chinese stamp. He did not open it immediately, but let his mind go back to a meeting he had had with the writer many years before. In the New Zealand parish

where he was minister, the owner of a large cattle station invited him to see the cattle mustered for market. Only the best were chosen, and it was an interesting experience to see the stockmen separate the cattle. Near Dr. Boreham stood the young son of the owner, a bright-faced, pleasant lad, and without any forethought, he turned to the lad and said, "Keith, I wish I could separate you out for service to Christ and His church, just as the stockmen are separating the cattle". No more was said, and the occasion passed, but a few years later, Keith came to him and said he would like to go into training for the Mission Field. The letter in the Doctor's hand was from Keith, but the old minister let his thought wander over past memories, so as to enjoy to the full this letter telling of Keith's work in China. Yes, letters may bring joy.

We must remember that some folk cannot express just what they wish to say, so we learn to "read between the lines" as it were. We know also that letters need to be addressed correctly and distinctly to ensure their safe delivery. In one of Paul's letters to the young churches, he says that the followers of Christ are "Living Letters". I would suggest that our faces are like those "window" envelopes, which show the address through the clear space. Just as the postman scans the writing on the letters so as to deliver them to the right address, so should people be able to read from the serenity on our faces that we are on our way to the City of God.

Let us now refer to letters which appear in the Old Testament. In studying these letters we must bear in mind that Israel was a very small nation and her borders were occupied by great and powerful nations, especially Assyria. Israelites were often taken as captives, and made slaves to high officials of the conquering nation. The first letter we will refer to was written by the powerful King of Assyria to the King of Israel. One of the Assyrian officers of whom the king was proud, had contracted leprosy, for

which there was no known cure. A little captive girl, who was a slave in the household, told her mistress of the prophet in Israel who could cure leprosy. The news was brought to the Assyrian King, and he sent to the King of Israel a deputation, loaded with rich gifts. In return, he desired the cure of his army officer, Naaman. You will remember the story from Sunday School days, how the King of Israel was very troubled, thinking it was an attempt to provoke war (2 Kings 5,7). When Elisha heard of the King's worry, he agreed to deal with the matter and for Naaman all finally ended well.

When Hezekiah was King of Israel, he received a threatening letter from the King of Assyria. The letter boasted of the many conquests of the Assyrian army and said that Israel would be invaded and her people overthrown. Hezekiah felt helpless when he thought of his small army facing such a war, but he took the letter to the house of God, and placed it in front of him as he prayed for help. God answered the prayer and the invading army met with a mysterious illness which prevented the invasion, so through their King's humble faith, Israel was saved.

It is very interesting to read in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah of the troubles which overtook the Jews when they set about rebuilding both the temple and the walls of Jerusalem. Many letters passed between the Jews and their enemies, but again, God's help was sought by prayer. The Israelites recognised that they would have to do their part in any answer to their prayer, as is shown by a phrase recorded "Strengthen Thou our hands, O God". Their prayer was answered, and the work was completed in spite of their foes.

There is a very interesting letter in the Book of Jeremiah, written under the direction of God. Jeremiah was told to write to the Jewish captives in Babylon in the following terms. They were to build their homes and plant their gardens, and live on the fruit thereof. God would

come after 70 years to release them from captivity. A very telling sentence in the letter said "Ye shall seek me and find me if ye shall search for me with all your heart".

In turning to the New Testament, we have the wonderful letters of Paul and the other apostles. In most instances the letters were addressed to a particular church or person, but they were also passed to other branches to provide advice, guidance and consolation, as well as encouragement to all of the young churches.

Quite a number of Paul's letters were written from prison, but they were always in good spirit, for he knew his life was in God's hands. The letter to the Philippians for instance, was written from a Roman prison, from which there was little hope of release, but the spirit of joy which pervades the letter is indicative of Paul's courage. It is most interesting to read in Paul's letter to the Corinthians that he calls the members "Epistles, written, not with ink, but with the Spirit of the Living God; not on tables of stone, but on tables of the heart". Scribes wrote most of the letters, but Paul would write a greeting or a benediction in his own handwriting with thanks for loving and practical help given. Paul writes to Timothy as a father to a son, for such he counted Timothy in their comradeship in the church. On one occasion Paul wrote "O, Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, lay hold on eternal life, fight the good fight of faith." And another time, "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman needeth not to be ashamed."

Have you ever read that short letter of Paul's to Philemon? In it he pleads for the life of a one-time slave of Philemon's, whom Paul had met in the Roman prison. Onesimus had helped Paul during an illness, and he became a Christian. As such, he decided he should give himself up to his former owner, Philemon. It could have meant his death, for this was the punishment of an escaped slave. Paul wrote for mercy to be shown to Onesimus, not only

as a slave but as a church brother and used this plea: "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on my account". It would seem Philemon was indebted to Paul for some favour given.

The letters of Peter, written when he was old, had great significance to those Jews who had adopted the Christian faith. They were subjected to persecution by the rigid Jews. These letters were written to encourage them to hold fast to the faith. The three letters of St. John were also very helpful to the converts and John's letters give a real insight into the love of God for His People. It is to John that we owe the record of some of the most wonderful teachings of Jesus. The 14th chapter of John's Gospel, commencing with the words "Let not your heart be troubled" has given comfort to many, many Christians.

The only record of Jesus writing, is in the story where a sinful woman was brought before Jesus for His judgement. Jesus idly wrote in the sand while waiting for the accusers to drift away, after hearing Jesus say: "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her". The wind would blow away the writing, but I often wondered if the Pharisees saw the words which Jesus wrote.

The letter of Jude is not often read at any church service. It, too, was written because of the persecution of the Jewish Christians. I will close with the words of the benediction with which Jude closes his letter.

"Now unto Him that is able to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power both now and ever.
AMEN."



I SHALL NOT WANT

There are few people who are not familiar with the words of the 23rd Psalm. Someone has said that the 23rd Psalm is "a song of serenity which conjures up scenes of quietness and tranquillity, that bring peace to the weary and hope to the hopeless". We are very familiar with the opening words "The Lord is my Shepherd" but I wish to direct our thoughts to the next phrase "I shall not want". I hope that we shall, together, see that this phrase is relevant to all of the verses of the Psalm, that all our needs, both physical and spiritual will be supplied.

"I shall not want" suggests that above thought, and those of us who have lived a long life can say with conviction, that, as we put our trust in God, we have been supplied with all things needful, perhaps not with luxuries, but necessities, and sometimes in quite unexpected ways. I suggest that we take the verses separately (and quickly) so as to open up the needs expressed by David in this beautiful Psalm.

"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures and beside the still waters". What a lovely "word-picture" is here: contented sheep lying down in the grass, after refreshment from the still water. Having followed the Shepherd over stony tracks, they need a time of refreshing, before setting out to graze again. And do we not follow this rhythm in our daily living? We go through troubled times, then, if we are in touch with the Source of all comfort, we experience times of refreshing. An artist hung a picture in a gallery in Europe, entitled "Life". He expressed his idea of life as a stormy sea, with heavy clouds overhead. But, in a crevice of a rocky outcrop above the waves, he had painted a nest of green fern and here, in perfect peace above the storm, a dove sat peacefully on the nest, calm amidst the storm. This serenity we too can attain by a simple trust in One Who tells us that we "shall not want" rest or refreshment.

“He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness”. Even if we have felt defeated in some experience of life, we have only to appeal to the Good Shepherd to be restored to full vitality and the ability to face any further experience which might come our way. He will always guide us into the right path. We shall be supplied with unfailing guidance and leadership; we shall not be left wanting.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me”. In these words David expresses his confidence that in this final experience of the spirit, God will be with him, and there is no need to fear. And this confidence extends to other experiences of life which we sometimes approach with fear, but always we have the assurance that, whatever we have to face, we shall never want companionship and help.

“Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me”. In Palestine, where rocky hills abound in the restricted grazing areas, a shepherd would lead his small flock, calling each one by name. But many a sheep or a lamb could fall into a deep crevice. It would be then that the shepherd’s rod (or crook) and the staff he used to guide his own steps, would be used to lift the fallen one to safety. Would David have had in his mind the thought that, on many occasions where he had slipped into wrong-doing, God was there to help him out of his trouble? Many of the Psalms contain this thought.

And what of the sheep who did not return home to the flock? I think the most loved parable told by our Master is that of the lost sheep, and someone has put the meaning in these lines:

“Twas a sheep, not a lamb, that went astray,
In the parable Jesus told.

‘Twas a grown-up sheep that wandered away

From the ninety and nine in the fold.
And out on the hillside, and out in the cold,
‘Twas a sheep that the Good Shepherd sought.
And back to the Shepherd and back to the fold,
‘Twas a sheep the Good Shepherd brought.
Now why should a sheep be carefully led
And cared for still to-day?
Because there is danger, if they go wrong,
They will lead the lambs astray.
For the lambs will follow the sheep, you know,
Wherever they wander, wherever they go.
If the sheep go wrong it will not be long
Till the lambs are wrong as they.
If a lamb is lost, what a terrible cost
Some sheep will have to pay.”

We know assuredly that we “shall not want” comfort and assistance when we fall.

“Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.” To those of us who love to welcome guests to our homes, the wording of this verse would have an appeal. It shows God as the Divine Host preparing a table at which to welcome us as guests. We can sense the wonderful hospitality to be extended to us. His house has many mansions and great will be the welcome, so great, that our cup of joy runs over. We shall discover Him in the breaking of bread, as did those two whom He joined on the road to Emmaus. We shall find that we shall not want, or lack spiritual food or a joyous welcome in our Father’s House. But, did you notice that the meal would be prepared “in the presence of mine enemies”? We do not usually choose our enemies or those whom we do not love to be our guests or companions. Perhaps God has a message for us here: that, by kindly actions, an enemy may be turned into a friend. If we really wish it, we “shall not want” the gracious spirit shown by our Lord, who said “Father, forgive them.”

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.” So, on this note of confidence ends this poem of serenity. There are no doubts in the heart of David, God’s mercy and goodness he knows will be shown to him in this life. We, too can claim the promises in the Psalm and, like David, we shall know that we “shall not want” an eternal home, when He shall take “from our souls the strain and stress and our lives shall then show the beauty of His peace.”



LORD, I BELIEVE, HELP THOU MY UNBELIEF

Our thoughts this morning centre on the story we read in Mark 9.13-29. There, in reply to Jesus’ statement that all things are possible to him who believeth, the father of the boy replies in these very familiar words: “Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief”.

Is it possible that we give sufficient thought to what we believe? I suppose that not many of us have ever tried to put into words just what we believe about our faith, but have relied on the formal creed as set out by the Church to which we belong, in our case, “The Apostle’s Creed”, which we recite each Communion Sunday.

In our Sunday School days we were taught of the existence of God, that He ruled over all His creation, that in His love for us He sent His Son to live on the earth. We learnt that Jesus died for us on the Cross, that He rose from the dead, and is our Mediator in heaven. These teachings were as a skein of golden threads put into our hands to be woven into the fabric of our lives. But, how many put these teachings aside as not being relevant to the everyday bustle of this world’s activities? Those of us who are older, when we look back, if we have the eye to discern, can catch a gleam here and there of these higher things lightening the drabness of everyday life.

If we could take as our own and translate these basic beliefs into helpful service and conscious influence on those with whom we come in contact, it would be a rewarding experience. We would find that, even if our efforts to help in the work for His kingdom do not come up to the standard we would like to offer, if all we do is done in the spirit of love, all, surely, will be accepted. The story is told of a busy mother who went to her basket of mending, only to find that someone had been there before her. The large clumsy stitches on the garments told the tale that it was her very small daughter who had tried to help her. The

heart of the mother warmed to the thought of the help her little one had tried to give. Similarly, our sometimes clumsy efforts to help in God's work may be likened to those of the little child, and we know that He will accept them, for, as the hymn writer says, "The heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind".

Whether we wish it or not, we do influence those lives which touch ours on the path of life. Do they see in us something attractive which comes from our belief in God? Can they see in you and in me that peace and serenity which are the possession of these who have a perfect trust in their Heavenly Father? It is said somewhere that we are able to influence others by the heart, rather than by the head; that a loving spirit shown does more for the kingdom than all the arguments that may be offered. This is illustrated by the following incident. The minister of a large city congregation was surprised to learn that a regular worshipper confessed that while he had a general belief that God was the Creator of all things, and worshipped Him as such, he could not believe that God had an interest in him as a person. The minister prepared a series of sermons showing Christ as the personal friend and Saviour of all who believed. Later, the minister was told by this man that he now had taken Christ as his own friend and Saviour. When asked which of the sermons influenced him, he replied that while the sermons had been helpful in guiding his thoughts, it was the peace and serenity of an old lady's face which made him go home and pray that these might be his experience. He proved the promise that "If with all your heart ye truly seek Him, ye shall surely find Him".

We see then, that a great influence is brought to bear on our ordinary everyday life by believing in the presence and power of God. But do we believe that He can change the whole course of our lives if we surrender them fully to His guidance? What better illustration of this is there than the life of Simon Peter? A rough, unlettered man, rather

inclined to act first and think afterwards, toughened by contact with wind and waves in his calling as a fisherman, this Peter, with all his faults, was commissioned by the Master to establish His Church on earth. After Jesus' Ascension, and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, we read that Peter and the other disciples "turned the world upside down", preaching and teaching as if they were learned men. Later, Peter, writing to the new churches, advised them to put on the apron of humility. Possibly he was thinking of his denial of the Master. Truly, Peter could have said, in the words of the old Sankey hymn: "What a wonderful change in my life has been wrought, since Jesus came into my heart".

Think again of one of our hymn writers, John Newton. As a young man Newton was a sailor. His shipmates, rough though they were, avoided the company of Newton, because of his bad language and behaviour. Newton came under the influence of a Christian man, and a great change came over his life. We often sing his hymns; "Glorious things of Thee are spoken" and "Jesus, the very thought of Thee". What a change!

Think too, of an African slave boy. Taken from his village home and thrust into the hold of a slave-trading ship, so wretched was Samuel Crowther that, young as he was, he wished life would end. God's hand was upon him, and, after the slave ship was taken by a British warship, the slaves were freed, and Samuel came to be one of a group seeking Christ. He came to know and love Him. In 1864, an English Cathedral was crowded with people to see Samuel Crowther crowned as first Bishop of Nigeria. In 1821, a slave, in 1864, a bishop, Crowther shows the power of God through a life fully surrendered.

"I wish I could move my congregation as you do your audience," a minister once said to a noted actor. "What is your secret?" "Ah," said the actor, "we live the part. We believe everything we say". Yes, that is the secret too, of

real Christian living, to live the part, and to believe what we say. We read the Bible, but do we make the promises there our own?

We would not worry unduly about material things if we really believed the promise, "Seek ye first the Kingdom and all these things shall be added unto you". We would never feel lost and lonely if we believed the promise, "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee". What of the promise that "Where two or three gather in My Name, there am I"? Notice the positiveness of the promise: not "I might be there" or "I'll try to be there" but "I am there". If we believed that He is here this very morning, next to you, next to me, what a difference and reality would be put into our worship! A story to illustrate the presence of our Master when we are about His work is told by a missionary. He worked on a Pacific Island Mission Station for years and, in talking to one of his earliest converts, he said, "Do you remember that, when first I came here, I had to go through the forest one day to see a sick man? I thought I would be attacked that day and never be heard of again." "Well" said the native Christian, "now that we know each other so well, tell me who was the shining figure we saw walking beside you? We were hidden in the bushes ready to attack, but this figure made us afraid, for we thought it was a spirit." Yes, if we believed that God was with us all the way, our courage would be strengthened, our wills sustained and our hearts lightened.

When Jesus said the words, "Ask and it shall be given you, seek, and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened," he may have wanted to convey the thought that we have to take some conscious part in making His promises a reality. Miracles do not often happen, but if we do our part, ask, seek, knock, looking to Him for guidance, we can expect results. There is no sphere in life where God's help is not available and what we are comes out in what we do. Rev.

N. Vincent Peale, a great preacher, tells of a businessman who came to him for help. The man's health was impaired because of a decline in his business. After talking with the man, Dr. Peale urged him to put the business into God's hands. "But," said the man, "it is an ordinary business, nothing to do with religion." However, he agreed to go back to his office, pray and be quiet and ask God for guidance. For four days he did this. Nothing happened. Then on the fifth day, an idea came to his mind which, when applied to the business revolutionised its output and success came. God had used the businessman's quietness of mind for creative thought which could not come while he was worrying.

If we could gather the many promises of God, believe them, and weave them into our life like the golden threads of our childhood teachings we would achieve that serenity which is the outcome of a sure belief in God's goodness. We could say, like the father of the boy, "Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief."



GIFTS AT CHRISTMAS

What a happy time we have at the Christmas season. I am sure it is because our thoughts and plans are for others. For the little children who touch our lives we plan a gift which will please them, for our families and friends we plan suitable gifts, and what a happy time is spent as our families gather to greet one another and exchange gifts.

I wonder do we take time to remember that to one and all at Christmas time comes the greatest gift we can receive, the gift of God's love in the coming of the Babe of Bethlehem, a gift renewed each passing year. It calls to mind a little poem I came across somewhere which says:

“The first Christmas gift ever given, was not bought
in market or shop,

And it wasn't encased in gay wrappings, with a bright
ribbon bow on the top.

The first Christmas gift was given, in a manner lowly
and bare,

And a blanket alone was the love-wrap of this Gift
so precious and rare.

God gave the first gift of Christmas, a most holy and
wonderful one,

When He looked down in mercy and goodness and
gave us the gift of His Son.”

Now, the gifts we receive from our relatives and friends are very nicely wrapped in these days when pretty paper and ribbon are so readily available even to those of us who have not much money. These gifts are not left in their wrappings, however, at the foot of the Christmas tree, nor in the Christmas stocking, nor yet at the bedside where they may have greeted you on Christmas morning. No, they are soon unwrapped, admired and put to the use or ornament for which they are suited.

What about the wonderful gift which God has given us? Do we make it our own by taking Him into our hearts

and lives, or do we put His gift aside for a while? Someone has written "If Christ a thousand times in Bethlehem be born, if He's not born in thee, thy soul is yet forlorn." Think about it this year as you open up your gifts, and take Him with joy into your heart and life.

Coming back to the practical gifts we receive at Christmas time, I expect that most of us, who are housewives, will have among our gifts, a nice apron and it is on this ordinary garment that I wish to centre my thoughts. There are many lessons we can learn from an apron, and I suppose many of you have been to an "apron afternoon" when many types are submitted in competition: aprons made of muslin and lace for hostess wear; aprons made of good old gingham for kitchen wear. In past days there were gardening aprons made of hessian, with large pockets for scissors and things; modern days have brought us the barbecue apron, and even men deign to wear these to prepare food for a picnic. Many skills are shown in the making of aprons, decorative as well as useful, but all aprons have the same purpose: that of protection for our clothing. At one time, the cap and apron was the "badge" of domestic service, but how this would be scorned by those who call themselves "Women's Libbers" in this day and age.

We see, in another incident, that Peter put on the apron of faith, but lost it temporarily, because he took his eyes off Jesus. You will remember that, after the feeding of the 5,000 with the loaves and fishes, Jesus sent His disciples across the lake in a boat while He went apart, to pray. As he was coming to them later across the water during a storm, the disciples were alarmed until reassured by Jesus's voice. Again impulsive, Peter cried out, "Bid me come to you". In faith, he stepped out of the boat, but taking His eyes off the Master, he began to sink. The hands of Jesus caught Peter, and they rejoined the boat. Peter regained the apron of faith.

Approaching the scenes of Jesus' arrest, trial and death on the Cross, Peter sinks to the depths in his denial of the Master. He had been so sure that he never could deny one whom he loved, even though Jesus had told him it would happen. When Jesus' eyes were turned on Peter in sorrow, Peter went out and wept bitterly. He found himself wearing the aprons of sorrow and repentance. After openly boasting that though others might fail Jesus, he never would do so, Peter had failed at the very time when Jesus needed his support. It was no wonder that he wrote later advising his fellow members of the new Church to put on the apron of humility, for he had found in times of weakness, we can deny those we love dearly.

After the resurrection of Jesus, Peter and the other disciples had obeyed Jesus and they returned to the Lake of Galilee, where they occupied themselves with fishing. On one day, as they approached the shore, Peter recognised the figure on the beach, and, impulsive as ever, he threw himself into the water, so as to reach the Master first. He knew that he needed the apron of forgiveness put on him, and no one could do this for Peter, save Jesus only.

As they talked, it seemed as if Jesus wanted to wipe out the three times of denial, for, three times He asked, "Simon, son of Jonas, do you love me?" and three times Peter replied, "Yea, Lord, Thou knowest that I love Thee." So it was that the apron of love covered the past, and it was with great joy in forgiveness and restoration that Peter accepted Jesus' commission to feed His sheep and lambs.

Now, I am sure, that you will feel that we all put on these aprons from time to time: obedience, trust, faith, sorrow, repentance, forgiveness and love. Peter's experience in life is similar to most people's and, like Peter, I feel that when we put on the apron of humility, we recognise that it is a hard apron to keep on. The ties need to be made of love, and sewn on with the golden thread of patience, because it needs so little to put our pride up in arms, and off comes the apron of humility.

Useful aprons have pockets, and often these are decorated so as to add to the beauty of the apron. I could suggest that we embroider on our apron of service a motto which applied to a now extinct missionary society. The badge had pictured on it a glowing fire in the centre, with an ox standing on one side of the fire, and a plough on the other side. Under the design were the words: "Ready for either service or sacrifice", and if we wore our aprons in His service in that spirit, then all would be well with us this Christmas time.

Just a little story to close. A little boy was in trouble a few days before Christmas because he had lost his handkerchief. His mother was cross with him because she thought he was careless. His eyes filled with tears as he explained that he was on his way home and had seen the door of the church open. He went in to look at the Christmas crib scene and had noticed that there was no pillow under Baby's head. "What else could I do, Mummy?" he asked, "I folded my hanky and said, there, Baby Jesus, that will be more comfy".

