

Celestial Visitors

Charles G. Bellah

1938

Review and Herald Publishing Association
TAKOMA PARK, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Celestial Visitors

Contents

1. The Book of Angels
2. By the Garden Gate
3. By the Wilderness Fountain
4. By the Hidden Well
5. Under the Oaks of Mamre
6. In Lot's Palatial Home
7. Pulling Lot Out of Sodom
8. The Angel of Mt. Moriah
9. On the Ladder
10. On the Banks of the Jabbok
11. At the Back Side of the Desert
12. In Egypt and Goshen
13. With the Mad Prophet
14. At the Death of Moses
15. Under the Oaks of Ophrah
16. In the Fields of Zorah
17. On Ornan's Threshing Floor
18. Under the juniper Tree
19. On the Assyrian Battlefield
20. In the Fiery Furnace
21. In Babylon's Royal Cave
22. With Zacharias in the Temple
23. On the Judean Hills
24. At Bethesda's Pool
25. In Joseph's Tomb
26. With Eleven Men on Olivet
27. With Peter in Prison
28. Aboard Ship With Paul
29. At the Pearly Gates

Celestial Visitors

1. The Book of Angels

THE BIBLE is a book of angels. From beginning to end, the sacred volume is radiant with their beneficent ministry. As prophet and seer traced the truth on parchment or scroll, angels looked over their shoulders, and viewed with delight the messages written. Yes, before creation was begun, and after redemption has ended, we find them continually rolling back the curtains of the sky, and coming and going on the shimmering wings of light.

Unwearied as the stars, and fresh as the morning dew, they visit the utmost bounds of God's creation. With undimmed eyes, they behold wonders entirely unseen and unknown to man. From their far-distant home they come to lift the fallen, and to cheer the lonely and distressed. These clergymen of heaven, radiant with majestic beauty, taught from communion with God, are tireless in their ministry of love. They bring pitchers of refreshment, drawn from the rivers of Paradise, and our life into countless wounded bosoms.

Their number is so great that earthly arithmetic is lost in the counting. The "angels round about the throne" are ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands," "an innumerable company." A discouraged frightened lad, in the days of Elisha, saw a mountain full of angels and chariots, and was consoled. A word from the Master of men would bring more than twelve legions of armed beings from the strongholds of the sky to the side of their loved Commander.

Away back in eternity, the Father and the Son laid the plan of redemption, when "the counsel of peace" was "between them both." Jesus volunteered to die for guilty man. Then the angels prostrated themselves at the feet of their Commander, and offered to become a sacrifice for the lost. But an angel's life could not pay the awful debt. Only a Creator could be a Redeemer.

When the plan was laid before the angels, inexpressible joy filled heaven. They were happy. Through the celestial courts there echoed the first strains of that song which was to ring out above the hills of Bethlehem, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." For the great army of angels were to have a part in the work of human redemption.

Writing of this plan, Peter says, "Which things the angels desire to look into." 1 Peter 1:12. The Greek says, "bend over," like the cherubim over the mercy seat on the sacred ark. Paul says, "We are made a spectacle [or theater] unto the world, and to angels." 1 Corinthians 4:9. This is the only theater the Christian should countenance. On the stage, men are before hundreds for only an hour. In the world, they are before the angels for life.

When the earth came fresh from the hands of its Maker, it was beautiful beyond description. Angels viewed it with delight, and rejoiced at the wonderful works of God. Above the newly created world, as it lay, fair and unblemished by sin, under the, smile of God, and bathed in the light of heaven, "the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for JOY." Job 387.

Angels sometimes war as well as woo, and blight as well as bless. In the faraway battle of the sky, when Michael fought the dragon, angel fought angel, the good against the bad. With swords bathed in heaven, pointed with power, and keener than Damascus steel, or Toledo blade, Lucifer and his followers were defeated, and driven forever over the towering battlements of heaven.

When, in Eden, man fell, all heaven was filled with sorrow. There was no human way of escape for Adam and Eve; they were doomed to misery and death. Angels ceased their songs and laid aside their harps. There was bitter mourning. But the angels were to be ministering spirits, to guard the subjects of grace from the power of the evil angels.

With undimmed eyes and holy interest, they watched the unfolding of events in the new-formed world. This "lesson book of the universe" was diligently studied. They saw the first infant ever born into the world, and watched the mother as she lovingly pressed him to her bosom, hoping he might be the promised Seed. With unutterable grief they saw this very child, Cain, slay his brother while the two were alone in the field.

Cherubim, with flaming sword, guarded the eastern gate of the Paradise of God. The angel of the Lord slew the first-born in every Egyptian home upon whose door post the red streak was not seen. With drawn sword an angel halted the mad prophet on his way to curse Israel. Another slew seventy thousand of David's picked men, bringing terror to a proud empire.

Heavenly beings witnessed the faith of Abraham and the submission of Isaac on Mt. Moriah. The sacrifice was not for the patriarch alone, nor was it solely for succeeding generations. It was for the instruction of all the sinless beings of heaven. It was not so difficult now for the angels to grasp the mystery

Celestial Visitors

of redeeming love.

Angels can be as gentle as a summer breeze, or as severe as the wintry blast. They can hold the four winds back from blowing on the earth, or cast Satan into the bottomless pit for a thousand years. They can pull the linchpins of Pharaoh's chariots, and drown his mighty men in the Red Sea; or drive the untrained cattle of the Philistines over hill and vale, and bring the cart bearing the sacred ark safely to Israel in the harvest fields of Beth-shemesh.

These heavenly messengers bear the saints up in their hands, lest they dash their feet against a stone; and cast Babylon, like a mighty millstone, into the depths of the sea. They watched over the babe in the basket of bulrushes on the river Nile, and guided Pharaoh's daughter to the brink. They cursed Meroz for helping not against the mighty.

"There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repented," for they helped to bring him to repentance. To the angels a soul is priceless, because he may by and by wear a starry crown, hold a palm branch of victory, and sing a song of experience that even the angels can never learn.

They are "all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation." They speed on rapid wings to do God's will, and may be entertained unawares. They came to Joshua on the battlefield, to Elijah while he was asleep, and to Cornelius while he was at prayer. A star of shining angels guided the wise men to the Babe in the manger of Bethlehem.

They took away a dream from Babylon's haughty king, and caused Pilate's wife to suffer "many things in a dream because of" the Christ, whom her husband failed to acquit. They have spoken aloud in the language of earth, and whispered to a Jewish maiden of "the promised Holy Child. They are mighty in power, rich in knowledge, countless in numbers. They diffuse it holy calm into many troubled hearts.

They have talked with men in the temple, in dungeons, and in the open fields. They excel in strength. 'Manna is angels' food (Psalm 78:25); yet they have eaten of the humble fare of the poor, and spurned the banquets of sin. They have appeared on the lonely mountaintop, and on the wet deck of the storm-beaten ship at sea. They have been with men in the crowded streets, in the highways, and by the threshing floor of the Jebusite.

They come with messages as pure as the dewdrop on the lily, or smite Herod with a dreadful punishment from the Almighty. They bring health to God's men, or lay wasting pestilence upon the disobedient. They lead wild beasts of the jungle into Noah's ark, and stop the mouths of lions in Persia's royal cave. They whisper words of peace and pardon to the penitent, and cause the Roman guards to fall as dead men, before the rent tomb of the Savior.

The angels were with Christ throughout His entire ministry on earth. At the beginning, an angel told the wondering Joseph, "Thou shalt call His name Jesus." The celestial choir sang a glory song over His birth in the manger, and ministered to Him in the wilderness of temptation, and in Gethsemane, while the bloody sweat stained His holy brow. They guarded His grave in the beautiful garden, were in the empty tomb, and when He departed from Olivet, they told His disciples to watch for His return.

When Jesus comes the second time in majesty, all heaven will be emptied of angels. For "the Son of man shall come in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him." Then "He shall send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."

When the last trumpet sounds, and the voice of the Almighty cries, "Awake!" waiting angels make straight for the abode of the righteous, and the rent tombs of God's children. As the graves burst asunder, the guardian angels that have camped about the saints will be the first to grasp their hands and greet them. Then, with the living righteous, they are caught up, and wafted to meet their Lord in the air. Dear reader, let angel hands clear the dim eye of faith now, and their words explain life's mysteries by and by.

These secret-service messengers of God are as youthful now as when first created, and are swifter than the beams of the morning light. The prophet of Chebar said that these "living creatures ran and returned as the appearance of a flash of lightning." Gabriel came from the glory land to old Babylon while Daniel offered a short prayer. Angels can ride on the wings of the storm, keep pace with the swiftest trains. They have a key that fits every dungeon and dark cell on earth. Their presence will strengthen us, their power protect us, and their influence lead us to the Savior.

2. By the Garden Gate

Genesis 3:22-24

Celestial Visitors

THE MOST heart-rending banishment ever recorded in the annals of profane or hallowed history, was the expulsion of Adam and Eve from beautiful Eden in the faraway childhood of the world. God mercifully threw coats of skin about their shivering forms, to hide the shame and nakedness of sin, and thrust them through the eastern gate of Paradise, and out into a dreary and untried future.

The first pair had been allowed open communion with their Maker. He did not come to them in majesty and splendor, as when He spoke from Mt. Sinai. But, with glory softened, He walked in the beautiful garden He had planted for them, and conversed with them face to face. Unafraid, they listened, learned, and loved. A wealth of wisdom fell upon open hearts as dew falls upon leafy, bower and vine.

Angels from the Wonderland were frequent visitors of the holy air in their vine-embowered home. They warned them to be on their guard against every device of Satan. He would be unwearied in his efforts to ensnare them. The celestial visitors particularly warned Eve not to separate herself from her husband. With him she would be in less danger from the wiles of the adversary than if she were alone.

For the education of the first pair, Eden was a model school. It was a home school, yet all the world attended. Eden was the schoolroom, nature the lesson book, and the Lord their teacher. They talked face to face with their Maker, with no dimming veil between. This blessed state might have continued forever, had not sin entered. By and by there would have been other Edens, and other schools throughout the earth.

But the school was temporarily discontinued, the gates were closed, and a long vacation began. After four thousand years the Great Teacher came, and instructed by both precept and example. He spoke as never man spoke, because He lived as never man lived. Then He went away. But His work has grown until now there are schools everywhere, preparatory institutions for the great commencement in the stately seminary of the by-and-by.

After their sin, Adam and Eve were no longer to remain in Eden. Having partaken of the tree of knowledge, they must be kept from the tree of life. In order to possess an endless existence they must continue to partake of this tree. But, deprived of this privilege, they would gradually lose physical vigor, and eventually die. Thereby the winter of Adam's wrongdoing came soon after his fall; and thus he has bequeathed to us a sad heritage of sin, misery, and death.

"Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the, Garden of Eden," expelling him from primeval Paradise, the fairest spot in all the new-made world Adam and Eve must go. The habitation of innocence was no place for sinners. Sin expels men from their Edens today. Many a man has lost a veritable Paradise by making a bad use of a good thing. So take care of your Eden, for when once out, one cannot easily get back.

In mercy to fallen man, God sent him forth "to till the ground from whence he was taken." Labor was to be the mitigation of woe, and a cursed earth the sinners' future bride well. Man was sent to a place of toil, not of torment. Adam had pitiably failed in Eden. Jehovah would now let him try in another way. God might justly have driven him clear out of the world. But love forbade this.

Man was now to earn his living by labor. "In the sweat of thy face shall thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground," was the fiat of Jehovah. Observe it is the sweat of the face, not the brow. There is a difference. The brow sweats easily, the face does not. Perspire or expire is the inflexible law of life.

Like many today, Adam and Eve did not fully sense the matchless blessings they possessed, until after wandering beyond their reach. Some golden hours of life may be had only once. The soil, hitherto without a taint of bane or blight, would now mock them with thorns and thistles. Before, Adam had only to pluck; now he must plow. Every failing leaf and fading flower would painfully remind him that his sin was the cause of it all.

Even the beasts that used to be subject to Adam, now became snarling, snapping enemies to each other, and to him. His willfulness caused their wildness. Yet by and by, through the sanctification of the second Adam, they will again inhabit the earth, and once more be gentle and harmless. The golden age is in the dim past, but another and better one is in the not far-distant, future.

Adam had been created with wisdom direct from God. His knowledge of animal nature was large and full. God had named the sun, moon, and stars-objects over which man had no jurisdiction. But the naming of the animals was left to Adam. The vision of moving life appearing before him, stirred him to speech. As he surveyed them all, seeing the nature of each, he affixed appropriate names.

"So He drove out the man." Verse 23 seems to indicate that God had asked him to depart from Paradise. He was loath to leave an abode of such surpassing grace and loveliness. But Eden was no longer to be his residence. In justice, God banished him from his Elysian home, yet left him in sight of it. He was

Celestial Visitors

not driven to some dark desert or waste wilderness. But he was left at the eastern gate, to linger near the boundaries of the forbidden spot.

After man's expulsion from Paradise, God "placed at the east of the Garden of Eden cherubim." Angels were immediately commissioned to guard the tree of life. Thus Eden's gate was securely closed against the returning footsteps of the troubled pair. Man, who lost life, and not the tree that gave life, was removed from the garden. The one was kept in, and the other kept out.

It was with unutterable sadness and humility that Adam and Eve bade farewell to their beautiful home. It was all so different now. They were to dwell upon the earth, where rested the curse of sin and shame. Even the atmosphere, before so mild and balmy, was now subject to marked changes of temperature. There was a chill that even the newly made coats of skin could not exclude.

The sad results of sin were soon to be seen everywhere. Adam and Eve were constantly reminded of the direful results of which they were the immediate cause. How they mourned at fading flower and falling leaf. Death was now to be the portion of every living thing. Animals must be slain to shield and shelter, as well as for sacrifice and security.

Around the angels at the gate of Eden, there flashed beams of light, having the appearance of a glittering sword. This was "a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life." Since Adam did not "keep" Eden in the way he was instructed to do, the Lord would do the keeping now. And whatever He keeps is always safely kept.

Adam's sin, which brought the flaming sword to the garden gate, eventually awakened the sleeping sword against the Christ. The prophet Zechariah proclaimed, "Awake, O sword, against my Shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow." Zechariah 13:7. The first Adam died because he lost the tree of life. The second Adam died that He might restore the tree of life.

After Adam and Eve were thrust out of their first home, Eden was shut up and empty, a beautiful specimen of God's handiwork. The tree of life which, in Genesis, was left behind the closed gate, will be found again, in Revelation, beyond the open gates. Gates closed at one end of the Bible, and open at the other end. The tree of life also has a prominent place at both ends of the Bible.

The long-sought tree is not lost after all. God has only been keeping it out of sight. But the flaming sword of eternal justice will not always glitter at the gates of Paradise. Angels will be there, to be sure, but they will be swordless. The gate of Eden was guarded to keep men out. The gates of heaven are kept to let men in. Will you be one to pass the pearly portals?

Although there was a closed Eden, thank God there will be an opened Paradise. The fall will be supplanted by redemption. When sin's door was opened, Eden's gate was shut. And when sin's door is finally closed, the door of Paradise will be opened. Man had an Eden once, and by sin lost it. Men have no Eden now, but by salvation they may find it. What will you do about it?

Slowly, sorrowfully, Adam and Eve wended their way for the last time through the eastern gate of beautiful Eden. With heads bowed in unutterable grief, they passed the celestial beings with the flaming sword. Pausing outside, they turned, and gave a final, lingering, loving look at the beautiful home they had lost. In infinite mercy and love Jehovah drops the sheltering veil of secrecy over the painful scene, and we are left to ponder, pray, and press onward.

As Adam and Eve left Paradise, they went away gazing at the vanishing beauty beyond the gate. They bivouacked close by. Altars were erected near this eastern gate, where supplication and sacrifice were offered, and where they renewed their vows of allegiance to God. Here they and their posterity were long permitted to gaze lovingly upon their lost home ' of innocence, their entrance barred only by the watching angels.

3. By the Wilderness Fountain

Genesis 12:16

LONG AGO there was a grievous famine in the land of Canaan. An aged patriarch and his wife journeyed down into Egypt, where there was plenty of corn. They sought only a temporary refuge near the Land of Promise, intending to return shortly to the place in which God had already placed them. The old

Celestial Visitors

man was a devout and sincere servant of the Lord. His wife was very beautiful, “a fair woman to look upon,” but withal, shrewd and cunning.

Before arriving in the land of the Pharaohs, the man instructed his wife to tell the Egyptians that she was his sister. He feared that they would not scruple to slay him in order to get his charming wife, unless some scheme was employed to avoid it. But through this deception he and his wife were placed in great peril. The king of Egypt, being informed of her beauty, had this fair woman taken to his palace, intending to make her his wife. But the Lord interposed by sending judgments upon the royal household.

The king of Egypt kindly dismissed the patriarch, and bade him leave his realm. He generously gave him “sheep, and oxen and menservants, and maidservants.” Among these servants, in all probability, was Hagar, a dusky, black-haired damsel who became a handmaid to the patriarch’s wife. When this maid was received into the tent of the patriarch and his wife, they little dreamed of what, eventually, the dreadful fruitage would be.

When Abraham “went up out of Egypt, he was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold.” Including families and servants, there were about a thousand people in his encampment. They pitched their tents at Bethel in Canaan, by the altar they had before erected. Wherever the aged man had a tent, there God had an altar. He found, as every other godly man has found, that prayer is an ample key of the day, and a secure lock of the night.

Soon after this, the patriarch, with his retinue of attendants and his vast wealth, moved to Hebron, and pitched his tents under the oak trees of Mamre. And beside the camp he again erected an altar unto the Lord. In these upland plains, with their splendid pasture grounds, and fields of waving grain, he was content to dwell, and live the simple, patriarchal life.

But it was not always peaceful and harmonious with Abraham and Sarah. Although God had promised them a son, as yet the promise had not been realized. Abraham was now eighty-five years old, and Sarah was seventy-five. This delay in sending the promised son was permitted in order to test Abraham’s faith in the power of God. But he failed to endure the trial. This was one weak place in his character.

Thinking it impossible that a child should be given her in her old age, Sarah suggested a plan which she thought would be of assistance. Addressing Abraham, she said “Behold now, the Lord hath restrained me from bearing. I pray thee go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her.” In other words, her plan was that Hagar, the Egyptian maiden, should become his second wife. But this proposal was iniquitous, and proved fatal to the peace and tranquillity of the once happy home.

“Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai.” He very unwisely listened to his wife’s delusive reasoning. Becoming a mother by proxy is never a wise course. The sin of carnal expediency is far too prevalent in our own day and time. But in the case of Abraham and Sarah the transaction was made in the open. There was no secrecy or subterfuge. And at first the plan apparently was a success. But the maid Abraham brought from Egypt was to cause no end of trouble.

Hagar was very much elated with the honor of her new position as Abraham’s wife. She became proud and boastful. Thinking herself better than her mistress, she upbraided her for her barrenness. When she found that she was to be a mother, “her mistress was despised in her eyes.” Now there was trouble aplenty in Abraham’s tent. Jealousy disturbed the peace of the once happy home. The old patriarch tried to restore harmony, but all his efforts were in vain. It is always easier to have things right in the beginning than to mend them at the end.

Although Sarah had led Abraham to marry Hagar, she now reproached him as the one at fault in the matter. “MY wrong, be upon thee,” she charged. She should have said, “How foolish I was, and what a blunder I made!” And as if to justify herself further, she continued, “The Lord judge between me and thee.” She wished him to banish her rival from the camp. But Abraham would not permit this. Hagar was to be the mother of his child, so why should she not remain in his home?

Nevertheless Abraham said, “Behold, thy maid is in your hand; do to her as it pleases thee.” She was Sarah’s servant, and he left the matter in Sarah’s hands. It was in her province to rule that part of the family, and he would not interfere. Then “Sarai dealt hardly with her.” She not only confined her to her usual place as a servant, but probably made her work unusually arduous and exacting.

Hagar’s proud and haughty spirit would not bear the treatment she received at the hands of her mistress. She was impatient of even the slightest rebuke, and “fled from her face.” She not only wished to avoid Sarah’s wrath for the present, but she promptly deserted her service, and ran away from home.

Hagar outlawed herself in running away from home. She probably endeavored to make her way toward Egypt, her own country. In doing so, she was not only out of her place of duty, but she soon lost her

Celestial Visitors

way. Perplexed, bewildered, and alone, she became hopelessly lost in the wilderness. Forsaking duty is no way to find peace.

Weary and dejected, lonely and friendless, she sat down to rest beside a fountain. She was glad for the refreshing water of the wilderness. As she tarried a moment, pondering what to do next, she heard a sweet voice addressing her. “The angel of the Lord found her by a fountain of water in the wilderness.” He evidently appeared in human form, his identity at first concealed from the discouraged fugitive.

Addressing her, the angel says, “Hagar, Sarai’s maid.” She hears the gentle voice, quickly looks up, and listens. “Sarai’s maid!” What a reminder of the obligation she had so hastily abandoned. Sarah’s maid ought to be safely back in Sarah’s tent, and not lost in a bleak wilderness. The desert was no fit place for any woman, much less this runaway handmaid.

The angel does not even call her Abraham’s wife, although he might truly have done so. In this he shows heaven’s disapproval of the whole nefarious arrangement.

“Whence came thou? and He continues, “whither wilt thou go?” She answers, “I flee from the face of my mistress.” “Return to thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hands,” he counsels. The patriarch’s home might not be the most delightful place for her. It was not ideal, it was true; yet it was where she belonged. Anyway, Egypt was much worse than Abraham’s humble tent.

The angel dealt more kindly with Hagar than had Sarah. He told her that Sarah might be hard, but that sin was harder still. He did not advise her to go back to fight it out, and let the stronger win. Nor was she to return, sullen and morose, and merely endure it. But he said, “Go back, and submit.” Go back cheerfully, and ask pardon for the wrong you have done, and resolve to do better in the future. The only place to find a squandered experience is at the place where it was lost.

With the reproof, the angel mingled words of comfort. “I will multiply thy seed exceedingly,” he said, “that it shall not be numbered for multitude.” And as a perpetual reminder of God’s mercy, she was told, “Behold, thou shalt bear a son, and shall call his name Ishmael [God shall hear]; because the Lord hath heard thy affliction. And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man and every man’s hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.”

In gratitude to the Lord, she called the well, “Beerlahai-roi,” or “Thou God sees me.” She now readily yields to the angel’s pleadings, binds her garments about her, and returns to the tent, a humble and converted servant. She doubtless told Abraham and Sarah the whole experience. “And Hagar bare Abram a son: and Abram called his son’s name Ishmael.”

When God saw Hagar at the fountain, Hagar saw God as the fountainhead. Dear reader, as He sees you, what do you see? Have you, like Sarah’s maid, wandered on through life, with no idea where the lonely wanderings will end? If so, there is for you, too, a well in the wilderness. Linger, look, and hearken, and the angel will direct you back to the Master’s house.

4. By the Hidden Well

Genesis 17:15-22; 21:1-21

WHEN ABRAHAM was nearly one hundred years old, the promise of a son was repeated unto him, with the assurance this time that the son should be Sarah’s. But he did not yet seem to understand it all fully. His mind continually turned to Hagar’s son. “O that Ishmael might live before Thee!” was his fervent appeal. Then, in words that could not be mistaken, the Lord plainly said, “Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed, and thou shalt call his name Isaac [Laughter].”

Isaac was born according to promise, and thus was brought about the fulfillment of their dearest hopes. The long-looked-for son came at last, and their hearts were made glad. But this event meant quite another thing to Hagar. It would result in the overthrow of all her fondly cherished ambitions. Ishmael, now a youth of about fourteen, was thus to be set aside. Baffled, disappointed, and despondent, he and his mother hated Isaac, the child of Sarah.

Under the tender care of the aged couple, Isaac flourished like a tender plant. Holy Writ says, “The child grew, and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast.” This was in thankfulness to God for His signal mercy to him. But this feast only increased.

Hagar’s dissatisfaction, and Ishmael’s jealousy, until, at last he openly mocked the heir of God’s promise. “Sarah saw the son of Hagar mocking.” It was very rude and impudent for a youth of sixteen to

Celestial Visitors

taunt and ridicule a little child.

Ishmael's presence in the tent of Abraham would henceforth be a source of perpetual discord and strife between him and Isaac. Their destinies would be so divergent that they could not mingle with any advantage to either. Sarah appealed to her husband in no uncertain terms: "Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, Isaac." In other words, Your son shall not supersede my son. This was very distressing to the aged saint. To banish his own son, to cast out his own flesh and blood, was indeed painful. "And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight because of his son."

Abraham pleaded for divine guidance in the matter. In answer to his prayer, God, through an angel, graciously sets the whole question before him in its true light. He said, "Let it not be grievous in thy sight; in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called." Isaac's only security, then, was in having Ishmael banished from the encampment. And the patriarch's love for Ishmael or for Hagar must not stand in the way.

However, even though Ishmael should be separated from his father's home, he would not be separated from his father's God. "And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he is thy seed." God thus promised that his life would be preserved, although he would not be so highly honored as Isaac.

The sorrowful morning soon arrived when Hagar and Ishmael must go. The old father's heart was heavy as he kindly sent them away. "And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and took bread, and a bottle of water, and gave it unto Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and the child, and sent her away." How much of the old father's heart went into that bread and bottle we will never know.

A thousand volumes might be written against polygamy; yet the subject could not be made clearer than in this one act of Abraham's. At last, all things were ready, and the final parting time had come. The aged patriarch, with aching heart and tear-dimmed eyes, bade them an affectionate farewell. Standing in his tent door, he watched them as they slowly made their way down the long, rugged path toward distant Egypt.

Hagar, the young fugitive mother, with her only son, "departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba." They were making their way toward the land of the Pharaohs, where she used to live, before she knew Abraham or Sarah. The hot blood of her Egyptian mother coursed swiftly through her veins, as she thought it all over. She was determined to go where they would never see her again. Wandering off in the trackless wilderness, they finally lost their way. There was no road, no fence, no house, and no signs to direct the two weary travelers on their journey.

The blazing desert sunshine poured down upon the two fugitives, as if the sky were one vast furnace. The grass was parched by the intense heat. Rocks, sand, barren plains, and distant mountains greeted their eyes. "And the water was spent in the bottle," is the record. Their bread was soon gone, and the leather bottle was as dry as the desert sand. Mother like, Hagar gave Ishmael the last drop, and the last crust, while she was famishing.

The distressed mother flings the empty bottle aside in utter despair. Dry sand rattles in it, unmoistened, as it cracks in the intense heat. The dark-skinned, black haired woman of Egypt is now exhausted and ready to faint. The strong, keen-eyed youth of sixteen, staggers along a few steps farther. Their lips are cracked, and their tongues are dry. Was there none to heed or help? What would they not now give for just one hour in Abraham's well-provisioned tent!

With rapidly failing strength, Hagar guides the lad's unsteady steps to a bush near by. She would give him the benefit of all the shade she could. The record says, "She cast the child under one of the shrubs." She was powerless to save him. All her human resources had failed. Lost, starving, dejected, and alone! What a sad picture! Yet today there are many mothers and children lost in homes that are wilder deserts than the wilderness of Beersheba.

Leaving Ishmael under the bush, "she went, and sat her down over against him a good way off, as it were a bow shot: for she said, Let me not see the death of the child." Homeless, helpless, without physician, with a dying child in the wilderness! There seemed to be nothing else to do but to die, a prey to the hungry vultures and jackals. It was only a short way from the jaunty maid in Sarah's tent, to a lost, heartbroken woman in the wilderness of Beersheba!

Hagar was so benumbed with sorrow that she could not pray. So "she sat over against him, and lift up her voice, and wept." She had done all she could be here she sat down to weep. For his sake she had been keeping back the bitter tears. Now, being far enough away so that Ishmael could not hear, she burst into a flood of grief, and cried aloud. And any woman who does not weep over a lost child, is not a mother.

Celestial Visitors

There is no condemnation of Sarah now. Losing a boy was far worse than losing a home with Abraham. Ishmael was her only child, her only joy, and her only hope. To lose him was to lose all. Indeed she was ready to die for her dying boy.

Yet he was not going to die. God had promised Abraham to make of Ishmael a great nation. This poor lad, outcast, friendless, homesick, and dying, was to live, and become great in the earth. But she seemed not to remember this promise.

Evidently Ishmael prayed. So much so that the record says, "God heard the voice of the lad." The Lord heard, and sent the needed help. Thank God the wildernesses of life are still full of the Lord! "The angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said unto her, What ails thee, Hagar?" When God heard the piteous cry of the child, He talked to the mother. "What ails thee?" was the question. Had Hagar not been lost, Ishmael would not have been lost. Mothers, are you lost?

As Hagar looked up she heard the gentle voice of the angel of the Lord, saying, "Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in your hand." Parents, are you lifting up your children? Are you holding them in your hands? If not, God pity you. If so, God will bless you and them.

Remember, God is the Father of wandering outcasts. And His messenger is the angel of every lost and bewildered child the world over.

"God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water." He opened the eyes so swollen by tears and so blinded by grief that they could not see. Ishmael's cry had uncovered the hidden well for his mother, and the angel opened her eyes to see it. It had been there all the time; yet she had not been able to see it. Here she was, perishing of thirst, and a flowing fountain at her side. Bane and blessing are still often near each other. Thank God, life's deserts are full of hidden wells! Every wilderness has its refreshing springs, and every desert an angel. When Hagar came to the end of her bottle, she found a well. And the only thing she had to start with for the search, was her great need.

Ishmael's mother had thrown the bottle aside, thinking she would never need it again. But it came in handy now. Quickly seizing it, "she went, and filled the bottle with water, and gave the lad drink." The well was not enough. She must go, bring, and give. Love for her dying boy hastened her weary steps. She quickly filled the bottle with the refreshing draft, and hurried back to Ishmael. Herself famished, yet she gave the cooling drops to the boy first. She wet his fevered face, moistened his parched lips, and let him drink a little at a time, until he could take enough.

Her watchful and eager eyes saw light and life return to her only son. The lad's piteous cry of "Water! Water! Water!" had been fully answered. Soon their troubles were over.

Parents of today, God sees your children "where they are." He provided the well for Hagar, but she alone could fill the bottle, and give Ishmael drink. She had been near the well all the time, but did not know it. The well of salvation is as near to you as the well of water was to Hagar. Remember that help for your offspring is in a full well, and not in an empty bottle.

"God was with the lad." Even though Ishmael had sinned, and was an outcast, the Lord did not forsake him. He mercifully provides for every wandering pariah, for every lost exile, when He hears the cry for help. Ishmael was lost in the wilderness because of the combined sins of Sarah, Abraham, and Hagar, and of his own as well. It was because of Sarah's giving Hagar to her husband; of Abraham's weakness in yielding; of Hagar's contempt of her mistress, and of his own sin in mocking Isaac.

Hagar and Ishmael remained in the wilderness, and made their home there. Ishmael "dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer. And his mother took him a wife out of the land of Egypt." His children grew up wild, brave, and strong. One of his daughters was married to Esau. Genesis 36:3. It is thought that the Arabians of today are descendants of Ishmael. Archery was their trade, and hunting their business.

We hear nothing more about Hagar. Of Ishmael, one writer has said, "In his latter days he repented of his evil ways, and returned to his father's God." He was present at the death of Abraham, and kindly assisted Isaac in the burial of the patriarch in the cave of Machpelah. Genesis 25:8, 9. His sons were princes, and lived in towns and castles. Verse 19. He lived many years, and died at the ripe old age of one hundred thirty-seven. Verse 17. Surely the wanderer returned, and the outcast was forgiven by the One who loves all men.

5. Under the Oaks of Mamre

Genesis 18:1-33

Celestial Visitors

THE LORD LOOKED out from heaven, outward, onward, and upward. Everywhere there were stars, and suns, and systems, magnificent worlds, and gigantic planets, teeming with happy, contented inhabitants, where sin had never been. Constellations and systems, in majestic arrangement, circled about the throne of Deity. No earthly eye has yet beheld, no human mind could comprehend, the surpassing grandeur of the expanding view that opened before the eyes of its Maker.

But there appeared one dark blot upon the fair vision. This little speck called earth, once enshrined in beauty amid a galaxy of worlds, was enshrouded in shadowy gloom. And one lone spot on the earth appeared darkest of all. A cluster of cities in the plains of the Jordan seemed entirely given over to the works of darkness. God had borne long and patiently with them, as the tragic years went by. Now their cup of iniquity was full to overflowing. Something must be done about it. The earth must be rid of this foul miasma of iniquity.

He thinks I can see the Lord turning to the shining ones about Him, and hear Him say to two of the most glorious of the angelic hosts, "Come with Me. Mercy for Sodom is to be no more. Their probation is about ended. We must hasten down, and forever wipe this blot from the face of the earth." And over the battlements the three came, winging their way earthward with the speed of lightning, down past systems, suns, and stars.

We seem to hear the Lord say, upon reaching the earth, "Before destroying Sodom, we have another errand awaiting us. Over in the hills of Mamre I have an old friend, whom we must see first. I must tell him of My plans. He is well acquainted with Sodom. He knows its condition, and has often prayed for it. He has a nephew living there. Let us see him before the besom of destruction falls upon the ungodly."

Over on the hills of Mamre there lived this old patriarch, known everywhere as "the friend of God." He was a shepherd-king, caring for his bountiful flocks, and ruling his household well. Often while his family, his servants, and his herds were sleeping about him, he would steal out at night, and lean upon his staff, or fall upon his knees, and talk with his God. This is how he became God's friend. There were a thousand in Abraham's household; yet he found time to pray for them all, as well as for himself.

What a picture the old man made, as he sat in his tent door at noontime. His long, white beard lay on his breast. There he sat, looking out over the uneven plains of Mamre. It was a hot day, and it was high noon. Abraham's tent had been pitched under the shade of a cluster of great oak trees. His servants' tents were grouped about him, and his vast herds had sought shelter, as best they could, from the burning sun.

As Abraham "lift up his eyes and looked," he saw three strangers approaching. Suddenly he became alert. They were coming toward his tent, toiling in the heat. They halted a moment, as if consulting about their course. To Abraham they were neither clansmen, neighbors, nor friends, but only strangers, needing rest. Hence the old patriarch might have waited for them to solicit his hospitality. But no. Disregarding his age and dignity, he sprang to his feet like a boy, and "ran to meet them."

As Abraham met the men, he "bowed himself toward the ground." He urged them to tarry with him, and rest, as he was used to doing when strangers passed his way. Knowing they were from a far country, he addressed the most commanding of the three, thus: "My Lord, if now I have found favor in thy sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant."

Continuing his appeal, he said, "Let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. And I will fetch a morsel of bread, and comfort you your hearts; after that you shall pass on: for therefore are you come to your servant. And they said, So do, as thou has said." Abraham considered it a favor and a privilege to entertain these guests.

The old patriarch kindly found them a comfortable place in the shade of a giant terebinth tree near his tent. Then "Abraham hastened into the tent unto Sarah, and said, Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, and knead it, and make cakes upon the hearth." Losing no time, he "ran unto the herd, and fetched a calf tender and good, and gave it to a young man, and he hastened to dress it."

The old friend of God had many loving and loyal servants. Any one of them would gladly do his bidding, and do it with alacrity. But out of the depths of his loving old heart, he wanted to act the part of a servant to the three strange guests. He made his own selection of one of the choicest calves of his immense herd. Like Martha of Bethany, he considered his best none too good for his visitors.

"And he took butter, and milk, and the calf which he had dressed, and set it before them." The patriarch's dining room was the shade of a spreading oak, the ceiling was the leafy boughs overhead, the table was the bare ground, and Sarah was his cook and baker. The fare was plain. There were no dainties or knickknacks. Neither were there any desserts, or modern undigestible. The food was simple, although Abraham was very rich, and his guests were very honorable.

Celestial Visitors

And Abraham “stood by them under the tree, and they did eat.” He did not think it beneath a patriarch to wait table, though he supposed his guests were only brother men. Little did he realize that he was entertaining his Lord, and “angels unawares.” They had no real need of food, but Abraham needed the blessedness of service. Here is the very best lesson in true Christian hospitality to be found in the Scriptures.

After the noonday meal was over, “they said unto him, Where is Sarah thy wife?” thus revealing the fact that they were acquainted with his family. Angels are still interested in household matters, in your home, and in my home. Abraham answered, “Behold, in the tent.” In other words, where ought a good wife to be but there? Nearly two thousand years later, Paul said that women should “be discreet, chaste, keepers at home.” Titus 2:5. If asked about your wife, your husband, or your children, what would be your reply?

The Lord said, “I will certainly return unto thee.” He always returns to the home where He receives Abraham’s welcome. Angels come to many a tent door, however, and are not invited to tarry. Paul cautions us to “be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” Hebrews 13:2. It is one thing to talk about angels, but it is quite another thing to entertain them in your home.

After the rest at Abraham’s tent, “the men rose up from thence, and looked toward Sodom,” indicating that they were ready to pass on. The angels had finished a part of their duty. “And Abraham went with them to bring them on the way.” The four walked to the hilltop overlooking Sodom. Doubtless the old patriarch had not even yet discerned the character of his distinguished visitors. What would he have missed had he bade them farewell at his tent!

“And the Lord said, Shall I hide from Abraham the thing which I do?” God had promised Canaan to Abraham; therefore he would not destroy a part of it without letting him know about it. Thus the old patriarch was admitted into the purposes of the Divine.

The Lord further said, “For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him.” Not only were his children obedient, but his servants as well. Even now, family government promotes family religion. Is that true in your home?

“The cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and their sin is very grievous.” Their sin was a crying sin. They were a veritable sink of iniquity. Continuing, the Lord said, “I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto Me; and if not, I will know.” God does not punish men or cities on the report of others. He must know for Himself.

“And the men turned their faces from thence, and went toward Sodom: but Abraham stood yet before the Lord.” The friend of God wanted to talk to his Friend. Do you love to talk with the Lord? And do you know when He talks to you? “And Abraham drew near, and said, Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked?” As he gazed toward Sodom, sorrow filled his heart. Was it doomed? Was there no way to avoid its destruction? What could he do?

Continuing his appeal, the old patriarch asked, “Peradventure there be fifty righteous within the city: wilt Thou also destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous?” The Lord answered him, “If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then will I spare all the place for their sakes.” The friend of God had power with God. Do you? He had once rescued Lot with the sword; now he would do it by prayer.

Fearing that there might not be fifty righteous people found in Sodom, Abraham pleaded that it might be spared if forty were found. This also was granted. Then he asked safety for thirty, and twenty, and at last for only ten. And the Lord promised to spare the city if only ten were found. He didn’t leave off granting, until Abraham left off asking.

The fact that the Lord would spare Sodom if only ten righteous persons were found there, shows the great value He places upon His people. Why did Abraham stop at ten? Was it because this was the number of Lot’s family? Or was it that he thought if there were not even ten righteous persons found in it he was willing for it to be destroyed? We do not know. Anyway, he made an impassioned appeal in its behalf. Remember, it was Abraham, and not Lot, who prayed for Sodom. The man outside, and not inside, did the praying.

“And the Lord went His way, as soon as He had left communing with Abraham.” So long as Abraham entreated, the Lord listened. He let him have his full say. The old patriarch having ended the conversation ‘ the Lord departed. “And Abraham returned unto his place.” What must have been his thoughts, as he went back home? Surely his old heart was warmer, his faith stronger, and his steps lighter, as he returned to Sarah in the tent under the oaks of Mamre!

Celestial Visitors

6. In Lot's Palatial Home

Genesis 19:1-13

THE WESTERING SUN gilded the walls and towers of the most beautiful city in all the Jordan valley. Vast treasures of the East adorned her palaces and costly dwellings. Art and commerce contributed to enrich this proud city of the plains. A little effort produced the luxuries of life. Hence idleness was everywhere in evidence. Businessmen were prosperous, and dreamed of still greater prosperity. Gorgeous halls of pleasure were thronged, and Bacchus reigned supreme.

About this city lay a fertile and picturesque landscape, bathed in the rays of the setting sun. The whole plain looked like a veritable garden of beauty. Thrifty shepherds were folding their flocks on the near-by hills. Farmers were coming in from fertile fields. Belated wayfarers were hastening their steps into the city before the gates were closed for the night. Pleasure seekers were beginning to throng the streets, as the sun sank over the western horizon.

As the long shadows of evening stole over the hills and through the valleys, people little realized that this was to be the very last night for Sodom. No warning had been given that the fated city's doom was sealed.

There was nothing outward to show that it would be destroyed. There were no fiery swords hanging overhead, and no weird voices cried its destruction. No trumpet of wrath sounded its doom. No earthquake startled its inhabitants. Night sank upon a scene of perfect loveliness and beauty. The stars looked down peacefully on the quiet valley. The moon shone for the last time on the doomed city.

In the fading twilight of that fateful day, two strangers were seen approaching the gates of the city. They seemed like common travelers from over the hills. None could discern in these humble wayfarers the mighty heralds of divine judgment. God's greatest messengers of wrath often appear in the common garb of men. The careless throng little dreamed that these two had been sent to bring destruction upon their fated city. But thus it must be. God must burn up Sodom, or its terrible sins would spread. Now the shadows slowly deepened into night for the last time.

But there was one man who manifested a kindly interest in the strangers, and invited them into his luxurious home. He did not know who they were, nor did he suspect the awful errand upon which they had come. There seemed to be but one good man in Sodom, and the heavenly messengers soon found him. He did not live and act as the rest of the men of the city; hence he was not to fare as the rest of them.

"And there came two angels to Sodom at even." Evidently they were the same two that had only that afternoon left Abraham talking with the Lord over on the hills of Mamre. These were there to execute God's judgments upon Sodom, and to see whether there were any in all the city who could be persuaded to escape the impending doom. If so, they were to be rescued, that they perish not in the overthrow with the wicked.

"Lot sat in the gate of Sodom." While the rest of the inhabitants were drinking and pleasure seeking, he sat alone at the gate, waiting for an opportunity to do good to some one. He was extremely respectful to these wayfaring strangers. Lot was probably a judge. The elaborate and spacious gates of the ancient cities of the East were used as public promenades, as open markets, and even as courts of justice. The arched roof afforded a pleasant shade. In such a place as this we find Lot, as the sun set for the last time on Sodom.

"And Lot seeing them rose up to meet them; and he bowed himself with his face toward the ground." He did not know the true character of the two strangers, but politeness and hospitality had been well learned in his association with his uncle, Abraham. These characteristics were a part of his religion. How good it would be if more people today would manifest to strangers the kindness of Lot and Abraham!

As Lot greeted the strangers courteously, "he said, Behold now, my lords, turn in, I pray you, into your servant's house, and tarry all night, and wash your feet, and you shall rise up early, and go on your ways." The idle throng in the streets looked with disdain upon the hospitable old man, as he rose up from his seat in the gate to meet the travelers. They saw nothing worthy of such attention. They were more ready to stone the strangers than to entertain them.

But the strangers seemed to decline Lot's invitation, saying, "Nay; but we will abide in the street all night." It was not an uncommon thing for travelers to spend the night in the streets of Sodom. Their object in this answer was to test the sincerity of Lot. He greeted the angels just as Abraham had greeted

Celestial Visitors

them earlier in the day. Their answer made Lot all the more determined not to leave them for the night at the mercy of the rabble.

Lot “pressed upon them greatly; and they turned in unto him, and entered into his house.” Doubtless many an individual today has failed to know the joy of having angels pass over the threshold of the home, because of failure in giving a pressing invitation. Lot evidently was really desirous of having their company, even though he might not have perceived who they were.

When the angels accepted Lot’s invitation, he treated them nobly. “And he made them a feast, and did bake unleavened bread, and they did eat.” The simple tent life that Lot had known while with Abraham was largely a thing of the past. He now had a beautiful home, to which he invited the two strangers. The evening meal was an elaborate one, in the form of a feast or banquet. Lot’s wife probably assisted in the entertainment.

Soon the news spread that the strangers were in Lot’s home. The hour of rest had not come before a crowd gathered in the street, and beset the house where the two had gone. “But before they lay down, the men of the city compassed the house round, both old and young, all the people from every quarter.” They were so vile, and blinded by sin, that they would do violence, if they could, to God’s mighty angels. Lot’s home was not a safe place even for angels, much less for men, only as they manifested the power of angels. But Abraham’s tent was a safe place for both men and angels.

An immense company, old and young alike, inflamed by the vilest passions known to man, surrounded Lot’s house. But they were no more vicious or dissolute this last night than they had been before. They had arrived at the height of wickedness where they were “sinners before the Lord exceedingly.” Genesis 13:13. But there is a point beyond which divine forbearance cannot go. And the Sodomites had reached that point.

“And they called unto Lot, and said unto him, Where are the men which came in to thee this night? Bring them out unto us, that we may know them.” Their sin was so vile and sordid that it is known even yet by the name of the city abandoned to it-sodomy. They proclaimed open war with virtue, and bade defiance to purity and chastity. They had already passed “the hidden boundary between God’s patience and His wrath.”

“And Lot went out at the door ‘ unto them, and shut the door after him.” In doing this he evidently thought he might protect his guests, and also that they might not hear the insults proposed. He spoke kindly to the rabble, and said, “I pray you, brethren, do not so wickedly.” Kindness seemed like fuel to the flames. Even “that righteous man dwelling among them” (2 Peter 2:8), had no influence upon the very dregs of doomed Sodom.

Enraged at his words, the mob replied, “Stand back. This one fellow came in to sojourn, and he will needs be a judge: now will we deal worse with thee, than with them. And they pressed sore upon the man, even Lot, and came near to break the door.” “Came in to sojourn.” Here was Lot’s great mistake. The Sodomites said more than they thought in this thrust at their would-be friend.

Nothing less than the power of an angel could now save Lot out of their hands. Hence the messengers of God’s wrath, knowing all, and having heard all, “put forth their hand, and pulled Lot into the house to them, and shut to the door. And they smote the men that were at the door of the house with blindness, ... so that they wearied themselves to find the door.” This smiting with blindness revealed, for the first time, the character of the guests Lot had entertained.

There was just one more thing to be done, and that was done. The angels said to Lot, “Has thou here any besides? son-in-law, and thy sons, and thy daughters, and whatsoever thou has in the city, bring them out of this place.” Better had they never gone into Sodom, in the first place. The aged father was permitted to go out and urge his loved ones to flee from the doomed city. Even today angels expect parents to exert every effort possible to rescue their children from destruction.

You will observe that the angels did not ask Lot if there were any more righteous people in Sodom. They knew only too well, that even ten such could not be found. But they did ask, “Do you have any of your own, good or bad, that you may persuade to go with you, ere the fire of God falls upon their shelterless heads?” The reason given was, “For we will destroy this place, because the cry of them is waxen great before the face of the Lord; and the Lord hath sent us to destroy it.” The old man hastened out at the midnight hour to find his lost children.

Celestial Visitors

7. Pulling Lot Out of Sodom

Genesis 19:14-38

LEAVING THE TWO ANGELS in his home, Lot made his way to the homes of his loved ones. “Lot went out, and spoke unto his sons-in-law, which married his daughters, and said, Up, get you out of this place; for the Lord will destroy this city.” See the old man, with gray hair, and bowed head, with flickering torch in hand, and his heart broken, going through the streets of Sodom at midnight! His earnest appeal was never again to be heard by his loved ones.

“But he seemed as one that mocked unto his sons-in-law.” Probably they thought the assault the Sodomites had made upon his house had disturbed his head. They laughed at what they called his superstitious fears. It is sad indeed when a man has lost all his influence with his own children. How vastly different were Lot’s children from the family of Abraham. Lot’s children had been educated in Sodom. Parents, where are your children being schooled?

The angels kindly waited in Lot’s home until the old man returned, weary and disappointed. He sadly told them of his failure. The first streak of dawn was just appearing in the east. As yet there seemed to be no change in earth or sky. There was no cloud of vengeance hanging over the horizon. “The morning star shone with its accustomed brightness over the mountains of Moab.” Apparently all is well in the beautiful vale of Siddim.

“And when the morning arose, then the angels hastened Lot, saying, Arise, take thy wife, and thy two daughters, which are here; lest thou be consumed in the iniquity of the city.” Here we find that even the righteous sometimes need hastening. Lot’s guests turned him out of his own home, and his family with him. It seemed to be the only way to get him out of the doomed city. What a terrible night it had been in Lot’s house! How entirely different from the peaceful visit the angels had in the humble tent of Lot’s uncle on the hills of Mamre!

But “he lingered.” He trifled. He did not make the haste that the occasion required. He seemed stupefied with sorrow. It was indeed hard for him to leave a part of his family, and all of his worldly possessions, behind to be consumed in the overthrow. But there was no time to save property now. Life itself was the only thing to be considered. He lingered, hesitated, while the moment of doom was fast approaching. Are we any wiser today? Let us not do as Lot did. Don’t linger. If a thing is right, do it now. If it is wrong, leave it at once, and forever.

While the old man still lingered, “the men laid hold upon his hand, and upon the hand of his wife, and upon the hand of his two daughters; the Lord being merciful unto him: and they brought him forth, and set him without the city.” Two angels, with four hands with which to lead. Four people waiting to be led. Not an angel hand to spare, but angel hands enough. There always is, when angels help people. The Lord did not lead Lot into Sodom, but He did send His angels and mercifully led him out.

Now the Lord, the one with whom only the day before, Abraham had pleaded, drew near to Lot. Then came the startling, urgent charge, “Escape for thy life; look not behind thee, neither stay thou in all the plain; escape to the mountain, lest thou be consumed.” The storm of divine judgment was waiting only that these poor fugitives might escape. Even a few moments’ delay would now cost him his life, for the angels had already returned to Sodom to destroy it.

Still lingering, Lot said, “I cannot escape to the mountain, lest some evil take me, and I die. Behold now, this city is near to flee unto, and it is a little one: oh, let me escape thither and my soul shall live.” He evidently thought a city of his own choosing was safer than a mountain of God’s appointing. He thought that the little city, Zoar, was not as wicked as the big city, Sodom. Thus men often reason today.

The Lord graciously granted his request. “See, I have accepted thee concerning this thing also, that I will not overthrow this city. Haste thee, escape thither, for I cannot do anything till thou be come thither.” Lot wanted to remain as near to Sodom as possible. Even God’s justice was delayed while Lot tarried. Zoar was spared to gratify Lot, and Sodom’s ruin was suspended until he was safe. How great is the mercy of God toward His erring creatures!

The last day for Sodom broke fair and serene. “The sun was risen upon the earth when Lot entered into Zoar.” It gleamed brightly over hill and plain. The stir of active life had just begun. Streets were becoming crowded by the idle. The sons-in-law were laughing about Lot’s midnight visit. Many an idle jest was made that morning at the early breakfast tables of the Sodomites.

Then suddenly, as thunder in a clear sky, the awful tempest broke. “Then the Lord rained upon

Celestial Visitors

Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven; and He overthrew those cities, and all the plain.” It was indeed a destruction from the Almighty-never anything like it before or since. Fire was rained from heaven upon the cities and the plain, upon palaces and temples and costly dwellings, and upon the gay throngs who had been rioting the night before. It was a terrible, suffocating, scorching downpour of liquid fire, that melted everything it touched.

The fair vale of Siddim suddenly became a desolation, a place never to be built up again, nor inhabited. The plain that seemed like a veritable paradise one day, was a dismal and smoking furnace the next. That once fruitful valley remains to this day a great stagnant lake-the Dead Sea.

Four people left the fated city, but only three escaped. “His [Lot’s] wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt.” Had not Lot lingered, his wife would not have looked back. But she who left Sodom with her husband, was not to enter Zoar with him. While her body was upon the plain, her heart was in the city of destruction. Doubtless she was thinking about her married daughters and her beautiful home in Sodom. “Remember Lot’s wife” (Luke 17:32), is the wise counsel of the apostle. Lot went into Sodom rich, but he left it in poverty.

He was led out by the angels of God. And what was it all worth now, as fiery blasts were poured upon Sodom, that highly favored city? Soon its entrancing beauty was blotted out, leaving its very site bleak and bare.

“Abraham got up early in the morning to the place where he stood before the Lord. And he looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah and, lo, the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace.” The old patriarch was anxious to know whether ten righteous people had been found in Sodom. As he looked across the hills toward the vale of Siddim, what an awful picture met his gaze! Great billowing columns of murky smoke ascended as from a mighty furnace. But while Sodom was in flames, Abraham’s tent and his family were safe.

When Abraham prayed for Sodom, God heard him for Lot. “When God destroyed the cities of the plain.” He remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow.” He saved Lot for Abraham’s sake. The man inside was saved because of the man outside. As far as we know, Lot never had a single convert during the twenty years he spent in Sodom, and he even lost all of his own kin except two daughters.

8. The Angel of Mt. Moriah

Genesis 22:1-14

GREAT TESTS OFTEN COME to men in early life. It is easier to face the storm while the heart is fresh, and the hopes are high. Then one is better able to rise up again from every disappointment, fresh for new battles. While the ardor of youth is still strong to endure hardships and to brave danger, it is easy to come up again after the blow is past. Dauntless youth may often bend beneath the load of affliction, but it seldom breaks beyond repair.

But it is indeed hard for an old man to find that the sorest trials are reserved for the last, when the burden of years is heavy upon him, and the fire of youth is dim in his eyes. When a man’s feet are faltering toward the grave, and he longs for rest and repose, afflictions are likely to cause the heart to fail. It is easier to walk in the fresh young garden of life, than in the dismal desert.

Abraham was one hundred twenty years old when he received the most strange and startling command ever given to any human being. The patriarch had found a quiet home in Beersheba, and was surrounded by prosperity and honor. He had planted a sacred grove, sunk deep wells, and set up an altar to the Most High. Thousands of sheep and cattle covered the verdant plains, and faithful servants surrounded him.

Heaven seemed to have crowned Abraham’s life of sacrifice with its abundant blessings. Isaac, the son of promise, had grown to manhood in his home. The old patriarch seemed now to be able to discern the fruition of all his hopes. Apparently his trials and conflicts were over, and his desires were to be fulfilled. He looked confidently forward to a cheerful old age and a peaceful close to along and eventful life.

“And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham. And he said, Behold, here I am.” As the old patriarch answered, he doubtless expected another promise, or a blessing. But instead there came, like a thunderbolt from the blue, the most heart-searching and

Celestial Visitors

extraordinary command that God ever gave to man, a command contrary to all of God's commands, one for which no reason was given.

"Take now thy son, your only son Isaac, whom thou loved, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of." This awful command is aflame with burning words and phrases. Every word came like a sharp knife, cutting at the very soul of the old man. Doubtless Abraham could have cried out, as the blessed Son of God did on Calvary, "My God, My God, why?"

What a seemingly strange, mysterious contradiction of terms. "Take now thy son, your only son Isaac, whom thou loved, and offer him for a burnt offering. Take Isaac, thy Laughter, and kill him. Sacrifice him upon the altar, just as you have been sacrificing sheep and oxen." There is no narrative in all Holy Writ more solemn than that here recorded. A trial without any precedent, and a crowning test of the patriarch's long and colorful life.

God did not ask for Ishmael; neither did He require a trusty servant; but the beloved son of promise. If Abraham had been blessed with many sons, the trial would not have been so great. If there had been a call for an animal from his vast herds, that would have been a pleasure. Gladly would the old man have given a thousand sheep and oxen, yea, all that he had, if only his beloved might be spared. Yes, it would have been easier if the Lord had asked that Abraham die, instead of the only son, the son of promise.

Abraham might have offered a thousand reasons for not doing this awful deed. O, why did God ask him to slay his only son? But the Lord said, "Abraham, you take the knife and fire, and make the supreme sacrifice."

God asked Abraham to do no more than He was eventually to do with His only Son. But God wanted only the patriarch's submission, not Isaac's life. Was he willing to be branded a murderer, and bear the reproach of Eliezer, and even Sarah? But God's tests are not for the purpose of hurting, but for healing. There must come into every purified life a crucial test; one trial beside which all others dwindle into insignificance. And this was to be Abraham's supreme test.

Abraham lived in a country, and in a time, in which human sacrifices were all too common. Even from his childhood, he had seen the heathen offer their children as gifts to Moloch, Baal, and Chemosh. And now must the father of the faithful follow their cruel example, and stain his hands with the warm blood of his own son? Must he be a monster instead of a father? Yes, the son must be given, and the father must be the giver. Isaac must not rival Jehovah in Abraham's affections.

The required sacrifice seemed to clash with reason as well as with religion. Was not Isaac the son of promise? The Messiah was to come through his line. Was salvation to perish with his perishing? It looked as if God, by one fell blow, would utterly destroy the fondest hopes of future Israel. Was the book of Isaac's life to be closed, with only the title page written? Abraham was tempted to believe that he might be under a delusion. It would have made any heart less stout than his, stagger at such an awful command. But true faith is always and forever tested faith.

There was no more sleep for Abraham that night. The aged lord of the camp crept softly out and away into the darkness. In anguish of soul he bowed down upon the earth, and prayed as never before, for a confirmation of the strange command. He went to the very spot where he had met the angels before, hoping to meet them again. But none came, and darkness seemed to shut him in on every side. God's command was constantly sounding in his ears. Day was approaching, and he must soon be on his journey.

Returning, the aged patriarch came to the outer apartment of the tent, and looked on Isaac as he lay peacefully sleeping, all unconscious of the great ordeal through which he was soon to pass. Abraham looked for a moment upon the dear face of his only son, then he dropped the curtain, and turned away in an agony of grief. He felt for the moment as if the blood of the dreadful sacrifice was already upon his hands.

Slowly he made his way to where Sarah was sleeping. Should he awaken her, and allow her once more to embrace her only child? Or should he go without letting her know? He longed to unburden his heart to her, but he dared not, lest she should hinder him. And God's purpose was to try Abraham, not Sarah.

A thousand questions could have arisen in the old man's mind. In the command he was called upon to pierce one heart, and to break another. His own trembling heart was probed to the very bottom. If he performed the terrible deed, would he ever be able to look Sarah in the face again? Would it forever alienate her affections from him? Would the weapon that slew the child divide the parents? If Isaac was given back, would she love the father still? And if he should return alone, O what then?

The aged patriarch, with bent form, and a face harrowed with unutterable grief, stepped out into the open, and looked eastward. Dawn was already rising the horizon. He "conferred not with flesh and

Celestial Visitors

blood.” With tremulous voice, he called his sleeping son. And Isaac awoke. In the command God had touched a multitude of tender chords in Abraham’s breast. Every word had been yet a deeper stab to his bosom.

Isaac had often gone with his father to worship at some distant altar, and the call now excited no alarm. “And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son.” The aged man had plenty of servants; yet he saddled his own animal. Then he “cleave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him.” The wood- for the sacrifice was cleft at home to be taken along. This was in order to make sure that there would be fuel for the sacrifice. What if they should reach the designated spot, and find no wood there? Ah, there must be no failure then. As the old man bound the wood to one of the animals, only God and Abraham knew what the bundle of sticks meant. And what if the knife had been left at home? No, the knife is to be taken, and it must be sharp, and the blow must be true.

The little company of four moved out slowly from Beersheba in the dim light of the early morning. They probably left their tents only three or four hours after the vision and the voice. How hard it must have been for the father to keep his voice calm when he spoke to Isaac during that first day. But he went straight ahead on the road God had marked out for him.

Side by side the father and son journeyed in silence. Abraham dared not tell Isaac what was to take place at the end of the journey. That day was the longest the old man had ever experienced. But at last it dragged slowly to a close. He must have felt some relief when night came, and Isaac and the two servants lay down upon the bare earth and slept. But there was no sleep for him.

The agonized father, wearied with the long torture, withdrew from the company. Under the friendly cover of darkness, he could pour out the sorrow of his breaking heart to One who was to say, “If it be possible, let this cup pass from Me!” All night he prayed, hoped, and waited for some heavenly messenger to come and say that it was enough. But no such relief came to his tortured soul.

The morning came all too soon for Abraham, for he must hasten on to Mt. Moriah. Another long day passed, as they journeyed among the hills, and the second night was spent, like the first, in agonizing prayer. Satan was near to whisper doubts and unbelief. He suggested, “The law says, ‘Thou shall not kill,’ and God would surely not now require what He has once forbidden.”

On the third morning the aged man girded his soul anew for the terrible ordeal. As they began the last stage of their journey, he looked across the hills, “and saw the place afar off.” A cloud of glory hovered over Mt. Moriah. Now he knew of a certainty that the voice he had heard had come from heaven. He fully expected that before another day should close, the bloody sacrifice would be completed. And when another morning should break, he would be on his way back home, brokenhearted and childless.

Abraham desired that none but God should witness the last terrible, agonizing scene. The servants must not interfere. Hence he “said unto his young men, Abide you here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.” “Go yonder and worship.” O, you Christians of today, remember that even the martyr’s sacrifice is still an important part of worship!

With his own trembling hands, “Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son. Isaac, like Christ, whom he typified, was to carry up the mountain the wood of his own sacrifice. And as Abraham’s son was willing to carry the wood up Mt. Moriah, so the blessed Son of God was willing to bear the rugged cross up Mt. Calvary.

After laying the wood upon his son, Abraham “took the fire in his hand, and a knife.” Side by side the father and son slowly ascended the mountain, the one with the fire and a knife, the other with the wood. Silently, “they went both of them together.” Isaac wondered where the victim for sacrifice was to be found. At last he “spoke unto Abraham his father, and said, My father.” O, what tender, melting words! How they pierced the old man’s breaking heart! He could only answer, “Here am I, my son.”

Looking around him, Isaac said, “Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Even yet the aged father could not break the painful truth to his son. O, what a test this was! There is nothing like it in all the Bible! It stands unequaled on the pages of Holy Writ. All the old man could say was, “My son, God will provide Himself a lamb for a burnt offering.” And the brief record continues, “So they went both of them together.”

At last “they came to the place which God had told him of.” Together they “built an altar there, and laid the wood in order.” This was the saddest altar the aged man had ever built, and Isaac’s last one, it seemed. But he painfully laid the wood in order for Isaac’s funeral pile. The last dreadful moment had come, and no delivering angel had appeared.

At last the time had come when the father must tell the son the painful message, which he had

Celestial Visitors

carried locked up in his own bleeding heart for three long, weary days. With trembling voice, he carefully unfolded the divine command. It was with amazement that Isaac learned of his fate. But he made no resistance. He could have escaped his doom, if he had chosen to do so. He was in the prime of young manhood, and his father was a century his senior. But from childhood he had been trained to obedience, and now he yielded in willing submission to God's plan.

With trembling hands and a breaking heart, the aged patriarch bound his son to the altar. Isaac tenderly encouraged his father in the painful task, and thus sought to lighten his grief. Now the last words of love were spoken, and the last embrace was given. With a flood of tears the old father planted the last farewell kiss upon the lips of his own dear son. Isaac looked, as he thought, for the very last time, up into his father's haggard, yet kindly face.

Be astonished, O heavens! And wonder, O earth! See the old father, with a will as firm as the mountain on which he stood, yet with a heart as tender as a babe's! Gaze upon him as he slowly raised the glittering knife above the head of his son. It is a spectacle for God and angels to look upon with love and amazement. The simple record states that "Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son."

At last it was enough. The cup had been drained to the very dregs. When Abraham lifted up the knife, the sacrifice was complete. The son had already been sacrificed upon the altar of the father's bleeding heart. And God had taken the will for the deed.

The old patriarch had come to the line, beyond which God would not suffer him to go. The sky suddenly cleared, and the sun broke forth. "The angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham, Lay not your hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him. For now I know that thou feared God, seeing thou has not withheld thy son, your only son from Me."

With a strange and inexpressible joy, the father and son gazed lovingly into each other's eyes once more. Abraham received his son, more precious now than before he was placed on the altar. After all, the Laughter in his tent back at Beersheba was not to be stifled. Joyfully he loosed the cords that bound his son. Isaac was now doubly a child of wonder. He had been born by a miracle, and now he had been delivered by a miracle.

Then Abraham saw "a ram caught in a thicket by his horns." Quickly he "took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son." Isaac was a type of dying humanity, and the ram symbolized Christ. The substitute for Isaac, caught in the thorns, seems suggestive of Jesus, our substitute, and His crown of thorns. Mt. Moriah was very near to Mt. Calvary. Jesus said, "Abraham rejoiced to see My day: and he saw it, and was glad." John 8:56.

The heavenly Father spared Isaac to Abraham. But He "spared not His own Son." Romans 8:32. He spared Abraham the awful pang which He did not spare Himself. A voice from heaven halted the old prophet's sacrifice just in time. But no voice was heard upon Calvary, saying, "Spare Thy Son." Isaac was looked upon by Abraham for three days as dead. Jesus was dead three days. On the third day Abraham returned with his son. On the third day Jesus was raised from the dead.

"And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovah-jireh," "The Lord will see and provide." Remember that providing is not the children's business, but the Father's. And God always provides in a godly way'. If you need wisdom, strength, food, or pardon, God will provide. But we must be willing to ascend the mountain, yield our all to Him. Jehovah must sometimes lay His hand on something very dear to us. But, the angel's voice was heard on the mountaintop.

Thus ends one of the most familiar and one of the most thrilling stories in all the Bible. Heartthrobs are in every part of it. Its beauty And pathos are unsurpassable. One wonders if Isaac told his mother how near she came to being left childless. We do not know. But we do know that he was not the same after the trip to Mt. Moriah. Neither was Abraham. Someday in the beautiful beyond, we would like to ask him to tell us the story, as only he could tell it.

9. On the Ladder

Genesis 28:11-18

THERE HAD BEEN TROUBLE between two sons in an old patriarch's tent. The younger of the two had defrauded his brother, and deceived his old father. Being threatened with death by his brother, the

Celestial Visitors

younger son slipped away. In his haste he took only a staff in his hand. He was leaving home, never to see his mother again. But his life was no longer safe where his brother dwelt.

He hurried out over the plains, and toward the distant hills, with a heavy heart. Alone, without a guide, he trudged on, with only one thought in mind, that of escaping from his angry brother. On the ascent of every ridge, he paused and looked backward and forward. Backward, fearing his brother would overtake him, and forward, fearing robbers might meet him. In his attempt to escape, he did not take the common, or traveled, road, but sought an unfrequented and solitary path.

In his remorse and timidity, he avoided men all he, could. Even strangers might enable his angry brother to trace him. As he trudged on and on across the lonely hills and vales of Syria, he was greatly wearied with his journey. Unlike his brother, he was not used to the wild life of forest and plain. But he dared not stop. The evening of the second day found Jacob far away from Isaac's tent, and out of the reach of Esau, who was back at Beersheba. All day the sky seemed as brass over his head, and his hot cheeks were fanned by the passing breeze. The journey was unusually wearisome. His mind was back at his father's tent, on the cheated elder brother. Satan was at hand to press him with discouragement and remorse.

On into the wilderness the weary refugee went, until the shadows of evening slowly lengthened around him. Darkness crept overhead like some shadowy ghost. He was indeed heavyhearted and sad, as he climbed the rocky slopes of the hills of Canaan. The sun had sunk to rest, darkness gathered about him, and the stars came out overhead. Night found him in a most solitary place. But the darkness of his soul was deeper than the darkness of the night.

The stars were ablaze like millions of lighted altars, as Jacob the wanderer sought a secluded place for the night. Like many another, he had been driven into solitude, by his own sins. No voice of friend or foe was heard. To be alone with God is a most blessed experience, but to be alone without God is a most miserable experience.

Fear and despair pressed sorely upon him. Never before had he felt so great a need for divine protection and guidance. No doubt he confessed his sins with deep contrition of heart, and longed once more for the divine benediction. He remembered very vividly how each evening, his father had knelt at the altar, and committed all to Him who watches over His people. He very well knew that this night of all nights, a most fervent prayer would be offered for him in the little tent back in Beersheba.

Jacob's very worst enemy on the long journey had been an evil conscience; and a guilty conscience cannot be bribed. Neither is it easily silenced. Right and wrong should ever be as sharp to the conscience as black and white are to the eyes. Conscience is like a bell in the watchtower. If no one rings the bell, the inhabitants of the city are in danger.

Weary and dejected, Jacob lay down on the cold ground, without blanket or mat. The old tent of his father was not over him now. With a stone under his head, he had a comfortless pillow, and a shelterless bed. But soft sins often lead to hard lodgings. The earth was his couch, and the heavens above, his only canopy. But the bright, friendly stars twinkled overhead, as if assuring him that God had not entirely forsaken him.

Jacob slept; and that night the Lord compassionately revealed to the weary wanderer just what he needed most, a Savior. As he slept, he dreamed. And the wonderful story of that dream has been told down the ages for nearly four thousand years, until now almost every child in the land knows it. He saw a gigantic stairway, or ladder. And this ladder reached from the sleeper's side, away and up, even into heaven.

A shining ladder it was, that reached from earth to heaven. It began on the earth, but did not end there. Its foot was on the ground, but its top was above the stars. From the sleeper's side to far-off heaven was one shining highway. The ladder touched the ground, so that angels could alight to minister to earth's discouraged ones, and so that human feet could easily reach it. And it did not stop short of heaven.

On this ladder of his dream the weary refugee saw cherubim and seraphim ascending and descending. The shining pathway was peopled with the celestial messengers of God. Thus when Jacob thought himself most alone and forsaken he found the wilderness and sky peopled with angels.

As Jacob gazed upward in wonder and amazement, he saw that the last rung of the ladder was lost in the splendor of the throne of God. Up there was the Lord of glory whom he thought had entirely forsaken him. But for his benefit, Jehovah unbarred the casement of the sky and looked lovingly upon His discouraged child. And as Jacob listened, he heard a gentle voice saying, "I am the Lord God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac. The land whereon thou lies, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed; and thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shall spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the

Celestial Visitors

north, and to the south. And in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.” God thus graciously took away his despondency, and in its place gave him courage and hope. And that God is still at the summit of Jacob’s ladder.

Knowing his loneliness and distress, the Lord said, “Behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goes, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee.” Jacob had felt that he had left his father’s God when he left his father’s tent.

On this ladder Jacob saw the angels ascending and descending-ascending for a blessing from God, and descending with a blessing for man. Jacob’s ladder stood on the ground, among men, and it reached to heaven, where men want to go.

A railroad track may suggest speed, but a ladder indicates climbing. And the weary climb must be made rung by rung. No one can leap at one bound from the bottom to the top. But we must make the toilsome ascent one step at a time. It is a ladder all the way up. There are no level plains along life’s steep ladder. Neither is it a flower-lined path of ease and comfort.

Keep the eyes upward and lift one foot at a time, is good advice to climbers. Use both hands, and plant both feet firmly on the first rung. Look up. Looking down, we become dizzy, and fall. No one can start at the top, or even halfway up. A ladder is not an easy thing to ascend. Each step is higher than the last. And each day should find us above the day before. Only those who climb are getting toward the stars.

Every man must do his own climbing. It cannot be delegated to others, or done by proxy. If others do the climbing, others will receive the reward. In the parable the angels carried Lazarus to Abraham’s bosom. But no angel is ever commissioned to carry any man up life’s ladder to his reward. So climb, if you expect to win.

This ladder is Christ. It is a living ladder, and thus a ladder of life. The foot of this ladder is by every man’s side. It may be found in every nation on earth, and in the islands of the sea. It may be seen by the eye of faith in every place; in the crowded city, on the lonely wayside, in public, and in private. There is no other way to reach heaven but by this ladder. He that “climbed up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber.” Men’s ladders lie flat on the ground. But that which God builds, reaches straight upward and onward into the skies.

A man need not climb life’s ladder alone. It may be radiant with shining angels. They are always passing up and down. Any time man needs help, he may beckon to an angel going up, and send a prayer to the throne of God. And a descending angel will soon bring a reply.

The benevolent face of the Father looked down upon Jacob from above the top of the ladder, and a voice was heard saying, “I am the Lord God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac.” Highest above all man’s plans, if he is to succeed in the truest sense, must be God. And it is the privilege of every man to hear the voice of God speaking in His word.

In the still hours of the night Jacob awoke. The ladder was gone, the angels had disappeared, and the voice of God was no longer heard. But a divine presence seemed to fill the very air. In great joy he exclaimed, “Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not. This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

Jacob arose the next morning from his stone pillow, not only a better man, but a wiser man. It was the best night’s sleep he had ever had. He “took the stone that he had put for his pillows, and set it up for a pillar.” Dear reader, have you by faith seen the angels ascending and descending upon the blessed Son of God? May the Lord grant to you this blessing.

10. On the Banks of the Jabbok

Genesis 32:24-32

IT WAS A LONELY REGION, where the turbulent Jabbok River, that wild, rocky stream, came roaring down from the mountains of Gilead and Bashan. In the gathering darkness, white foam could be seen as it was churned up over the rocks of the shallow ford. The near-by heights were studded with ancient castles, once held by robber chieftains. The lion and bear wandered on this wild heath beneath the stars, unrestrained by fear of hound or hunter.

But the desolate region was not alone in its solitariness. An old patriarch had sent his family and servants across the river, while he remained on the upper side. The long, weary day had closed, and the

Celestial Visitors

dark shadows of night had fallen upon the distant hills. The bleating of his herds had ceased in the valley. No sound was to be heard, except the occasional call of his own herdsmen. Silence lay like a pall over the land.

Just a little before this, as “Jacob went on his way, the angels of God met him.” Seeing them, he said, “This is God’s host. And he called the name of that place Mahanaim” (“two hosts, or camps,” margin). Two hosts of heavenly angels seemed to encompass him behind and before, advancing with his company, as if for their protection. His heavy heart grew lighter at the thought that the divine messengers were the guardians of his journey.

Now Jacob, no longer a young man, was alone with himself and his God. Twenty eventful years had passed since the vision of the ladder and the angels. At that time he had carried all his earthly possessions in a coarse shepherd’s bag. Now he had become rich. The multitude of his herds literally filled the valleys. His flocks, like fleecy clouds, covered the verdant hillsides. His army of servants were obedient to his every wish.

Drawing near to his journey’s end, he was troubled. With many misgivings, he had retraced his steps taken twenty years before. He could not go back to Haran, yet he feared to advance to meet Esau. The wrong done his brother two decades before, was still with him. An accusing conscience is yet the worst companion in the hour of danger. Unforgiven sins always point an accusing finger.

Solitary and unprotected, Jacob bowed upon his knees in great distress. The crisis of his life had come. He had laid siege to Esau’s wrath with a train of tears and gifts. He had done all he could to appease his brother, and now he turned in utter helplessness to God. He was like a great general on the eve of a mighty battle. Out under the deep heavens, in the silent night, he would prepare for the conflict.

Jacob’s servants reported that Esau was coming to meet him with four hundred trained men. It appeared certain that he was bent on revenge. Jacob’s own company was unarmed and defenseless. He accordingly divided them into two bands, so that if one was attacked, the other might escape. It was now midnight. All that made life dear to him was on ahead, exposed to danger and death. He would be alone with his God.

With earnest cries and tears, Jacob prayed. As he did so, a nocturnal visitor appeared. Suddenly a strong hand was laid upon him. He felt sure that in such a place, and at such an hour, it must be the hand of an enemy. Perhaps it was his angry brother, who had waited twenty years for an opportunity to be revenged. Jacob sprang to his feet, grappled with his unknown antagonist, and struggled with all his might to fling him to the ground. In the darkness of the night, the two contended for the mastery, but neither seemed to win.

It was a terrific conflict, that most famous combat fought by Jacob and his assailant on the banks of the faraway Jabbok. In this terrible fight in the dark, not a word was spoken by either. The only sound was Jacob’s deep and labored breathing. Night is always a time of fear, and it was doubly so to this lone human struggler.

As Jacob battled for his very life, a consciousness of his guilt pressed upon his soul. His sins rose up before him to shut him away from God. Hour after hour passed by. The long and terrible conflict was no sham battle, but a real and desperate conflict. It seemed to be either win or die.

The struggle continued all the rest of the night. “There wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day.” At last the mysterious stranger put forth his power and brought the struggle to a close. “And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob’s thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him.” The patriarch now discovered the character of his antagonist. He knew that he had been in conflict with a heavenly messenger. No common wrestler could have defeated him. It was Christ, the “Angel of the covenant,” who had revealed Himself to Jacob.

Jacob’s sinew shriveled when touched by the Almighty. The patriarch suffered keenly, but would not give up. The Angel said, “Let Me go, for the day breaks.” But Jacob replied, “I will not let Thee go, except Thou bless me.” He was not presumptuous in making this appeal, but he was holding on to One who alone could bestow what he most needed, and he would not release his grip.

When Jacob could not wrestle, he could cling. One limb was useless; he had but one sound leg on which to stand, yet he held on desperately to his assailant. Although he had been so strong and unmasterable a moment before, now, crippled and weeping, he could only hang upon the neck of his divine Antagonist. He would now make sure of gaining by prayer and tears a victory which his human strength had failed to win.

When God subdued Jacob, Jacob prevailed with God. So only when we surrender to the Infinite, do we become real victors. Uttered in penitence and faith, the words, “I will not let Thee go, except,” are

Celestial Visitors

still the open road to a blessing. The hiding of power is still, as ever, in the closet. And whatever we cling to for strength must be stronger than we are. Jacob had found, not his worst foe, but his best Friend.

The angel said to Jacob, "What is thy name?" And he humbly replied, "Jacob." He would have the patriarch admit that his name was Jacob, or Deceiver, before He gave him the new name, Israel, or Prevailer. What is your name, Jacob or Israel? If the former, let God make it the latter. The patriarch could not enter the Promised Land as Jacob, but only as Israel. Neither can we.

The Angel assured him, "Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince has thou power with God and with men, and has prevailed." This was an evidence to Jacob that he had been forgiven. Men look up to a prince, for he has access to the throne, and power with the king. On the banks of the river Jabbok, Jacob was knighted. This experience meant his real conversion. We cannot get the new name without wrestling.

From this hour Jacob was another man. Doubt, perplexity, and remorse had embittered his past life. But now he was reconciled to God, and a sweet peace filled his soul. This was the beginning of the brightest and best days of his long and eventful life. He had gone over the river Jabbok as Jacob, but he came back as Israel.

The aged patriarch requested of the Angel, "Tell me, I pray Thee, Thy name." He replied, "Wherefore is it that thou does ask after My name? And He blessed him there." The place of trial is still the place of blessing. God blessed Jacob at the place where He had lamed him. Jacob obtained Isaac's blessing by fraud, but God's blessing was received by faith.

Jacob was no longer afraid to meet Esau, whom for twenty long years he had feared to see. While he was wrestling with the Angel, another heavenly messenger had been sent to Esau. In a dream he had seen the distress of his exiled brother, and his heart was softened toward him. Jacob had gained the victory over his brother when he obtained the victory over himself. He could meet Esau better lame than he could whole.

"And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved." Esau and his mighty host had been conquered at Peniel, when God turned a foe into a friend. The night of wrestling was followed by a day of reconciliation. If there were more wrestling with God today, there would be more power with unbelieving relatives.

After receiving the blessing, the old patriarch returned to the tents of his loved ones. "And as he passed over Peniel the sun rose upon him, and he halted upon his thigh." Such an experience as Jacob had will leave its mark upon any man. No one can pass through severe conflict without carrying scars of the battle.

In life's conflicts there can be no victories where there have been no battles. The call of the Lord is for soldiers. Paul had his thorn, and Jacob his limp. The milk and honey of the Promised Land lies beyond the tragic wilderness. The best armies are made up of volunteers, and only soldiers are pensioned after the war is over.

Three times the patriarch had seen the angels. The first time was at Bethel, where the ladder, with its shining hosts, had connected him with heaven. Then at Mahanaim, the bright battalions were seen accompanying him. This was no dream of the night, but a clear, calm view in open daylight. And lastly, at Peniel, the Angel of the covenant came so near that he felt the touch of a living hand upon him, and saw Him face to face.

At Bethel, Jacob saw the angels. At Mahanaim, he met the angels. And at Peniel, he wrestled with the Angel. Bethel was the house of God. Mahanaim stood for the hosts of God. And at Peniel he saw the face of God. Each place became a shrine, and at each there was a wayside prayer.

Although Jacob halted until his dying day, and went limping to his grave, he was ever a prevailer. And God revealed to him the future of his posterity. He had something vastly better than earthly riches to bestow upon them. What a will this was! Not a written will like that a testator pens. Oh, no! But he had already enriched his twelve sons with an inheritance better than lands. His dying words were, "Bury me with my fathers." May the Lord give us the hope and consolation of Jacob!

11. At the Back Side of the Desert

Celestial Visitors

Exodus 3:13; Acts 7:30-34; Deuteronomy 33:16

EARLY one bright summer morning a shepherd led his flock out of the fold and away for food and drink. Behind him, to the east, lay a dry, barren desert. Before him, there arose in awful grandeur the distant "mountain of God." It was a wild, rocky region, with chalky cliffs and gray peaks dotting the landscape here and there. Occasional wadies or glens intersected the desert, and afforded water and grass for his flock.

For forty years this man had "kept the flock of his father-in-law." Faithfully and well he had done his work. This particular day was just an ordinary one. The sun had risen as usual over the eastern horizon, and had whitened the already-bleached sand about him. The stillness of the desert was unbroken, save by the clatter of many hoofs, and the familiar bleating of the immense flock that followed him.

The shepherd led the flock to the back side of the desert, and came to the mountain of God." The "back side of the desert" is preeminently Jehovah's place for training those whom He calls to any great undertaking. Here the din, noise, and clamor of the trafficking throngs are never heard. The thirst for gold, the sigh of ambition, or the voice of human applause, never reaches the "back side of the desert." Everything is gone except the divine voice and the holy Presence.

It was here that Moses had conducted his flock that eventful day. For forty years he had led a shepherd's life. How he had changed since he arrived in the land of Midian nearly half a century before. He was a young man then, wearing the princely apparel of Egypt. Now he was an old man, dressed in the coarse mantle of the shepherd. In his hand was a rugged staff which, under God, was to become a mighty scepter, ruling an empire.

Day after day, year after year, and decade after decade, the faithful shepherd, sun tanned and vigorous, had patiently trudged over this familiar region. His faithfulness in caring for Jethro's sheep had prepared him to shepherd God's flock. There was now to be more in life than merely tending sheep. There was better employment for a man of his qualifications.

Previous to Moses' leaving Egypt, two great influences had molded his life. The greatest of these was his mother's loving heart, and the other was his Egyptian surroundings. Forty years ago he was in his prime, and young dreams of conquest were his. Then suddenly all was blasted, and he thought no one cared. Noble aspirations sprang up, only to wither when he was forced to flee for his life.

Moses had married one of the girls he had defended at the well. For forty years he had been growing wise in the knowledge of the hills. He had been driven out under the sky, to become acquainted with the stars, to forget cities and worldly splendor, and to learn to know God. He was sent to talk to men who tended cattle, sheared sheep, and wove wool into garments, to learn and to unlearn.

Moses had learned in Egypt some things that he must unlearn in Midian. And it took him forty years to unlearn them. Shut in by the bulwarks of the mountains, he was alone with God. The Great Teacher was his instructor at "the back side of the desert." All those who will learn of Him, must be alone with Him. And Moses must learn far more than the great masters of Egypt ever knew. The deserts are still fruitful in yielding great men.

Heavenly angels shed light around Moses in his solitary vigils with his flocks. It was here in the land of Midian that he wrote the book of Genesis. The revelations of the desert were many, as he kept his ears open and his tongue quiet. He saw more of God in one day than he had seen in Pharaoh's court in a quarter of a century. It had been eighty years since Jochebed had hidden the baby boy on the river Nile. Now the great clock of time had struck the hour, ending the long years of bondage in Egypt, and he must go.

For forty years the lonely shepherd had led his flock out-where they could browse on the scanty herbage the desert afforded. While they fed, or lay quietly in the shadow of some great rock, Moses studied the beauties of nature, and communed with nature's God. He little dreamed that this was to be the very last day of his shepherd life. He was now to be called on the greatest errand ever given to any man, save that upon which Jesus came.

Suddenly, he saw a common shrub in flames. Moses had probably seen this same bush a hundred times before. But never before had he seen it standing enwrapped in fire.

It was no make-believe fire. He watched it intently, expecting the tree to be consumed. Although it was flaming, yet it was flourishing; burning, yet not burnt. A shrub on fire, yet no one had lighted it, and no fuel kept it burning. The splendor, of Pharaoh's palace had never afforded such a sight as this. Bright flames enveloped it, but no branch, leaf, or twig was even singed.

"The angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of the bush: and he

Celestial Visitors

looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed.”

God drew Moses by that little thread-curiosity. Although he was no longer young, he was as inquisitive as a boy. “And Moses said, I will turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.”

In life’s pilgrimage it pays to “turn aside, and see.” Often in our quiet hours, the vision and voice will beckon us aside to linger, listen, and look. He who lives near nature, lives near nature’s God.

“When the Lord saw that Moses turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses.” This call fell on the shepherd’s ear like a double knock at the door of his heart. How often God calls individuals by name, as in the case of Adam, Samuel, Elijah, Simon, Martha, etc.

Upon Moses’ answering, “Here am I,” the Lord said, “Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou stands is holy ground.” Before the godly shepherd had reached the bush, the voice said, “Put off thy shoes.” Holy ground must be trodden only by unshod feet. God’s presence made it holy. To Moses, the desert had suddenly become a temple, and the shrub a shrine.

From the moment of his call from the bush, his entire life was altered. He was henceforth a new Moses. He was amazed at God’s command that he should lead Israel out of Egypt. Hiding his face in great humility, Moses begged to be excused from the gigantic task. But God assured him of His divine presence and guidance.

Passing over forty years leadership of this colossal figure of Old Testament times, we come to the last days of the shepherd-priest. As the people gazed lovingly upon the aged man, soon to be taken from them, they vividly recalled his wise counsels, his parental tenderness, and his untiring labors for them. Only once in forty years had he- become impatient with them.

For the last time, the aged patriarch stood in the assembly of his people. It was to be his final benediction upon Israel. And a most touching scene it was! The long journey through the desert was over at last, and soon his people might possess the Promised Land. The Spirit of God rested upon him, and in sublime and touching words he pronounced a blessing upon the twelve tribes.

As he cast a retrospective survey over a long lifetime, many hallowed memories crowded upon him. There were the ten plagues and the Passover angel, the pillar of cloud and fire, the crossing of the Red Sea, the sending of the manna, the smitten rock, Mt. Sinai and the giving of the law, the building of the tabernacle, and the brazen serpent. All these stood out distinctly as beacon lights in the hallowed past.

And as he blessed the children of Israel, to Joseph he commended “the good will of Him that dwelt in the bush.” Once again, after forty years, he is keeping sheep. He sees the burning bush, and hears the familiar voice. That God has never left him, and that fire has never gone out of his life.

The vision and the voice were still with him. The Angel who appeared to him in the bush had been with him during his long pilgrimage, during forty years of battles and rebuffs. The fire had set his own heart ablaze with a holy love for God and His wayward children. Thus we leave the bronzed shepherd of Israel contemplating with tender reverence the vision at “the back side of the desert.”

12. In Egypt and Goshen

Exodus 12:1-27

IT WAS NIGHT in old Egypt, the land of the Pharaohs. In this rainless clime, no clouds darkened the heavens. The bright, silvery moon shed its light over cascades of marvelous beauty. The feathery palms along the banks of the Nile were motionless and still. The numerous canals looked like threads of silver among the gardens and vineyards. It was indeed a beautiful picture of peace and prosperity.

Every city and village along the Nile was hushed into silence. The fishermen and pleasure seekers had moored their boats to the bank of the river. The weary plowmen were in from the fields, the swarthy smith had banked his fires, and the shepherds had folded their flocks for the night. In every abode, whether of plenty or poverty, slumber had soothed the inmates into sweet dreams of forgetfulness.

But in the porphyry halls of the palace, all was not peaceful. The haughty monarch slept uneasily. His subjects had been cursed with terrible plagues from the God of his bondmen. Blood, blains, tempest, locusts, and darkness had done their direful work. But he deceived himself into believing that the worst was now over. So the weary monarch slept, unconscious of impending danger.

There was quietness in all the houses of Egypt, and silence reigned in the streets of Pharaoh’s

Celestial Visitors

capital. From the priests in the temple of Isis and Osiris, to the peasants in mud huts, or on stone floors, the inmates had gone to bed, fully expecting to sleep soundly until daybreak. The oppressors felt sure that they would hear no more about the release of their slaves.

Not far away there was a vastly different picture. The long evening shadows had crept silently over the land of Goshen. Here none were asleep. Every soul was awake, and every eye was on the watch. There was no stir in the streets. The flocks and herds had been rounded up, in readiness for some long, mysterious journey. The day had been busy with some great preparation.

In the land of Goshen, all the families were inside their houses, but not asleep. There was a mysterious bloodstain on the lintel and the two side posts of every door. All were awake, strong and healthy. There was not a sick one among them. From the gray-haired sire to the newborn babe, all were assembled behind closed doors.

What does all this mean? Why all this excitement, this hurried but silent preparation? Why were the little narrow streets so strangely silent and still? Why was every member of every family within his own home, and the doors securely shut? Ah, here is the answer. "The Lord spoke unto Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying, This month shall be unto you the beginning of months: it shall be the first month of the year to you."

A new nation was to be born. A vast horde of slaves were to be organized overnight into a free and independent people. They were at last to leave Goshen, and set out for the Promised Land. The month of the exodus was thenceforth to be the first of the year. The commencement of the year was to be at once changed about from Tishri, the month of reaping, to Abib, the month of sowing; from the middle of September to the middle of March.

So on this eventful night, while darkness prevailed in all Egypt, whether in gorgeous home or bare hut, there was light in all the homes of Israel. The sovereign faith of Moses had kindled a flicker of hope in the hearts of three million people. They had been told that at midnight the hand of the Lord would fall heavily upon the homes of their Egyptian oppressors, and that they themselves would be set free from their cruel bondage.

The Lord's instruction through Moses was, "Speak you unto Israel, saying, In the tenth day of this month they shall take to them every man a lamb, a lamb for a house. And you shall keep it up until the fourteenth day of the same month." It was to be a lamb without blemish. In being kept up for four days, it became, as it were, an integral part of the household.

At every door stood the innocent lamb. Near by was a basin, a knife, and a bunch of hyssop. Instructions had come from Jehovah that the head of the family should take this lamb, and "kill it in the evening. And they shall take of the blood, and strike it on the two side posts, and on the upper door post of the houses, wherein they shall eat it."

The mere killing of the lamb would not make the first-born safe. Its blood must be on door posts and lintel. Neither would the blood of a bullock or a goat suffice. Also it must be applied in just the right manner. The blood on the outside would thus speak for the family inside, and the life of the first-born would be spared.

After the sprinkling of the blood, came the feast. They were instructed to "eat the flesh in that night, roast with fire," and "with bitter herbs." The herbs were a token of their bondage in Egypt. The lamb that had already become their safety, now became their food. In the hurry and bustle of that last day, it seemed a strange thing to be observing such a feast.

The Lord had said to the men, Have "your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand: and you shall eat it in haste." The women had their kneading troughs and dough boards bound up in little bundles. The anxious eyes of the parents ran round the family group, to see that all were there. God had said, "None of you shall go out at the door of his house until the morning."

God had said, "When I see the blood, I will pass over you when I smite the land of Egypt." "When I see the blood," not when they saw it. God's eye is never dim. Even yet He can see the blood marked home. "When I see the blood," not just any blood, for it was an appointed blood, "the blood of the Lamb."

Some ungodly Egyptian youth might have said, "It is too bad to be huddled in the home like sheep. Come out; it is a beautiful night, and there is no judgment impending." And, mocking at the blood-marked houses, he might have gone his way to jibe and sneer at others, deriding the fear that death would come to every home where the red streak was not found. He might laugh then, but none would laugh on the morrow.

It was now midnight in Goshen. Israel, having done all they could, waited. It must have been an awful hour. See, he comes along the street, the angel of death, counting houses, until he draws near a

Celestial Visitors

cottage! He lays his hand on the hilt of his sword, ready to strike. But, thank God, he sees the blood, smiles, and passes on. On he goes through Goshen, and every blood-marked home is safe.

After he has completed his work among the Hebrews, he speeds on to the lordly palace of Pharaoh. He finds no blood on marbled column or gilded portal. Nothing can stay the fearful stroke. The Egyptians may have strengthened their houses with solid bars of brass or iron, but the destroyer's weapon cleaves them as if they were of straw. The frightened king hurries to the bedside of the heir to the throne, and finds him dead. The news spreads like wildfire, until the whole land of the Nile is in mourning.

A wild, piercing cry goes up from home after home, until it becomes one long, universal wail. From village to village, from town to town, the death angel goes, smiting the first-born in every family. A mighty wave of lamentation rolls over the land of the Pharaohs.

One childless mother rushes out with a wail, to tell her neighbor that the angel of death has been in her home. She is answered by the cry of another mother. And it is useless to summon priest, physician, or magician. How can they help when death is in their own homes? A common sorrow has obliterated all social distinctions between maid at the mill and lady behind curtains of silk.

The proud monarch quickly "called for Moses and Aaron by night, and said, Rise up, and get you forth from among my people. Also take your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and be gone. We be all dead men." This was the command for which the Hebrews had waited. The stifled agonies of their long years of servitude had at last found an answer in the wails that came from the homes of the oppressors.

The night before, when the sun set over Goshen, Israel were bond slaves of the haughty king, toiling under the lash of the taskmasters. When the sun arose the next morning, they were a free people. It was a national deliverance. It was the birthright of the Hebrew nation, the beginning of the greatest era of all ancient times.

The next morning every door in Goshen was flung wide open, and a vast army, three million strong, with Jehovah for their guide, marched out of Egypt. Never again were they to return and pick up their tools and work for Pharaoh. At last this great host stepped forth to freedom, to drink deeply of a newfound liberty. Under the Great Emancipator, the ransomed tribe went forth that day in triumph toward their own longed-for Promised Land.

13. With the Mad Prophet

Numbers 22, 23

AWAY UP IN THE high tablelands of old Mesopotamia there lived one of the most extraordinary characters in Bible history. His eventful life seemed to be a series of mysteries, contradictions, and tragedies. This man from "the mountains of the east" stands out as one of the most remarkable figures in the Old Testament. He possessed a strange mixture of the good and the bad, his life being a sort of paradox among men.

This notable man's home was in Pethor, near the headwaters of the Euphrates River. Aram, or Mesopotamia, was "the country between two rivers," the Tigris and the Euphrates. It was the land famed as the home of Abraham, and Terah, his father. It was also the place where the faithful servant was sent to find a wife for Isaac, and where Jacob found wealth as well as wives. This man had great gifts, but not good graces. His words were often of the best, but his actions were more often of the worst. He seemed to be orthodox in doctrine, yet heterodox in life. Although apparently wearing the livery of heaven, his wicked heart showed through, even to men. His piety, used as a cloak, was continually frayed out. But he found, as every other man will find who tries it, that it is harder to live as a successful hypocrite than to live as a successful Christian.

But very little is said in the Scriptures of this prophet of Mesopotamia. As to his birth, the brief record is, "Balaam also the son of Beor, the soothsayer." Joshua 13:22. Peter speaks of "Balaam the son of Bosor." Bosor is the Greek form of Beor. Some hold that Bosor means "Baser," characteristic of Balaam's unholy life. He seemed to have the most unusual gifts, yet prostituted them to an unholy purpose.

But Balaam was not altogether bad. He was not always an impostor. But he did try, unsuccessfully however, to combine divine prophecy with unholy soothsaying. He was often a true prophet, but a bad man. He seemed not just sure of himself. He wanted to do opposite things at the same time. He had noble sentiments; yet he performed base deeds. Covetousness lay deeply buried in his bosom. But he at last found

Celestial Visitors

that “the way of transgressors is hard.” Proverbs 13:15.

When “the children of Israel set forward, and pitched in the plains of Moab . . . by Jericho,” the Moabites were “sore afraid of the people, because they were many.” The king of Moab aroused the fears of the Midianites by sending messengers to their elders, saying, “Now shall this company lick up all that are round about us, as the ox licked up the grass of the field.” Thus he easily secured their cooperation.

King Balak “sent messengers therefore unto Balaam the son of Beor,” saying, “Come now therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people; for they are too mighty for me: for I know that he whom thou blessed is blessed and he whom thou curses is cursed.” Gifts and rewards were sent along with the request. Thus did he hope to win the money-loving prophet over to his side.

The inspired seer from the far-distant land was supposed to have supernatural powers. His fame had reached even unto Moab. Balaam had once been a good man, a holy prophet of God, but he had gone farther and farther away, until covetousness became the ruling passion of his life. Yet he still professed to be a servant of the Lord. For this reason Balak was encouraged to believe that he could curse Israel, if he so minded to do.

Covetousness is still the secret rock upon which multitudes are being wrecked. Like Eve, men covet the fruit of the tree, but fail to recognize that the serpent lurking there is a deceiver. Balak, king of Moab, was a shrewd man, and well understood the human heart. He trusted more to arts than to arms. Israel had a prophet, and was successful. So he also would have a prophet, and be successful. Moses was a prophet of Jehovah. And Balak understood Balaam to be inspired by the same God. And he evidently thought that “all men have their price.” Hence “the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the rewards of divination in their hand.”

Upon finding Balaam, these deputies delivered to him the message from their king. “And he said unto them, Lodge here this night, and I will bring you word again, as the Lord shall speak unto me.” So “the princes of Moab abode with Balaam.” The prophet of Mesopotamia well knew that it was his duty to dismiss the messengers at once, and spurn the rewards of Balak. He knew that his curse could not harm Israel. But he dallied with temptation in waiting a whole night to settle the question.

During the night season, “God came unto Balaam, and said, What men are these with thee?” The Lord is still concerned about our companionship. A man’s associates pretty clearly indicate his character. Not all the angels in heaven were proof against bad company. One had better walk in the right way alone than in the wrong way with many. When in Rome, the child of God will do as the Romans ought to do. A change of heart usually means a change of company.

“Balaam said unto God, Balak, king of Moab, sent unto me, saying, Behold, there is a people come out of Egypt, which covered the face of the earth: come now, curse me them; peradventure I shall be able to overcome them, and drive them out.” To this, God made a very positive answer, “Thou shall not go with them; thou shall not curse the people: for they are blessed.”

Not daring to disobey the Lord openly, “Balaam rose up in the morning, and said unto the princes of Balak, Get you into your land; for the Lord refused to give me leave to go with you.” He did not tell them just what the Lord had said. He was angry that his hope of honor and gain had been thus dispelled. His heart was set more on gold than on God.

The cause of Balaam’s downfall was that he “loved the wages of unrighteousness.” 2 Peter 2:15. He had more respect for the wages than for the word. He wished to serve God by serving self. It was not necessary to devote a whole ‘ night to the message of the deputies. But when a man starts from the line of rectitude even at a very small angle, the divergence grows wider and wider, until he is far from righteousness.

The deputies, on their return to Moab, misrepresented to the king Balaam’s answer. Instead of telling him that God had refused to let him come, they said, “Balaam refused to come with us.” Hence the king thought that Balaam’s refusal was merely to secure a richer reward. Accordingly he “sent yet again princes, more, and more honorable than they.” These were select men from both Moab and Midian. Higher honor and greater wealth was this time promised to the prophet of Mesopotamia.

Balak’s urgent message to the prophet this time. was, “Let nothing, I pray thee, hinder thee from coming unto me: for I will promote thee unto very great honor, and I will do whatsoever thou says unto me: come therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people.” He was willing to concede to any terms that Balaam might demand, if he would only save him and his people from the children of Israel.

Thus Balaam was tested the second time. He coveted the gifts, but he evaded complying with the request of the deputies. He said, “If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the word of the Lord my God, to do less or more.” The Lord was not his God; neither was he

Celestial Visitors

willing to obey the word of the Lord. So why this answer?

Although the will of God had already been definitely made known to him, he urged the messengers to remain, saying, "Tarry you also here this night, that I may know what the Lord will say unto me more." This was the turning point in Balaam's experience. It was a solemn moment, and a crisis in his life. And he made the sad mistake of trying to make the best of both worlds, and by doing so, eventually lost both.

Balaam was not as anxious to know God's will, however, as he was to change it. He evidently thought that the Lord might change His mind in regard to his going. He had already been told not to go with the messengers, and he ought never to have made inquiry the second time. But how little he knew even of his own unstable heart. Silver and gold were what he wanted. They blinded his eyes. Like the silly fish, playing with the tempting bait, he dallied until his soul was bartered for gain.

During the night the Lord again appeared unto Balaam, and said, "If the men come to call thee, rise up, and go with them; but yet the word which I shall say unto thee, that shall thou do." Thus far the Lord would permit Balaam to follow his own desires, because of his persistence. Like many men today, he first mapped out the course he wanted to take, and then tried to get the Lord's sanction. He was determined to go, whatever the cost.

Many at the present time are following in the footsteps of Balaam. It has always been so. If man persists in desiring a wrong course, God will let him have his own way, even to his own hurt. He sometimes denies the prayers of saints, and yet grants the desires of sinners. When Israel lusted for flesh, the Lord, "gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul." Psalm 106:15. When they desired a king, He gave them one, but to their great sorrow. Balaam's heart was with Balak, so why should he not go?

Evidently annoyed at Balaam's delay, the messengers had set out for Moab, without further consulting him. Balaam, determined to have the reward, "arose up in the morning, and saddled his ass," and set out on the long journey southward. Fearing that the divine permission might be withdrawn, he impatiently hurried along, dreaming of future wealth and glory that might be his. "But he who counts the cost of honesty is surely dishonest."

"God's anger was kindled because he went; and the angel of the Lord stood in the way for an adversary against him." Angels are still adversaries to sin. They are friends to the Christian, but enemies to the sinner. Men still come face to face with angels on the pathways of sin and shame. They are often stopped in their mad course, and like Balaam, they do not understand. Plans, pleasure, and business come to a standstill, and the ungodly wonder why.

"The ass saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand." Balaam boasted of being "the man whose eyes are open" (Numbers 24:3); yet he could not see as well as the beast could. He was too absorbed in schemes for wealth and glory to see the angel with the flaming sword, like the cherubim at the gate of faraway Eden.

Seeing the divine messenger, "The ass turned aside out of the way, and went into the field." In his anger, "Balaam smote the ass, to turn her into the way." When the animal turned aside, the prophet should have taken the hint, and returned home. If he had not been out of the way, his steed would not have turned out of the way. How many a man today, in a fit of anger, curses the tools he is using, or scolds his own innocent children.

With some difficulty, Balaam beat the poor animal back into the road again. But soon "the angel of the Lord stood in a path of the vineyards, a wall being on this side, and a wall on that side." The startled animal, on seeing the angel, "thrust herself unto the wall, and crushed Balaam's foot against the wall. And he smote her again."

Finally the angel removed to a place so very narrow that there was no way of passing him. He "stood in a narrow place, where was no way to turn either to the right hand or to the left." As the poor beast saw the angel, now in a threatening attitude, "she fell down under Balaam." With unbridled rage, "he smote the ass with a staff." If she had not fallen down, the angel would have destroyed the angry prophet then and there.

As Balaam was beating the animal in a most unmerciful manner, the Lord gave it the faculty of speech. "And the Lord opened the mouth of the ass, and she said unto Balaam!, What have I done unto thee, that thou has smitten me these three times?" "The dumb ass speaking with man's voice forbade the madness of the prophet." 2 Peter 2:16. Balaam's madness had turned him into a beast; so why should not one beast teach another?

Men are often rebuked by dumb creatures. Lowing oxen and bleating sheep told Samuel of Saul's

Celestial Visitors

disobedience. 1 Samuel 15. The cock told Peter of his cowardice. Matthew 26:74. "Ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee." Job 12:7. "The ox knows his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel does not know." Isaiah 1:3. "The stork knows her appointed times; . . . but My people know not the judgment of the Lord." Jeremiah 8:7. "Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise." Proverbs 6:6.

So the talking beast undertook to teach Balaam. God was about to restrain the tongue of the prophet, but He loosened the tongue of the animal. It was an efficient teacher for a man who refused to be taught of God. It was soon discovered that a dull ass was more than a match for a worldly-wise man. Her instinct was better than his reason. The man became angry, but the mule did not.

Balaam, in his fury, answered the beast as he would have answered an intelligent being. "Because thou has mocked me." He was not even surprised when the animal spoke with a human voice, while he was beating it. Continuing, he exclaimed, "I would there were a sword in mine hand, for now would I kill thee." just as if that would make matters any better. He was rebuked, but not checked, in his wicked course.

The beast replied to the prophet, "Am not I your ass, upon which thou has ridden ever since I was your unto this day? was I ever wont to do so unto thee?" To which he was compelled to reply, "Nay." Balaam could not say to his Master what the beast had said to him. What he needed was a renovation of heart and a reformation of life. But he was too angry to give thought to either.

While the prophet was thus conversing with the beast, "the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand." When the Lord opened the ass's mouth, He opened Balaam's eyes. Terrified at sight of the angel with drawn sword, "he bowed down his head, and fell flat on his face."

The ass had fallen under Balaam. Now Balaam fell before the angel. As he lay prostrate on his face, the "angel of the Lord said unto him, Wherefore has thou smitten your ass these three times? behold, I went out to withstand thee, because thy way is perverse before me: and the ass saw me, and turned from me these three times: unless she had turned from me, surely now also I had slain thee, and saved her alive."

When Balaam beheld the messenger of God, he exclaimed in terror, "I have sinned; for I knew not that thou stood in the way against me: now therefore, if it displease thee, I will get me back again." Balaam knew that his journey was displeasing to God, even before he had seen the angel. So why this statement? Since he evidently could not go forward, he was willing to go back.

In reply, the angel said to Balaam, "Go with the men: but only the word that I shall speak unto thee, that thou shall speak." So he went. As Balaam and the princes approached Moab, Balak "went out to meet him" to the borders of his dominion, and took him to his capital. Balaam remained as the honored guest of Balak overnight.

The next morning the king of Moab took the prophet of Mesopotamia to "the high places of Baal," to Pisgah, and to Peor. At each of these places seven altars were built. But each time Balaam tried to curse Israel, he blessed them instead, speaking in strains of eloquence never excelled in all the Bible. Thus the master of enchantment and divination found that "there is no enchantment against Jacob, neither is there any divination against Israel."

Vexed and disappointed at not being allowed to curse Israel, Balaam determined to accomplish his purpose toward them by another method. This he did by advising the Moabites and Midianites to send lewd women into the camp of Israel. And, as a result, God's people were led into an awful sin, until thousands fell under the judgments of the Almighty. In losing their purity, they soon lost their safety.

Later, in a battle against the Midianites, the quick thrust of a warrior's sharp sword, ended the life of the wicked prophet of the hills. (See Num. 31:84 He fell, fighting on the side of God's enemies. Thus he died, ungloriously, stigmatized as an evil man. (See 2 Peter 2:15-16.) His only counterpart in all the Scriptures is Judas. What Judas was among the disciples of the New Testament, Balaam was among the prophets of the Old Testament.

Thus the wicked prophet of Mesopotamia flashed across the page of Scriptural history for a moment, like a meteor, and then went out into utter darkness. It is a most melancholy history of a very sinful man.

Dishonored, ruined, unloved by either Israel or Moab, he fell into a nameless grave. Three times the angel blocked his way, three times he smote the beast on which he rode, and three times he vainly tried to curse Israel. Thus the heavy curtain drops forever upon a very strange life, and puts an end to the mad prophet from "the mountains of the east."

Celestial Visitors

14. At the Death of Moses

Numbers 27:12-14; Deuteronomy 3:25-27; 32:48-52; 34:1-8

AN AGED LEADER, stalwart and bronzed, with eyes undimmed, stood before his people. His hair was white with age, but his form was erect and rugged, and his face was illumined with a holy light. The old prophet was addressing an immense, grief-stricken throng, to bid them a last, lingering, and loving farewell. Never again, this side of eternity, would he and they meet.

Moses, the aged servant of God, ended his farewell talk to the children of Israel, turned slowly from his long-used tent, and walked away. He would need this shelter no more. Joshua might have it now. God had superannuated him, and hereafter another would fill his place. Passing along the serried ranks of the multitude, he made his way sadly out of the camp, across the narrow valley, and on toward the mountains.

Moses had often left the camp when called into communion with God. But this was a new and mysterious errand. He was now going away to resign his life into the hands of his Creator. God had said to him, "Get thee up unto Mount Nebo and die in the mount whither thou goes." Moses knew he was to die alone. No earthly friend, or loved one, would be permitted to minister to him in his last hour.

As he left the camp, men and women with bated breath and choked voices, whispered, "He is going! He is going!" Moses was used to going up the mountains with God. But he never before had been on this sort of mission. Sad, silent, and alone, he made his way slowly up the mountainside. Up! Up! Up! he went, every step taking him farther and farther away from those he dearly loved.

Did the rugged old prophet pause a moment upon the slope, and turn and look below for the last time? What thoughts surged through his mind as he toiled upward? Did the aged servant of God, standing on the frontiers of the Promised Land, utter a final, fervent prayer in behalf of his people? Did he wave them a last farewell, with the hand that had smitten the rock once too many times? We do not know.

God only knew what the mighty lawgiver suffered as he went alone up into the mountain mists. He was leaving his lifework, literally tearing himself away. There is something inexpressibly solemn and heart rending about it all. But he bravely ascended the hills to die amid the barren solitude of old Mount Nebo. He had become so used to obeying God, that even the command to die was not opposed.

The old patriarch had earnestly pleaded with God, "I pray Thee, let me go over, and see the good land that is beyond Jordan." It was the goal of forty years' wandering, and now for the second time, it was within his sight. He had been eighty long, weary years a pilgrim without a home, and it was only natural that the aged man should want a place of rest and retirement. How painful for Moses to miss the long-coveted prize when his hand was about to seize it! The cup of supreme happiness was to be dashed from his grasp just as it had reached his lips. For Israel's sake he had left a principedom in Egypt long ago, and now for Israel's sake he was to lose his home in fair Palestine.

The aged patriarch's heart almost broke under the terrible thought. Only the turbid waves of Jordan separated him from supreme bliss. Across its banks lay fair Canaan, the goal of a lifetime. A few miles onward, and his weary feet would touch the fertile soil of the Promised Land. After all, who among the vast army of Israel was more fit to lead the people into Canaan than Moses?

In answer to the plea of Moses to enter Canaan, God said, "Let it suffice thee; speak no more unto Me of this matter." This was Moses' hardest lesson. For a moment his old heart bent under the tremendous load. It was a fearful weight for one whose life had extended away beyond the century mark. But one sin had cost Adam Paradise, and one sin was to cost Moses Canaan.

This was the last stroke of God's chisel, needed to complete one of the most remarkable and beautiful characters recorded in Holy Writ. But we do not hear a single complaint from the grand old man. This gigantic figure of the Old Testament gracefully bowed to the mandate of Jehovah. Whether he should die on Mount Nebo's heights now, or on Zion's hills a little later, was left to One whom he had learned to trust.

So "Moses went up unto the mountain of Nebo, to the top of Pisgah." Eagerly, as a youth, he now climbed to the summit for the glorious vision soon to burst into view. As the aged leader, lawgiver, and prophet seated himself on some projecting ledge or huge boulder, "The Lord showed him all the land." And what a glorious vision it was!

His eyes had not yet grown dim, nor was his strength abated. Perchance the Lord gave added power to the old eyes. No human mind today can grasp the interest Moses had in the Promised Land, as he

Celestial Visitors

viewed it from Pisgah's lonely heights. It was to be his last look upon the fair land, before he should die. This spot was to mark the close of one of the most remarkable careers in the Bible.

As Jehovah rolled away the mists and clouds that might have shrouded the fair land from the view of His faithful servant, the aged man looked outward and onward upon a vision of glorious beauty and loveliness. Far away on the west lay the blue waters of the Great Sea; on the north was lonely Mt. Hermon; to the east was Moab; and away south stretched the desert of his long and toilsome wanderings.

A panoramic view of the Land of Promise was spread out before his wondering gaze. Not as it was then, but as it would become with the blessing of God upon it. It looked like a veritable Eden to the old man, weary with years of toil and hardship. There were beautiful mountains, verdant hills, fruitful valleys, and rich plains, with waving fields of ripening grain.

He saw hills, radiant with eternal light. There stood the Holy City, Jerusalem, the queen of all the earth, with the temple in the midst. Dear reader, if you would see the fair land, you must in a spiritual sense climb to Pisgah's lonely heights as Moses did. Elevation will surely bring a revelation.

Moses was permitted to look down the stream of time, and see the birth of Christ, His work, crucifixion, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension, and to behold the going forth of the disciples. He saw the light of the gospel shining on every land and sea. With undimmed eyes he saw the second advent of Christ, to gather His people to the fair land beyond the sky.

Still another scene opened before his wondering gaze. He saw the earth freed from the curse of sin, fairer than the Land of Promise. There stood the city, whose builder and maker is God. He was permitted to see the white-robed throngs with golden harps, and to hear his own song blended with the song of the Lamb. He saw the gates of pearl, the streets of gold, and the tree of life on the verdant banks of the eternal river, and his old heart became homesick.

Presently this glorious scene faded slowly away. The misty veil of obscurity covered the fair, faraway land. Once more the eyes of Moses rested upon the beautiful Land of Promise, spread again in gorgeous beauty before him. His eyes, undimmed by a century of looking for this very thing, literally reveled in the glorious land lying in the valley of the Jordan.

Now the leader of Israel took one long, last, lingering look at Canaan. As the evening shades deepened on the mountaintop, the beautiful land grew dim in the sheltering mists of solitude. As the vision melted away, God drew nearer still. The Lord had said to him, "Get thee up, and die." And now the final moment had come, when the aged -lawgiver should yield willing obedience to the last command of the One he had loved for more than a century.

Moses had lived alone with God, and now he was to die alone with God. Jehovah made the death of His aged servant like the calm setting of the sun at the close of a long, bright day. When his work was done, the Lord sent His tired servant to bed and to sleep, for a little while.

The brawny yet tender hands that had received the law from God on Sinai, were folded across his breast. The undimmed eyes, that had seen the glory of the Lord, were tenderly shut by a gentle touch. The lips that had talked with the Creator were closed, to stammer no more. The deep wrinkles were smoothed from the old face that had shone with the glory of the Lord. God, who had taken charge of his birth, was now directing in his death.

His body was not left for the winds of the mountains to gradually cover with dust. God prepared a lonely grave among the hills overlooking Canaan. "And He buried him in a valley in the land of Moab." He had lived on the heights, and must not be buried on the plain. No man ever had a more wonderful burial. None other like it is recorded in the Bible. And none other would have been a fitting interment for the grand old man.

Angels of God buried Moses, and God hid his grave with the sheltering veil of secrecy. Holy Writ says, "No man knows of his sepulcher unto this day." It is old Mount Nebo's mystery. But the lonely grave among the hills was in safekeeping. The angels from the Wonderland, who had buried him, were commissioned to watch over the body of the great commander. O lonely shepherd, mighty lawgiver, noble leader, battle scarred warrior, we leave thee to a little sleep on Nebo's lonely heights!

15. Under the Oaks of Ophrah

Judges 6:1-35

Celestial Visitors

GOD'S PEOPLE were in trouble. Their fertile land had become almost depopulated. Their homes were there, but no children played about them. Their fields bore no crops, their pastures fed no cattle, and no sheep grazed on hill or in dale. Instead of fields of waving grain and fruitful vineyards, there were scenes of utter desolation. Carpenters had deserted their benches, and the blacksmith's hammer and forge were unused. Fields were unplowed, and orchards were sorely neglected.

What was the cause of this dreadful condition of God's people? Mainly the swarming in of enemies from the east, across the Jordan, and their spreading, like grasshoppers over Israel's rightful possessions. These enemies came not with a regimental army headed by an experienced leader, but as bands of robbers, in small and large groups, to pillage and plunder. Some went in and out too quickly for detection. Other pitched their tents right in the Promised Land, and lived by plain spoliation. Like a devouring plague they spread over the country from the river Jordan to the Philistine plain.

Their plundering continued until almost the whole country was abandoned by the Lord's people. Most of them had fled from their homes, and sought refuge in the surrounding hills. They "made them the dens which are in the mountains, and caves, and strongholds." These were used as temporary homes. Israel was left in comparative security while they sallied forth to sow and to cultivate. But at reaping time, the marauders came and drove them away, and by force took the fruits of their labor.

The actual cause of Israel's condition was that they "did evil in the sight of the Lord: and the Lord delivered them into the hand of Midian seven years." Thus for seven long, weary years their bondage and misery continued, their very distress caused by their own repeated sins. Israel was indeed in a lamentable condition. Their altars had been torn down, and idols were on every hill. These hitherto- God-fearing sons of Jacob had become worshipers of Baal and Ashtaroth.

At last "Israel was greatly impoverished because of the Midianites; and the children of Israel cried unto the Lord." They had been crying unto Baal, but had received no help from him. Not until all other help had failed did they seek the Lord. And even until this day, "man's extremity is God's opportunity." The Lord, in mercy, sometimes palsies the hand to make it loosen its grasp on earthly things.

Afflictions are often sent because of sin. The all wise Father has sometimes to put a thorn in the nest, in order to make us take to wings. He puts men on their backs that they may see upward the better. A heavy heart is often the only thing that will give weight to character. Israel must find that it would lighten the stroke to draw near Him that wielded the rod of chastisement. They had yielded to Satan with full pockets. They were now willing to seek God when biting hunger gnawed at their vitals.

When, in their extremity, they cried unto God, "the Lord sent a prophet unto the children of Israel." This prophet (unnamed) went from tribe to tribe and from city to city, delivering the message of God to His back sliding people. Perhaps with a rock for a pulpit and a convenient vale for an audience chamber, this prophet of God told Israel that sin was the cause of their sorrow, and called them to repentance. Great crowds crept from their hiding places in the rocks to hear him.

Nor was his preaching in vain. Tears coursed down the furrows of famished cheeks' People turned to the Lord. Light began to appear amid the moral darkness. As the gloom lifted, the bright star of hope was again seen. Their obscure homes in dens and caves became places of prayer and confession. Penitence must precede peace, and pardon must go before prosperity. When they surrendered to God, He provided a plan for their deliverance.

The time had come. The darkest hour had passed. Heaven's gate was thrown open, and an angel, following the prophet, was sent earthward to raise up a deliverer. Some mighty man, fearless and true, with the power of God upon him, was to be found and set apart for this great work. It was an extraordinary crisis, and it demanded an extraordinary leader. And the Lord had been preparing just such a man for them.

As the angel winged his way to earth, the curtain rose on a scene in humble life. A simple husbandman was caring for his pittance of grain on the mountain farm of Abiezer. '(Gideon threshed wheat by the wine press, to hide it from the Midianites. The wine press, not being used at this season of the year, afforded a good hiding place. Evidently he was beating the wheat out by hand, as there was not a sufficient amount to justify the use of oxen.

Gideon was busy when the angel came. God calls busy men today, but Satan calls idle men. Busy days should be God's days, but man's idle days usually are the devil's busy ones. The Bible promises no loaves to the loafer. The same God who told men how to spend the seventh day, also told them how to spend the other six days. Oh, the easy sin of doing nothing! Even a child can let the fire go out.

While Gideon worked on, "there came an angel of the Lord, and sat under an oak which was in Ophrah." Gideon looked up and saw the angel. He had been meditating on the sad condition of his people, and his very soul longed for deliverance. Seven years had been a long, dreary time to a courageous and

Celestial Visitors

freedom-loving man. In silence and solitude he had pondered, prayed, and prepared.

The angel accosted him with respect, "The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valor." Doubtless he had observed how the son of Joash had threshed his wheat with all his might. Under God, would he not thresh the Midianites in the same way? He was a man of a brave, active spirit, though buried in obscurity. Being faithful in small things, he could safely be made ruler over larger things.

Gideon's answer to the angel expressed the deepest disappointment. He looked about him on the desolation of his country. At that very moment he was in terror lest the Midianites should appear before he got his bit of wheat threshed and hidden away. "Gideon said unto him, O my Lord, if the Lord be with us, why then is all this befallen us? and where be all His miracles which our fathers told us of?"

Observe that the angel said, "The Lord is with thee." But Gideon, putting himself with the thousands of Israel, says, "If the Lord be with us." He, like a true leader, identifies himself with his countrymen. Gideon flung down his flail, and said, "If the Lord were with us, do you think I would be skulking here by this wine press? Would my fellows be cowering before the Midianites?" The angel listened patiently to his argument. He knew that Gideon was wrong in blaming God, but right in refusing a religion that had lost its power.

Then the "Lord looked upon him." And what a look it was! He looked him clear out of his discouragement, and into an undaunted bravery. He verily looked might into him, for he did not have such bravery before. God's look was Gideon's commission. With it came wisdom, valor, and skill. It darted new life into his breast, and kindled a hope that he had not felt before. Gideon had just been hiding from those who might look on him.

When the Lord looked on Gideon, knowing his heart, He said, "Go in this thy might." In the noble spirit that would not tolerate the degradation of his chosen people, he was to go and do something heroic. He had been protesting against idolatry, now he was bidden to act in opposition to it. He had been thinking of deliverance, and the angel told him how to bring it about. He was to thresh Midian with the might he used in threshing wheat.

Gideon might have said, "What, go in all this weakness?" "No," the Lord made answer, "go in this thy might." Gideon did not really know his own might, for it had never been tried. Continuing, the Lord said "Thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: have not I sent thee?"

Being a humble, modest man, Gideon was overwhelmed with the magnitude of the task set before him. It looked hopeless. Speaking from his heart he said to the angel, "O my Lord, wherewith shall I save Israel? behold, my family is poor in Manasseh and I am the least in my father's house." Very few men will thrust honor aside like this. But God can do great things by those who are little in their own eyes.

Many a great soul toils on in secret, unknown to men or fame. Earth has no page for such names in gold. But the angels of God record these names in the Lamb's book of life. John preached himself down when he preached Jesus up. When Paul was a Pharisee, he thought himself blameless; but when he became a Christian, he felt himself the "chief of sinners." Better be a hod carrier, and help to build a temple for God, than to be a skilled architect, and build a palace only for self.

Gideon's objection was soon answered by the promise, "Surely I will be with thee, and thou shalt smite the Midianites as one man." Not only the Lord's presence, but the Lord's deliverance was assured. God will make up all the deficiencies of courage and strength to the man who has His presence with him. Here was Gideon's help, and here is ours also.

Gideon desired to have his faith strengthened for this great enterprise. Hence he said, "If now I have found grace in thy sight, then show me a sign that thou talked with me." His faith staggered at the promise. Continuing, he said, "Depart not hence, I pray thee, until I come unto thee, and bring forth my present, and set it before thee." Gideon felt himself too poor to be a general, but not too poor to be hospitable.

In reply to his request, the angel said, "I will tarry until thou come again." Thus the angel agreed to remain and have dinner with him. As yet, Gideon thought his august visitor was only a prophet or some great man. So the angel patiently waited until Gideon returned with the food. This evidently took no little time. Gideon did not ask him to his father's house, neither did he send a servant for the food. He desired to be alone with the stranger.

"Gideon went in, and made ready a kid, and unleavened cakes of an ephah of flour: the flesh he put in a basket, and he put the broth in a pot, and brought it out unto him under the oak, and presented it." He had only a small amount of grain; yet he was willing to share even that. He called it a present, thus leaving it either as food, or as an offering. Whatever the stranger did with it would prove whether he was a man or an angel of God.

Celestial Visitors

“And the angel of God said unto him, Take the flesh and the unleavened cakes, and lay them upon this rock and pour out the broth. And he did so.” This offering was a part of Gideon’s living. Have you placed your living upon the rock? If so, you surely will live well. If not, you surely will live ill.

“Then the angel of the Lord put forth the end of the staff that was in his hand, and touched the flesh and the unleavened cakes; and there rose up fire out of the rock, and consumed the flesh and the unleavened cakes.” The angel did not strike the rock, but gently touched it with the end of his staff. “Then the angel of the Lord departed out of his sight.” He was soon gone, but he left the very footprints of God upon Gideon’s soul.

“When Gideon perceived that he was an angel of the Lord, he said, Alas, O Lord God! For because I have seen an angel of the Lord face to face.” His courage seemed to fail him. But if he was to trouble the enemy, he must not be troubled. So the Lord said unto him, “Peace be unto thee; fear not: thou shalt not die.” The Lord had come to employ him, not to destroy him. He was going to live, and deliver Israel out of the hands of the Midianites.

Peace was what Gideon wanted most of all. He wanted to plow and sow and reap in peace. But now he was asked to fight for peace. And peace came to his heart when the words entered his ears. So he “built an altar there unto the Lord, and called it Jehovah-Shalom,” which means, “The Lord send peace.” Before he went to war, his prayer was, “Lord, send peace”, and not “Lord send victory.” When he had peace, by faith he had the victory.

“It came to pass that same night, that the Lord said unto him, Take thy father’s young bullock, even the second bullock [Joash had offered the first, or the best one, to Baal] and throw down the altar of Baal that thy father hath, and cut down the grove that is by it.” The first thing to be done was to remove the occasion of sin.

Gideon’s father evidently had an altar to Baal in his yard, and the young hero was to destroy it. He was not to spare it as a fine piece of workmanship, neither because it was his father’s. His orders were to begin the reform in his father’s house. The deliverer was one of the sons of a man who was a ringleader in Baal worship. Gideon was to save his people from their sins first, and then save them from their enemies.

He was to cut down even the grove in which the altar to Baal stood. The wood of Baal’s grove was to be used in God’s sacrifice. God’s command was: “Build an altar unto the Lord thy God upon the top of this rock, in the ordered place, and take the second bullock, and offer a burnt sacrifice with the wood of the grove which thou shall cut down.”

Gideon was not to destroy only, but to build up. He was to tear down one altar, and then erect another. Down with Baal, and up with God! Down with Ashtaroth, and up with Jehovah! The world is full of people who tear down, but there are only a few who build up. Destruction is so much easier than construction. He was not to build God’s altar where Baal’s altar had stood. But it was to be erected on “the top of this rock,” at the place where the angel had met him.

The son of Joash began the work of destruction that very night. “Then Gideon took ten men of his servants, and did as the Lord had said unto him.” He could depend on his servants better than he could on his own kin. They would not bow to Baal, nor would they hesitate to tear down his altar. They had caught Gideon’s spirit and zeal. To avoid resistance from “his father’s household, and the men of the city,” he chose to do his work at night.

The ax was laid at the root of the tree. It would not do for him to compromise now; so he and his servants wielded the sledge hammer and ax unsparingly. How many of his own people had been ruined under the foliage of these very same trees! Family ties did not deter him from his good work. Some people think they can reform the whole world, and yet they have a farm gate that will not stay on its hinges. He who wants to mend the universe, must mend the units first.

“When the men of the city arose early in the morning, behold, the altar of Baal was cast down, and the grove was cut down that was by it, and the second bullock was offered upon the altar that was built. And they said one to another, Who hath done this thing? And when they inquired and asked, they said, Gideon the son of Joash hath done this thing.” Gideon was known by all to be against the worship of Baal.

“Then the men of the city said unto Joash, Bring out thy son, that he may die.” But Joash quieted the mob, and said, “Will you plead for Baal? Will you save him? he that will plead for him, let him be put to death while it is yet morning.” Joash was one of the chief men of the city, and his plain words soon brought quietness.

Joash must have been secretly influenced by his son’s life and teaching, and Gideon’s act that night had brought a decision. Joash had ceased overnight to be an idolater. He had loved Baal, but he loved Gideon more. How many fathers today might be saved, if only their sons were Gideons! But sons must first

Celestial Visitors

sweep before their own doors, before they can have Gideon's influence.

Joash wisely continued, "If he [Baal] be a god, let him plead for himself, because one hath cast down his altar." In other words, if Baal were a god, he could plead for himself, and if he were not a god, why should they plead for him? Wise reasoning! By the same rule one may judge infidelity, evolution, and atheism. Having done no good in the world, they are not missed when they fall.

Heaven's call, "Thou mighty man of valor," was like a spark on dry gunpowder in Gideon's life. He leaped to his feet, cast aside his flail, seized a trumpet, and called his countrymen to arms. He blew such a blast that it fairly woke the echoes on the distant hills, and aroused the slumbering inhabitants of Abiezer. They now crowded around the man whom but yesterday they would have torn in pieces.

Eager men vied with each other in answering the summons of this new hero of the hour. Gideon's heart beat fast with the new experience. He humbly felt that he was the right man in the right place. The Spirit of the Lord clothed him as with a garment. Hope beat high in every heart. The people were encouraged with the prospect of immediate deliverance.

The market place of Ophrah: was soon crowded with men anxious to fight the Midianites. All ordinary business was suspended. Public buildings were vacated. The ring of the anvil and the song of the grindstone had given place to the peal of the trumpet. Gideon, the tree faller, was their leader. Now, once for all, they must rid the country of the common enemy, and break the yoke of oppression that had been upon their necks for seven long years.

Heralds were dispatched to his own tribe of Manasseh, and they quickly gathered to him. Bands of stalwart shepherds and woodcutters from the mountains of Lebanon willingly responded to the call. Crews of hardy sailors from the distant coasts of Asher volunteered. A long line of fishermen from faraway Zebulun and Naphtali left their boats and nets on the Sea of Galilee, and came streaming over the hills to join their fellow tribesmen. The ranks of Gideon kept swelling until he had an army numbering thirty-two thousand men. But they were too many for God's purpose, and by divine direction they were finally reduced to three hundred.

With three hundred dauntless men carrying lamps, pitchers, and trumpets, Gideon smote the Midianites hip and thigh, "so that they lifted up their heads no more. And the country was in quietness forty years in the days of Gideon." He died, "in a good old age, and was buried in the sepulcher of Joash his father, in Ophrah of the Abiezrites." Farewell, thou mighty man of valor, whose name is forever enrolled in the Scriptures among the heroes and the faithful!

16. In the Fields of Zorah

Judges 13:2-25

Up in the Shephelah Hills about fifteen miles west of Jerusalem, lay the little town of Zorah. It was a Danite town, between Dan and Judah, and near the Philistine border. It was located up against a conical hill, and means "A place of hornets." It had been assigned to Dan, and was a suitable border fortress.

The post was a sort of buffer against the Philistines at Timnath, three miles away. Near this little village lived a Danite by the name of Manoah. His wife, a godly woman, was a timely helpmeet for him. Amid the widespread apostasy in Israel, these faithful worshipers continued to plead with God for deliverance from the Philistines. Their home was one of the few that remained true to Jehovah. But there seemed to be no answer to their prayers. Year after year the power of the foe pressed more heavily upon Israel. Yet God in His providence was preparing help for them, and soon a deliverer would be sent.

The name Dan means judgment. When Dan was born to Rachel's handmaid, she said, "God hath judged me? And hath given me a son: therefore she called his name Dan." Genesis 30:6. The margin gives "Judging." It was probably with reference to a judge that dying Jacob foretold, "Dan shall judge his people, as one of the tribes of Israel." Genesis 49:16. The lot of Dan lay next to the country of the Philistines, and therefore one of that tribe would be best fitted to put a bridle upon them.

Manoah and his good wife belonged to the tribe of Dan. They had long been childless. In Israel a childless home was considered to be resting under the displeasure of God. Manoah's wife pondered,

Celestial Visitors

prayed, and pleaded. In the home and out, by the fireside and in the field, she watched, waited, and worshiped. Surely God would hear her plea and give her a son. Over and over again she had thought how she would dedicate him to God, and how faithfully she would instruct him in the ways of the Lord. Her fervent prayers moved heaven, and the longed-for son was eventually sent.

One day, while she was out in the field alone, “the angel of the Lord appeared unto the woman.” He brought the glad tidings that she should have a son. It was not alone for the sake of the obscure Danites that this extraordinary message was sent, but for all Israel’s sake, whose deliverer he was to be. Of all the tribes of Israel, Dan was most heavily oppressed by the Philistines. And accordingly, out of this tribe, in the providence of God, a deliverer should come.

Gently approaching Manoah’s wife, the angel said, “Behold now, thou art barren but thou shall conceive, and bear a son.” His statement indicated to her that he knew about her grievance. She thought he must be a prophet. To doubly assure her that the good tidings were true, he repeated “Lo, thou shall conceive, and bear a son.

As Manoah’s wife listened and wondered, the unknown visitor continued, “Now therefore beware, I pray thee, and drink not wine nor strong drink, and eat not any unclean thing.” The mother must be subject to the laws of a Nazarite, although not under the vow of a Nazarite. As the child must have nourishment from her, both before and after birth, she was to drink no wine or strong drink, nor eat any unclean thing. The effect of prenatal influence is greater than we sometimes think. Mothers today should take good care of their bodies, the temples of the Holy Ghost.

Referring to the promised son, the heavenly messenger said, “No razor shall come on his head, for the child shall be a Nazarite unto God from the womb.” The child, being a Nazarite, was to have imposed upon him the same prohibition as that imposed upon the mother in regard to meat and drink. In addition to this rules were given that his hair should not be cut, for he was to be consecrated to God as a Nazarite from his birth. He must be strictly devoted to the Lord and an example of holiness to others.

The angel foretold the service the child should render to his country. “He shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines.” This intimated that the oppression by the Philistines should last a long time. Deliverance would not even begin to come until this child, now unborn, should grow up to manhood. And even then he would not complete the deliverance. God sometimes chooses to carry on His work slowly but surely. He knows no haste and no delay.

In a transport of joy, Manoah’s wife told her husband, “A man of God came unto me, and his countenance was like the countenance of an angel of God, very terrible: but I asked him not whence he was, neither told he me his name.” All good women tell their husbands of their joys and sorrows. The joys are then brighter and the sorrows lighter. Yoke fellows will help each other pull the heavy load up life’s long hill.

Fearful that some mistake might be made in the important work committed to him and his wife, Manoah prayed, and entreated the Lord, “O my Lord, let the man of God which Thou did send come again unto us, and teach us what we shall do unto the child that shall be born.” He believed at once the angel’s words brought to him by his wife. But he begged the Lord to send His messenger once more, to further instruct them. Like all good saints, having once heard from heaven, he wanted to hear again.

The big, vital question was, “Teach us what we shall do unto the child.” That is still an important and appropriate question for every father and mother to ask. Observe he says, “Teach us.” He was no shirker. He would gladly share with his good wife the responsibility of training the child. Some husbands, being away from home so much, never see their children except when they are asleep. The Lord is just as ready and willing today as He was in ancient times, to instruct parents in regard to child training. Reader, will you seek His counsel?

Manoah’s wife went to the field where she had seen the angel before, and waited for the answer to her husband’s prayer. Wives of today, would you do that? And husbands, do your wives have the same unbounded confidence in your prayers as Manoah’s wife had in those of her husband? When we see the strength of these Danites’ faith, we marvel not that a Samson was born unto them.

“God hearkened to the voice of Manoah; and the angel of God came again unto the woman as she sat in the field: but Manoah her husband was not with her.” God heard Manoah’s prayer, but instead of answering him, He sent the answer to his devoted wife. Probably she was stronger in faith than her husband; women so often are. The angel came to her while she was alone. It is still often true that “solitude is the mother country of the strong.”

With all joy and speed she “made haste, and ran, and showed her husband, and said unto him, Behold, the man hath appeared unto me, that came unto me the other day.” She was anxious that her

Celestial Visitors

husband see the angel. And fearing that he might soon depart, she doubtless besought the heavenly messenger to stay until she should return with her husband. And he did.

“Manoah arose, and went after his wife, and came to the man, and said unto him, Art thou the man that spoke unto the woman? And he said, I am.” They had not yet discerned that this was an angel. It is good for husband and wife to seek the Lord together. Side by side in life, side by side in death, may mean side by side in heaven.

Manoah, having returned with his wife to where the angel was waiting, welcomed the promise of a son. He said, “Now let thy words come to pass.” His anxious inquiry was, “How shall we order the child, and how shall we do unto him?”

The previous instructions given to Manoah’s wife in regard to the child, were repeated. “Of all that I said unto the woman let her beware. She may not eat of anything that comes of the vine, neither let her drink wine or strong drink, nor eat any unclean thing: all that I commanded her let her observe.” God had an important work for the child of Manoah to do; hence the habits of both mother and child were to be carefully regulated. A child is affected for good or evil by the habits of the mother.

With true hospitality, “Manoah said unto the angel of the Lord, I pray thee, let us detain thee, until we have made ready a kid for thee.” He desired to show respect and gratitude to this august stranger who had brought them the glad tidings of a son. Those who welcome God’s message will be kind to the messenger whom He sends.

But the angel told him, “Though thou detain me, I will not eat of thy bread: and if thou wilt offer a burnt offering, thou must offer it unto the Lord.” Manoah needed this instruction. His purpose was to offer the prepared food, not to the Lord, but, as he supposed, to a human messenger; “for Manoah knew not that he was an angel of the Lord.”

“Manoah said unto the angel of the Lord, What is thy name, that when thy sayings come to pass we may do thee honor?” Manoah’s question did not indicate doubt of the truth of the message brought, but a desire to become better acquainted with his majestic visitor. Possibly the child would be named for the stranger. Or they could at least send a present, to tell of the arrival of the promised son. We would do well today to covet the angelic presence.

But the angel declined to tell his name, with a sort of check on Manoah’s curiosity. He said unto him, “Why ask thou thus after my name, seeing it is secret?” When Manoah asked for instruction about rearing the child, it was readily granted; but when he asked merely to gratify human curiosity, his request was denied. God never designed to answer all the various inquiries of speculation that men ask.

The angel gave Manoah a reason for his refusal to answer his question. “It is secret,” he said. And yet, in a way, the angel did answer him. The marginal rendering gives it, “Seeing it is wonderful.” This “angel of Jehovah” was probably none other than the Lord Himself. Isaiah tells us “His name shall be called Wonderful.” Also the name of Jesus was long kept a secret to the children of men.

Manoah, though no priest or prophet, and having no permanent altar, turned his hospitality into an offering. “So Manoah took a kid with a meat offering, and offered it upon a rock unto the Lord: and the angel did wondrously; and Manoah and his wife looked on.”

Twice it is recorded that Manoah and his wife looked on. They said nothing. When the Lord is present, man should be reverent. As the devout Danite and his wife “looked on,” “when the flame went up toward heaven from off the altar the angel of the Lord ascended in the flame,” and was gone. By leaving thus, he made clear to them that he was not, as they had thought, a mere man, but indeed a messenger direct from heaven, come with the good tidings of a son. This also indicated God’s acceptance of their humble offering.

When the angel ascended to heaven, the hearts of these two humble ones ascended with him in thanksgiving and praise for the promised blessing. Yet, unlike the witnesses of Christ’s ascension from the Mount of Olives, they dared not stand gazing idly into heaven after him. “Manoah and his wife looked on it, and fell on their faces to the ground.”

Unlike men or prophets, “The angel of the Lord did no more appear to Manoah and to his wife.” This appearance was for a particular occasion. They must remember and observe what the angel had said, and not expect to hear more. When they saw he was not chained to earth as man, and when he was unharmed by the fire, “then Manoah knew that he was an angel of the Lord.” He clearly saw him to be God’s divine messenger.

It was generally believed among the ancient Jews that it meant death for any man to see God, or an angel, face to face. This opinion quite overcame Manoah’s faith for the present. He was afraid. Tremblingly Manoah said to his wife, “We shall surely die, because we have seen God.” But why should he be afraid of

Celestial Visitors

God's angel? Good angels are to help the righteous, not to hinder or distress them. But here, as is often the case, the weaker partner was the stronger believer. His wife was indeed his help meet. She had the estimable gift of understanding. But like a true wife, she let her husband have his say. What produced fear in Manoah, produced confidence in his wife. "She said unto him, If the Lord were pleased to kill us, He would not have received a burnt offering and a meat offering at our hands, neither would He have showed us all these things, nor would as at this time have told us such things as these."

Such were her sensible and masterful arguments. While Manoah feared the wrath of God, his wife saw mercy. While he feared destruction, she saw salvation. She told him there was no sign of divine wrath, no reason for divine wrath, so why should they be afraid? Had not the sacrifice which they had offered been accepted—an assurance that they would live and not die?

Thus she reasoned, and thus she strengthened her husband's wavering faith. We would do well to reason as Manoah's wife did. The divine promise to Manoah and his wife was in due time fulfilled in the birth of a son. She who had long been barren bore a son who was to fight the battles of God's people. No word of God ever fails of fulfillment, and no promise ever goes by default. God provided a cradle in the home of these humble Danites for him "who should begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines."

"The woman bare a son, and called his name Samson." The name seems to be derived from "Shemesh," which means "the sun," or "like the sun." And Samson was indeed like a little sun, invariably bright and beaming. He was full of pranks as well as strength. Nothing seemed to disturb his constant and radiant good humor. His most valiant, as well as most cruel, actions were done with a smile and a jest.

As we look at his actions for a moment in this light, we find they have a new and more interesting meaning. Out of his first great achievement he finds material for his unique riddle about the lion's carcass and the honey. He displayed his mischievousness when he "went and caught three hundred foxes, and took firebrands, and turned tail to tail, and put a firebrand in the midst between two tails. And he let them go into the standing corn of the Philistines."

He neatly outdid the shrewd Philistine watchmen when, with superhuman strength, he carried away the great doors of the gate of Gaza, posts, bar, and all. He put Delilah off with quaint devices. And his foolish enemies seemed invariably to fall into trap after trap which he laid for them. In the closing scenes of his eventful life, his captors called him forth to make sport for them. And the record is, "He made them sport."

When Samson grew, "the Spirit of the Lord began to move him at times in the camp of Dan." This camp was located near his home, "between Zorah and Eshtaol." While yet but a child, he doubtless often visited this camp. Perhaps he was a great favorite with the men stationed there. He signaled himself by some very brave actions, and probably excelled them in trials of strength. Even from childhood he doubtless felt that something was stirring his very soul.

Thus we have a brief account of Samson from the promise of the angel to his parents, to his manhood. For the present purpose we need go no farther in this most interesting story. This strong man was born at a time of great national weakness. This redoubtable Nazarite champion of Dan was a veritable Hebrew Hercules. It was a dark time with Israel when this Danite came. He had extraordinary gifts for an extraordinary work. But he was able only to cow the Philistines, and to reanimate the failing courage of the Hebrew.

Samson stands alone among all Bible characters. His life was always a parable and a riddle. He fought a whole nation, single handed and alone. He always seemed like a great volcano erupting unexpectedly, submerging his enemies in the fire of his burning zeal. He bravely dashed ahead like a war horse without bridle or rider. With the shaggy, uncut hair of a Nazarite, his seven mysterious, sweeping locks twisted together about his head, he must have presented a very striking figure. We must bid farewell to the strong man who conquered the Philistines, but who utterly failed in conquering himself.

17. On Ornan's Threshing Floor

2 Samuel 24; 1 Chronicles 21

GOD MUST SOMETIMES palsy the hand to make it let go. It was blindness that helped Milton to see. Storms sometimes drive men to the harbor. Stars appear only after the gloom falls. But, thank God, the

Celestial Visitors

darkest night that ever surrounds His children cannot put out the blessed stars of hope.

Sin is the mother of men's sorrows. Sin is deceitful, and Satan a deceiver. The devil always throws over his ugliest side some shred of an angel's garment. At first he is willing to let men follow him a long way off, but he always makes it convenient for them to catch up.

Even the great and good of earth are not exempt from the work of the cunning deceiver. David, the king of Israel, whom the Lord declared to be "a man after Mine own heart," fell into his snare more than once. But you will find no approval of sin in the history of David. When obedient, he was a man after God's own heart. When he sinned he was not until by repentance he returned again to the Lord.

Of David's sin in numbering his subjects, the Scriptures say, "Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel." He meant to do Israel harm; hence he tempted their king. If the shepherd goes astray, the bewildered sheep are at the mercy of the murderer. When rulers sin, the people suffer.

"David said to Joab Go, number Israel from Beersheba even to Dan; and bring the number of them to me." There had been kindled in his heart an ambition for worldly greatness. In order to extend his conquests, David desired to increase his army. The number revealed by a census would show a favorable contrast between the strength of Israel at the time he ascended the throne, and its strength under his rule.

Under the influence of God, David was humble and obedient. Under the influence of Satan, he became proud and rebellious. But the Lord allowed the devil to tempt him, that he might learn that his hope and strength was not in man, but in the living God. Faith in mere numbers has always been a slavery worse than the bondage of Egypt.

The people did not look with favor upon David's plan. Even Joab, captain of the army, objected. Unscrupulous warrior and clever politician that he was, he was impelled to say, "The Lord make His people a hundred times so many more as they be: but, my lord the king, are they not all my lord's servants? Why then does my lord require this thing? why will he be a cause of trespass to Israel? Nevertheless the king's word prevailed against Joab."

So the census taking proceeded. "At the end of nine months and twenty days" it was completed, except that of Levi and Benjamin. These tribes "counted he not among them: for the king's word was abominable to Joab."

"So when they had gone through all the land, they came to Jerusalem. And Joab gave up the sum of the people unto the king: and there were in Israel eight hundred thousand valiant men that drew the sword; and the men of Judah were five hundred thousand men." A total of one million, three hundred thousand fit men that could be used in time of war.

But anticipation had been sweeter than realization. "David's heart smote him after that he had numbered the people. And David said unto the Lord, I have sinned greatly." He was not sorry during the nine months required for the census. He thought he would view with satisfaction the report when it came in. But it turned to wormwood and gall in his hands.

Self-condemned, in anguish he cried, "Now, I beseech Thee, O Lord, take away the iniquity of Thy servant; for I have done very foolishly." This confession brought pardon, but David's desire was for even more than that. The cry of the now-humbled king was not only for forgiveness; he wanted God to take away even a tendency toward sin, and help him to lead his people aright. But "when David was up in the morning, the word of the Lord came unto the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, Go and say unto David, Thus said the Lord."

The message of God through the seer was, "Choose thee either three years famine; or three months to be destroyed before thy foes, while that the sword of your enemies overtakes thee. Or else three days the sword of the Lord, even the pestilence, in the land, and the angel of the Lord destroying throughout all the coasts of Israel."

Famine, war, pestilence—three years, three months, three days! What dreadful plagues, and direful numbers! Three of the most destructive evils that could befall a nation, each in itself a terrific scourge. Either punishment would greatly reduce the man power, and thus make the enumeration worthless. But God had said, "Choose thee one of them."

Continuing, the old prophet requested, "Now advise, and see what answer I shall return to Him that sent Me." There was no way of evading the issue. If he should choose war, it would place the nation at the mercy of his enemies; if famine, they would be dependent upon the corn merchants. If he chose pestilence, a terrible destruction from the Lord would be the result.

In anguish, "David said unto Gad, I am in a great strait." Sin will bring any man into straits. But the king made a wise choice when he said, "Let me fall now into the hand of the Lord; for very great are

Celestial Visitors

His mercies; but let me not fall into the hand of man.” He well knew what the latter meant.

If war should be sent, David would be better defended than his people. If he chose famine, he would be the last to hunger. But in choosing pestilence, he would be in the same danger as his people. So the stroke of God was preferred, the punishment that no human hands inflict. Anything that God sent would be better than man’s correction.

It is bad to fall out of the hand of God, but good to fall into His hand. David would bend to the hand that supports while it smites. The burden is lighter when it comes from God. Man punishes in revenge, God in mercy. He had been in the hands of Satan, and knew what that meant. Satan tempts., God tries.

“So the Lord sent pestilence upon Israel: and there fell severity thousand men.” From Dan to Beersheba went the terrible aftermath of sin. No place was exempt. Death and sorrow were everywhere in the land. David had confessed his sin before the pestilence came, but that did not prevent it.

David’s kindly heart was wrung with pity for the suffering multitudes. But he could not arrest the plague. The pestilence secretly rode on the wings of the wind. It mysteriously destroyed by the breezes men sought for cooling. They were not sensible of its presence until it was too late.

Out over the fair land of Israel went the wild wail of bereaved men, women, and children. Joab had numbered one million, three hundred thousand alive. The angel numbered seventy thousand dead-one in twenty. David had been proud of the number returned by Joab. Now God made them fewer. Seventy thousand men had been slain by the pestilence.

On the angel went, until a great cry went up from Dan to Beersheba. The plague swept through the country, and then came to the Holy City. “God sent an angel unto Jerusalem to destroy it.”

“David lifted up his eyes, and saw the angel of the Lord stand between the earth and the heaven, having a drawn sword in his hand stretched out over Jerusalem.” The king pleaded with God, “Lo, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly: but these sheep, what have they done? Let Your hand, I pray Thee, be against me, and against my father’s house.”

God heard the cry of the king, and “repented Him of the evil, and said to the angel that destroyed, It is enough, stay now your hand.” The angel sheathed his sword, and “stood by the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite.” judgment was thus halted where Ornan threshed wheat. David was told to “go up, and set up an altar unto the Lord on the threshing floor of Ornan.”

Ornan the Jebusite was a Gentile, but was now a convert to Israel. He had once been a king, or chief, and was doubtless a man of means. He still retained considerable possessions. He kindly tendered the floor to the king, without charge. But “David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver.” And never did he make a better investment. Later, “David gave to Ornan for the place six hundred shekels of gold by weight.” This included the hill about the threshing floor.

Ornan, the thrifty husbandman, had located his home and threshing floor on the summit of Mt. Moriah. The elevation afforded a beautiful prospect, and was also advantageous for bearing the chaff away as the patient oxen trod out the grain. Here it was that David built an altar and offered sacrifices, and the plague was stayed. Ornan was willing to sacrifice private interest for public good.

Mt. Moriah, where the angel had stood, where sacrifice was offered and the plague was stayed, is far famed in Bible story. Here was once the thicket where the ram was caught which Abraham offered in place of the son of promise. On this very spot Solomon later erected the glorious temple. Here gleamed golden gate, tower and pinnacle. Here were terraced hills and stately palaces, the massive bulwarks of Jerusalem, Israel’s fair capital.

18. Under the Juniper Tree

1 Kings 17-19; 2 Kings 2

NEARLY THREE THOUSAND YEARS ago a mountaineer walked out of Tishbeh, an obscure mountain hamlet up in the wild regions of Gilead. His bare feet and head and bronzed arms had been tanned by sun and storm. With long beard falling upon his breast, locks straggling over his shoulders, and a sheepskin cloak, girt with rawhide, he presented a figure of strength and personality.

He had been inured to the life of a herdsman. He had climbed the rocky heights, and battled the mountain storms, until his frame was like iron. He had slept where the deadly serpents made their dens. The

Celestial Visitors

wild beasts were more familiar to him than were the men of his own hills. He was a man of superhuman hardiness, and his very greatness made him solitary.

This man was Elijah, the Tishbite. He feared none but God, and hated nothing but sin. He had been trained for his lifework in the solitude of Gilead. He was a prophet of fire, shining like a flaming torch amid the moral darkness that covered the land like a pall.

He was the voice of one crying in the wilderness, to rebuke sin, and press back the awful tide of evil. When he saw Israel going deeper and deeper into idolatry, he was overwhelmed with sorrow and indignation. His mountain retreat could no longer hold him. The Spirit of God moved him to enter upon the greatest and most startling mission ever committed to a prophet of God.

His very being was aflame with holy zeal. He appeared in Samaria as if he had dismounted from a chariot of the sky. His coming was like a clap of thunder on a clear day. He was the very incarnation of courage and zeal.

He suddenly appeared in wicked Ahab's court, and hurled rebuke at the very throne of the ruler. King and courtier trembled before his fearless challenge. "As the Lord God of Israel lives," he cried, "there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word." And then he disappeared as suddenly as he came. He had locked the floodgates of heaven, and taken the key with him.

Passing over his experience at the drying brook, where ravens provided bread and flesh twice each day; his sojourn with the widow of Sarepta, whose meal and oil failed not; and the miraculous raising of her son, we come to the glory-lighted summit of Mt. Carmel. Here we have the broken altar repaired, and the crucial test by the fire that shed its radiance out over mountain and valley.

As the whirling, blinding, blazing shaft of fire fell upon the water-drenched sacrifice, we hear that vast, repentant throng cry, "The Lord, He is the God; the Lord, He is the God!" We see the unrighteous prophets of Baal and of the grove slain by the brook Kishon. Here the prophet of Gilead, single handed, turned an entire nation back to God.

The rugged old man wheeled upon the abashed Ahab, and cried, "Get thee up, eat and drink; for there is a sound of abundance of rain." Rain would come now, after three long, hungry years. Then the seven times repeated, yet simple plea, "O Lord, send rain!" Elijah's attendant had seen the "little cloud out of the sea, like a man's hand," and the old mountaineer said to Ahab, "Get your chariot ready; the storm is on the way; the drouth is broken."

The monarch started amid the pelting storm, but his swift steeds were not fleetier than the feet of Elijah. Snatching up his streaming mantle, he girded it about his loins, and outstripped the chariot of the king to the entrance of Jezreel, a distance of eighteen miles. As the monarch's chariot swept inside the gate, Elijah wrapped his soaked mantle about him, and lay down upon the bare earth outside, in the drenching storm.

But Elijah had forgotten unholy Jezebel, the queen. She was absent when her prophets were slain. But when the awful news reached the palace, her indignation knew no bounds. She was like a tigress robbed of her young. Calling an attendant, she sent this message to Elijah, "So let the gods do to me if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time."

The prophet lay outside the gate sleeping when the messenger from Jezebel arrived. Wet, cold, and begrimed with mud, he had lain down in sheer exhaustion. Nature had mercifully wrapped the old Tishbite in peaceful slumber. Little did he know what experience would come to him ere another day should dawn. The messenger awoke Elijah, and delivered Jezebel's direful edict. Springing to his feet, the prophet stood, half dazed for a moment, too bewildered and stunned even to speak. As the terrible threat broke in upon his half-awakened mind, he wheeled about, and fled for his very life. Panic stricken, he plunged out into the wilderness, and away.

Over the broken hills of Samaria, up and down the stony paths he went, looking this way and that, fearing for his very life. He sped like some frightened steed, breaking away from battle. On he went along the valley, then out and down to Beersheba; "and he left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness."

The terrified old man did not dare stop for rest. Without guide or provision, he swung all day over broken hills. Through weary hours he plodded. On he strode till the sun went down and the stars came out. At last, fatigue and anguish overpowered sinewy strength. Haggard and travel worn, he sank to the sand under a low juniper tree, and sobbed aloud in sheer despair. What a picture of utter melancholy and solitude!

Under this solitary bush of the desert, the exhausted warrior, in deep anguish of soul, cried to God, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life." In the barren desert silence he could hear only the pounding

Celestial Visitors

of his own breaking heart. No sound of voice or footstep was near. The fugitive prophet, his spirit utterly crushed, desired never again to look upon the face of man.

God, not Elijah, knew when it was “enough,” and did not take him at his word. His pitying eye had followed the fleeing man every step of the way into the desert. As the shepherd tracks the wandering sheep over mountain and valley, the Lord followed Elijah, knowing it was the awful ebb tide of his life. Here the crushing waves of depression swept completely over the weary prophet of the mountains.

Gladly would the servant of the Lord have given his body to be buried beneath the drifting sand. But God understood his heart much better than he did. If he had really wanted to die, he would have remained in Jezreel, and let Jezebel kill him. There was no need of traveling a hundred miles for a lonely grave. But the Lord, loving him as much under the juniper tree as He did on Carmel, let His servant rest for a season.

The overstrain at Carmel had brought a reaction. No man can keep constantly at sublime elevation. When Elijah, tired and brokenhearted, was at the very depths, the Lord mercifully put him to sleep. It was the sleep of complete exhaustion. Perhaps the old prophet wished to die while asleep in the solitude of the hot Arabian desert, and never waken again.

God is wise in putting rest places in every life. He knew what He was about when He planned one third of our time for sleep. Sleep was vastly better for Elijah than medicine or rebuke. Seasons of depression need not unchristianize any man. But every man must sometimes have his periods of solitude. Some shade must fall across every flower bed of life.

That night the Lord sent a shining angel on an errand of mercy down into the wilderness south of Judea. This heavenly visitor presently saw a lone juniper tree, and a man underneath it fast asleep. Without waking Elijah, he kindled a fire and quickly prepared and baked a few coarse cakes. When these, and the cruse of water, found somewhere near, were placed at Elijah’s head, the angel aroused him by a gentle touch.

Perhaps the prophet had been dreaming of Jezebel, and woke in alarm. But instead of the queen’s guard, with drawn sword, he looked up into the face of the most beautiful being he had ever seen. A white robed angel stood over him, with a look infinitely kind, and a voice as sweet as the music of heaven. There was no upbraiding, reproach, or threat.

The angel said, “Arise and eat.” Thus instead of God’s taking his life, as Elijah had requested, He sent bread and water to preserve it. The mountain prophet had fled to the desert. He might starve there. But now the angel was feeding him. His hunger and thirst were great. After eagerly partaking of the simple food, he “laid him down again.” And while he slept, the angel kept watch beside the sleeping prophet.

Again, the second morning, the angel aroused him, saying, “Arise and eat.” The unkindness of men was made up for in the kindness of the angel. Elijah had been fed by the ravens at the drying brook, had eaten of the widow’s meal and oil; but never before had he tasted bread molded by angel fingers or drunk water drawn by angel hands.

The prophet went forty days in the strength of that food. At the brook he had had bread and flesh. Now, as he neared translation, his diet was bread and water. He did not continue to live under the juniper tree. But he went on, heard the voice of God, and had his loneliness removed by learning of seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal.

We come now to that sublime scene, the translation of this saint of God. He was taken up in a whirlwind. God sent down a chariot of the sky for this Melchizedek of the prophets, the Betelgeuse of the devotional sky. The last we see of the grand old man, he is standing in the chariot drawn by chargers harnessed in glory. Riding on into the heavens, he was soon swept through the gates into the Paradise of God.

19. On the Assyrian Battlefield

2 Kings 19; 2 Chronicles 32:1-23; Isaiah 36,37

SENNACHERIB, the son of Sargon, was doubtless the most magnificent of all Assyrian monarchs. He was a typical warrior-king, victorious in battle from Babylon to Egypt. This illustrious and dreaded world conqueror determined to rear a boundless monarchy for himself. He was rapacious and cruel, sometimes ruthlessly blinding his captives with the spear; or taking alive a whole city, and

Celestial Visitors

unmercifully slaughtering the inhabitants.

The Assyrian Empire stretched from the Armenian mountains and the Caspian Sea on the north, to the Arabian Desert and Upper Egypt on the south, and from the Salt Desert and the Persian Gulf on the east, to the Mediterranean Sea on the west. Sennacherib made Nineveh the capital of his kingdom, and ascended the throne in 705 BC. Here he repaired the royal palace, and built a second on the mound of Nebbi Yunis, or Jonah's Tomb.

For centuries the kings of Assyria had experienced a steady career of conquest. Surrounding nations had sunk in ignominious defeat before their terrible onslaughts. The great Assyrian flood had again and again subdued tribe after tribe. Now the indomitable Sennacherib towered above them all. In prowess and intrepidity he could scarcely be surpassed. His success on the field of battle was unexcelled.

Sennacherib had the wicked and unscrupulous Rabshakeh as the general staff officer in the Assyrian army. He was the king's Bismarck, who directed in aggressive military operations. Perhaps he was either a Jewish deserter or an apostate captive from the ranks of Israel. He was evidently familiar with the Hebrew language, for he used that dialect in addressing the Jews who had thronged the wall about Jerusalem to hear his threats of vengeance. (See Isaiah 36:11-13.)

Israel's ship of state was thus endangered. The storm that menaced her was the powerful host of Assyria. Good Hezekiah had ascended the throne of Judah in the year 726 BC, at the age of twenty-five. Unlike his reckless and wicked father, Ahaz, he at once determined to do all in his power to save Judah from the fate that was overtaking the northern kingdom.

Hezekiah "trusted in the Lord God of Israel; so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor any that were before him." A decided reformation in his kingdom was sorely needed. In this crisis he proved to be a man of opportunity. On coming to the throne, he at once began to plan and execute.

He first restored the temple service, so long neglected. He appealed to the priests for cooperation. They at once began heartily the work of cleansing and sanctifying the temple. The doors were repaired and thrown open, and the sacred vessels put into place. The rulers of the city united with them and Hezekiah in divine service. Once more the temple courts resounded with praise and adoration, and the songs of David were sung with a new joy.

Then came a time of great national peril, when the land of Judah was being invaded by the hosts of Assyria. The long-expected crisis had come. The forces of Assyria, advancing from one triumph to another, appeared in Judea. The officers insolently demanded the surrender of Jerusalem. Sennacherib was sure of overcoming Hezekiah. His kingdom, he thought, could be crushed like an eggshell in his hands.

Sennacherib boasted that he was the successor of Nimrod, the mighty hunter, and that he had been victorious in a hundred battles. He had never yet heard of a god that could resist his powerful onslaughts. In a boastful and taunting letter to Hezekiah he said, "Let not thy God, in whom thou trusted, deceive thee, saying, Jerusalem shall not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria."

Assyria expected Hezekiah to surrender without any resistance, or at least to call a council of war. However, being one of the Jewish heroes, he was not so easily daunted. When the Hebrew representatives returned to Hezekiah, and told him what Rabshakeh had said, he "rent his clothes, and covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of the Lord." Even royal robes are not too good to be rent in times of peril.

Meeting this insulting message in silence, the king "sent Eliakim and Shebna to Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz." These two men had heard the blasphemous charge of Rabshakeh; therefore they were sent. "And for this cause Hezekiah the king, and the prophet Isaiah prayed and cried to heaven." It is a happy time indeed, when king and prophet join together in prayer in a time of national danger. God heard the united prayers of His servants, and promised, "I will send a blast upon him [Sennacherib], and he shall hear a rumor, and shall return to his own land." The representative of the Assyrian monarch reported to his king, who immediately wrote "letters to rail on the Lord God of Israel." It was bad enough to talk profanely against God, but to put it in writing was the very height of mockery and insult.

When the king of Judah received the taunting letter, he took it into the temple "and spread it before the Lord, and prayed." A king in prayer! O that it might be so now! It would be sheer madness for one little kingdom to stand out against the great Assyrian army. But Sennacherib was not fighting against Hezekiah, as he thought, but against Jehovah.

"O Lord our God, I beseech Thee, save Thou us out of his hand," was the distressed cry. "We do not say how, but save us! Here is the letter, Lord, written down. It is against Thee, and not us." His prayer was not general, but specific, and had much to do with saving his beloved people. One poor man's cry set

Celestial Visitors

in motion tremendous powers, and brought about the downfall of the greatest of all Assyrian kings.

Dear reader, do you in prayer spread your troubles before the Lord, as the king of Judah did? Tell Him the details. Be specific. Whether it is the poison of a bee sting, or a cobra's bite, pray about it. Or if it is a letter that hurts the heart, spread it before the Lord ere you answer it. Jehovah answered Sennacherib's letter to Hezekiah, and added a terrible postscript later. Let Him dictate your correspondence, and He will do it well.

The Lord said of Sennacherib, "I know thy abode, and thy rage against Me." The king's anger had reached heaven, and God would defend the Holy City. "Thus said the Lord concerning the king. He shall not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there." Hezekiah need do no fighting. Jehovah could do it so much better. Even yet, the best way to baffle an enemy is to go to God and tell Him about your trouble.

Said the Lord, "I will put My hook in thy nose, and My bridle in thy lips, and I will turn thee back by the way which thou came." My hook, My bridle. God can use hook and bridle, as for an ox or a horse, upon the worst enemy that ever harassed His people. Let Him do this for you.

That very night deliverance came. Wickedness was uncontrolled in the Assyrian camp. Confident of their prey, they gave loose rein to ribaldry and rude jesting. Mockery of the unprotected Hebrews resounded in every quarter. They knew that Rabshakeh's threats and Sennacherib's letter had thrown the kingdom of Judah into a crushing terror. But it was to be a battle between unbelief and faith, and faith always wins.

In the dead of night, while the Assyrians were sleeping and the Jews were praying, a shining angel was sent into the Assyrian camp with a mighty sword. No one beheld his approach or heard his steps, or observed his departure. He came into the camp, passed through, and was gone like a breath. But the breath of nearly two hundred thousand soldiers went out with him. The Targum says, "The word of the Lord sent Gabriel to slay the Assyrians."

The terrible blow was struck in the night. One hundred eighty-five thousand picked men, the pride of Assyria, lay dead upon the battlefield. A whole army swept off the earth in a moment, and in silence, annihilated between Egypt and Palestine! The angel had made short work of Sennacherib's powerful army, which was not looking for Israel to receive such reinforcement.

In the morning the once mighty sovereign had only a camp of dead men. Where now is the army of terror he relied upon? The hosts lay like the leaves of autumn after a strong wind. Tents were silent, banners trailed in the dust, and trumpets were not blown. Justice will not always sleep, and angels may minister evil as well as good. The camp was broken up, and the king fled, lest the angel should also slay him.

Humiliated, defeated, and conquered, the arrogant and haughty monarch returned home, disheartened and ashamed. Instead of leading Hezekiah captive and returning laden with rich spoils, he was the gazing stock of the countries he had subdued, and a byword among his own people. With shattered army, muffled drums, and trailing banners, he was now convinced that God could fight better than men.

Sennacherib returned to Nineveh, and dwelt there twenty years. He never again ventured into battle. "It came to pass, as he was worshiping in the house of Nisroch his god, that his sons smote him with the sword." The sacred historian deems one verse sufficient to record his death. He was killed with his own weapon. The sword of the patricide did its awful work. As the bloody corpse lay before the dumb idol, it preached a ghostly sermon to the whole empire.

Hezekiah had gone to the house of his God with Sennacherib's letter, and one hundred eighty-five thousand corpses were the result. Sennacherib had gone to the house of his god with lamenting, and his corpse lay stretched before the idol as the result. Jehovah, the God of the Hebrews, had prevailed over Nisroch, the god of the Assyrians. God's honor stood vindicated, Jerusalem was secure, and the chosen people were filled with great joy.

20. In the Fiery Furnace

Daniel 3

IT WAS A GREAT DAY in old Babylon. Every one was astir early. Throngs of excited people were milling about in the broad streets. Vehicles of various kinds were jostling one another, conveying crowds of people in and out of the ponderous gates. Traffic was in a jam in the streets, and on the bridges

Celestial Visitors

across the Euphrates River. Excited crowds and agitated groups were everywhere in evidence.

For days and weeks workmen had been busy out on the beautiful plain of Dura, a short distance from the city. There were skillful stonecutters and expert masons, clever artisans and able mechanics, craftsmen, journeymen, and laborers. With hammer, mallet, and sledge, pickax, mattock, and shovel, all toiled early and late at the task in hand.

Nebuchadnezzar, the proud king of Babylon, had been given a dream some twenty years before, in which he saw a great image. Its "head was of fine gold, his breast and his arms of silver, his belly and his thighs of brass, his legs of iron, his feet part of iron and part of clay." Daniel, interpreting this dream, said to the king, "Thou art this head of gold."

As time went by, pride and prosperity caused him to forget God. He returned to idol worship with increased zeal. Taking advantage of this, the wise men of the realm proposed that he make an image similar to the one he had seen in his dream, and set it up where all could see.

Pleased with the flattering suggestion, he determined to carry it out, and to go even farther. His image should not deteriorate from gold to clay, as did the one he had seen in the dream, but should be entirely of gold. Being rich in treasure and precious metal, Nebuchadnezzar caused to be made a golden image. It was about ninety feet high and nine feet broad. Never before had the Chaldeans seen anything so resplendent and imposing.

Finally the image was finished. It was not solid gold, but evidently plated. It had not been the work of a day, but had taken much time. In the Chaldean Empire idol worship was universal. Hence it was not strange that this beautiful and almost priceless image should be consecrated as an object of adoration. This accordingly was provided for.

The day of the dedication was set, and a decree went out for "the princes, the governors, and the captains, the judges, the treasurers, the counselors, the sheriffs, and all the rulers of the provinces, to come to the dedication of the image." The high and the low, the rich and the poor, came, a vast concourse from all "people, nations, and languages."

Caravans of pilgrims came from away up along the coasts of the Black and the Caspian Sea. Others were from distant Egypt, and from across long stretches of Arabian sands. From the Persian Gulf country and the great desert, long lines of weary humanity came streaming over hill and valley. In chariots and wagons, on mule back and afoot, they arrived in vast numbers, and assembled, a mighty host, on the plain of Dura.

We can imagine that it was a beautiful day, with the sun kindling a blaze of glory over the wide plain, and cool fountains gushing and sparkling in the groves. The earth was carpeted with green. High on a royal throne, in gorgeous pomp and splendor, sat the Chaldean monarch. In the center of the mighty pageant was the colossal image, in open view of the king.

At his command the image was unveiled, and the herald cried, "To you it is commanded. . . . at what time you hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of music, you fall down and worship the golden image." All who refused should "the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace."

Immediately the plain was full of prostrate worshipers. They enjoyed the Babylonian musical concert, as men enjoy music today. The charms of stirring music allured, and the heat of the fiery furnace alarmed. Doubtless Nebuchadnezzar rubbed his hands in delight, and chuckled, "The image works. It surely unifies." It meant the deification of man, and he was the man.

But there were three stiff-kneed lads who refused to bow with the masses. Such attractions naturally appeal to most youth. With those three life was sweet, and in its prime. But the threat of the furnace was no argument to them. God's law forbade the worship of images, and that was enough. And there they stood, three young men against a whole empire.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego would rather die than desert. They had grit as well as grace, and pluck as well as piety. These three nonconformists of Babylon stood alone, erect, with faith in their hearts, God above them, and the world below. If the musical instruments had been used to praise God, they would have bowed to Him in delight. But bow to the image they would not.

Their brave, determined resolve permitted no wavering. They did not excuse themselves by bowing to the king, or the music, and not the image. Neither did they stoop halfway down, or reason that just ten minutes in a lifetime would not matter. Or say, "God forgive us this once. If we were not in Babylon, we would do differently."

Their motto was, "When in Babylon, do as Babylon ought to do." True religion cannot be changed like a garment. If I go to Salt Lake City, should I turn Mormon? Or if in India, must I be a Hindu? Or if in

Celestial Visitors

Constantinople, a Mohammedan? Man's duty to God is not determined by human law. Like the three Hebrews, we have orders from One higher than earthly kings.

Certain Chaldeans, probably the same men who had been saved from death by Daniel and his three companions, reported to the king concerning the youth who disobeyed his decree. In the bustle and hurry, Nebuchadnezzar had not observed them. The report came to him like a thunderbolt. He was a despot, in the zenith of his glory, and he acknowledged no master in the world.

In rage and frenzy, the king ordered the youth to be brought before him. He was not used to being disobeyed, but bent men's wills like frail reeds. But he had no right to compel worship. The youth were calm and unafraid. "Is it true?" he inquired. "Do you not serve my gods, nor worship the golden image which I have set up?"

He promised to have the whole ceremony repeated for their sakes, if they would only obey. "Just say it was a mistake," he added, "or that you blundered. Remember, I have educated you, appointed you to honorable positions, and have been your benefactor." He knew they never had served his gods; yet turn or burn, was the final edict, the ultimatum.

The youth were respectful, yet unflinching. They did not argue. But they would not render to Caesar the things that belonged to God. They answered, "If it be so [if this is your decision], our God whom we serve is able to deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou has set up." No words like that had ever before been heard in Babylon.

The king's wrath knew no bounds. "Full of fury," "the form of his visage was changed." Directing that the furnace be heated seven times hotter than was its wont, he commanded his mighty men to bind the three worshipers of Israel's God. The youth stood quietly while being bound. They did not cringe, or ask for time. So they were bound, and dragged away to the furnace.

Bound in their clothes, they "were cast into the midst of the burning fiery furnace," which was so "exceeding hot, the flame of the fire slew those men" that threw them in. Swirling, scorching, withering tongues of flame burst out from the mass of fire, and quickly consumed the king's mighty men.

The enraged king was watching near by. There was no human way of escape for the Hebrew youth. If God had promised deliverance to them, there would have been no test. However, a religion that costs nothing is worth no more than it costs.

From his royal seat the king fastened his eyes on the furnace. In breathless suspense he listened for screams of agony. But all was silent as the grave. The vast throng was hushed in mute amazement, and, lo, a mysterious marvel met his wondering gaze. It was the most sublime scene of which the human mind can conceive. The nobles standing near saw his face grow pale.

He started from the throne, and looking into the glowing flames, he turned to his astonished lords and asked, "Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God." The Savior had indeed come down from heaven to the help of the young Hebrews.

The king saw something supernatural about the fourth, and recognized a being divine in beauty and majesty. His lords drew near. The furnace was of large size, for the four had ample room to walk around. The flames played about them as harmless as autumn leaves. They seemed to be treading roses instead of fire. Nearing the door of the furnace, the king cried, "You servants of the most high God, come forth, and come hither."

The king and his mighty ones "saw these men, upon whose bodies the fire had no power, nor was a hair of their head singed, neither were their coats changed, nor the smell of fire had passed on them." The only things lost were the cords that bound them—that which the world had put on them. Nebuchadnezzar could put the three into the furnace, but he could not keep them there or make the fire burn them.

The now-humiliated king said, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who hath sent His angel, and delivered His servants that trusted in Him, and have changed the king's word."

As the three men came out of the furnace, they stepped over the bodies of the men who had cast them in, and the "angel" disappeared. Never again did the king try to coerce the three youth. The dedication was abandoned and the image not honored.

Dear reader, do you have a religion that the devil cannot burn? Are you willing to be different? Can you stand fire? Do you live as the three worthies did? Remember, the world is one wide plain of Dura, with many a tyrannical proclamation. Right and wrong can never be determined by the heat of fire, But if we would walk with the angel, we must be willing to tread the fire of the furnace.

Celestial Visitors

21. In Babylon's Royal Cave

Daniel 6:1-24

TWENTY-FIVE HUNDRED YEARS AGO haughty Babylon stood in all her glory, the unrivaled queen of the ancient world. With imperial palace, majestic temple, and gorgeous gardens, she presented a picture of unexcelled beauty and loveliness. With barred gates, closed bridges, turreted walls, and surrounding moat, she felt secure. But this very security emboldened the sensual Babylonians to every form of carnal pleasure.

Pleasure craft plied the clear waters of the Euphrates, or found a mooring place along its shaded shores. Lordly chariots of monarch and prince, drawn by liveried steeds, swept in grandeur through the crowded streets of this magnificent metropolis. Battle scarred warriors drove their war vehicles over stone paved streets, out through the wide gates, and on to conquest and glory.

In this voluptuous city of the plains, there lived an old prophet of God. For nearly seventy years he had stood amid the moral pollution, like a giant oak of the forest. He had seen kings enthroned and dethroned, a monarchy go down into oblivion, and another rise in its place. Yet the old man remained true as steel to the early training in righteousness brought with him into the city when he came here as a captive so long ago.

The old statesman was now prime minister of the greatest monarchy of that faraway age. He was president of the presidents, over all the realm of the king. With all the responsibilities and duties of state, the old man of iron always found time to lay aside his busy cares, and engage in prayer to God three times each day. He had a religion that flourished even in old Babylon.

See the old man as he leaves his seat in the king's court, and makes his way along crowded thoroughfares to his abode. Climbing the stairway, he goes directly to a western room. Kneeling before the opened window, he forgets the loneliness of his captivity. Straining his eyes out and across the sandy plain, he has drawn from his trembling lips the appealing cry, "How long, O Lord, how long?"

Five hundred miles away to the west, across the Assyrian desert, lay Jerusalem. Over long leagues of sandy plain was the fair city of the uplands. There was the sacred temple, lying in ruins, and the hallowed ark, with its law and mercy seat, once glorified with the splendor of the Shekinah, was now safely hidden from human gaze. Jerusalem was not only Daniel's home, but it was also the home of his people, the city of his God.

Darius had "set over the kingdom a hundred and twenty princes. And over these three presidents; of whom Daniel was first. This Daniel was preferred above the presidents and princes, because an excellent spirit was in him." These dignitaries sought in vain to find fault with the old prophet, "but they could find none occasion nor fault," except it might be "concerning the law of his God." He was faithful, honest, loyal, and his records were always correct.

These corrupt men had no chance to plunder the government, as long as Daniel was at its head. Promotion to him meant suppression to them. So they said, "Let us get rid of this old Hebrew." Then they proceeded to induce Darius "to make a firm decree," that whosoever should ask a petition of any god or man for thirty days, save of thee, O king, should "be cast into the den of lions." Think what thirty prayerless days would mean to Daniel!

The unsuspecting king signed the decree, "according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which altered not." Thus the law was leveled straight at Daniel. But the old white-haired secretary of state never flinched. His light, that had shone steadfastly for nearly seventy years in corrupt Babylon, was not to be extinguished now. Monarchs might change, but not the ruined old warrior. Praying had been his business too long to be given up now, even under the king's decree.

Some frightened Hebrew may have come running to the aged prime minister, saying, "Have you heard the terrible news? Have you seen the decree? Why don't you make a month's trip of inspection down into Egypt? Memphis needs you. Or go into Assyria, and stop at Nineveh awhile? Some way, get out of Babylon. But if you must stay here, don't get on your knees in that upper room, and don't open your window for thirty days."

But the aged hero feared not, nor did he take the slightest notice of the new law. He knew, as we know today, that politicians always muddle things when they meddle with God's children. He could not be frightened out of his faith, and he would rather suffer than sin. He would rather be put in the lions' den than be cast into Gehenna after awhile. He never distrusted God's purpose, plans, or power.

Celestial Visitors

“Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his window being open . . . toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime.” He did not reason that some other room would do just as well for a month, nor did he charge the servants to let no one in while he prayed.

The old prophet doubtless remembered that forty or fifty years before, his three companions had been delivered from the seven-times-heated furnace. He would rather be in the den with God, than free without Him. He would rather be killed by wild beasts than stop praying.

The breath of God through the open window kept Daniel’s life clean. The unshut casement was a symbol of his noble spirit, and his heart went out toward Jerusalem, beyond the purple hills. At the open window the old patriot was unmindful of Babylon’s tumult and clamor. He heard not the din of trade and traffic, of priest or pauper. But his heart and eyes were fixed upon a specific point away out on the western horizon. He had opened his window to look toward Jerusalem, not Babylon.

The spies found Daniel praying at his accustomed time and place. Report was made to Darius, who, vexed at being duped and caught by the cunning of his satraps, “abored till the going down of the sun to deliver” Daniel, for he loved him. Failing in this, he commanded Daniel to be cast into the den of lions. Babylon, made a law that could not be changed, but so did the old prophet.

The officers hurried out, found the old man, bound him, and led him away like some slave, through the crowded streets. But with steady step, clear eye, and an unfettered soul, he walked as if in the visible presence of his Creator. Reaching an underground cave in the suburbs of the city, the spies removed the stone from its mouth. At this the hungry beasts inside roared like thunder.

As the old prophet was thrown into the pit, the ravenous beasts could easily be seen. The roaring ceased, and Daniel’s enemies thought his voice was forever silenced. The ponderous stone was replaced, and double-sealed with the king’s “signet, and with the signet of his lords.” One hour ago Daniel was foremost in all the realm; now he was caged with hungry animals.

With heavy heart Darius returned to the palace, vexed at himself for what he had done. He “passed the night fasting: neither were instruments of music brought before him: and his sleep went from him.”

But how different was Daniel’s night from that of the worried king. Ere he reached the bottom of the pit, an angel of God, speeding on the silvery wings of light, stood before him. The stone and double seal were as nothing to him. His presence made the den light and glorious, a veritable paradise for the aged servant of God.

Daniel never had a better night in his life. He was unafraid, for the Lion of the tribe of Judah was there. He was as calm as a summer evening. But the king, passing a restless night, “arose very early in the morning, and went in haste unto the den of lions.” He would not risk sending a servant, but at the first streak of dawn the wheels of the royal chariot could be heard rumbling over the rough bituminous pavement, and out to the pit in the royal garden.

Reaching the den in early dawn, Darius cried, with weeping, “O Daniel, servant of the living God, is thy God, whom thou serves continually, able to deliver thee from the lions?” Not being able to see the old prophet, he listened with a sickening doubt. Would he hear the familiar voice, or only the angry snarls of the hungry beasts?

It was like a voice from the dead when he heard, from the unseen depths, the kindly reply, “O king, live forever. My God hath sent His angel, and hath shut the lions’ mouths, that they have not hurt me.” Daniel was not angry at the king for what he had done, but he assured him that prayer to God had done the king no hurt. There was great excitement in the royal gardens that morning as the aged prophet was taken from the den.

Then “the king commanded, and they brought those men which had accused Daniel, and they cast them into the den of lions, and the lions had the mastery over them.” With wild screams of terror, these meddlers who would now trouble Daniel no more, fell into the open jaws of the hungry animals. Babylon had challenged Jerusalem, and had miserably failed.

Dear reader, if you must live in Babylon, spend much time in the upper room, at the open window. If the healing breath from the hills of God plays in vain around the closed and dust-laden western lattice of your life, something is wrong. Your window should have a wonderful tale of victory and blessing to tell. Fling your lattice wide toward the New Jerusalem, and on your knees look with the eye of faith to “the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, and not man.”

Celestial Visitors

22. With Zacharias in the Temple

Luke 1:5-23, 57-64

IN THE UPLANDS south of Jerusalem there lived an aged man and his godly wife. Their humble abode was tucked away in the historic hill country of Judea, far away from the tumult of the crowds. No more beautiful picture of true godliness and filial love is to be found anywhere in the pages of Holy Writ. The testimony of their hearthstone was for God' and His kingdom, their eyes were turned Messiah ward, and their lives were humble, holy, and happy.

What a contrast to many homes of today, where homeless men live in richly furnished houses. And God pity the man who has only a house instead of a home! In Greenland, when a stranger knocks at the door of a home, he asks, "Is God in this house?" If the answer is "Yes," he enters; if it is "No," he turns away.

This aged man was a priest. Both he and his wife were of priestly descent. In their modest home away among the hills, they were noble types of truth and godliness. These two saints lived, as all married folk should, yoked together in sacred unity and contentment. There was hideous corruption all around them, but they remained true to each other, and true to their God.

When husband and wife work together, there are four hands to fight life's battles, four eyes to watch for danger, and four shoulders on which to carry heavy burdens. But the Rose of Sharon and the Lily of the Valley will not bloom in the home where the cold winds of controversy blow over the threshold. When completed, the record of every pair should be, "Side by side in life, side by side in death, and side by side in heaven."

Of the aged couple it is said, "There was in the days of Herod a certain priest named Zacharias, and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth." Zacharias was the last of the old-dispensation prophets and the first of the New Testament prophets. There had been no direct communication from God to Israel since the days of Malachi. For four hundred years, devout eyes had looked for the Messiah' and among them were those of Zacharias and Elisabeth.

Zacharias and his wife "were both righteous before God." They had grace in a time when grace was very rare. Doubtless their copy of the Old Testament Scriptures was much worn by constant use. The light of their faith shone out like a star amid the moral darkness of those evil and trying days. Their lives were like springs of freshwater, rising in the midst of a salty ocean.

They continued "walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless." They observed, not a few of the commandments, but all of them. They were one in affection and interest. The husband and wife, when happily united, halve the burdens of life, instead of doubling them. And the way for a husband to realize an ideal wife, is to love the real wife, and vice versa.

Zacharias and Elisabeth were not only righteous, but blameless, righteous before God and blameless before men. Dear reader, are you living that kind of life? One good example is worth a thousand arguments. The language of the life is always more convincing than the language of the lips. Example, then precept. If the first is right, the second will be. They make a mighty good pair.

This "blameless" pair had one great burden. "They had no child. They both were now well stricken in years." Their solitary home had not been gladdened by the patter of little feet, or their lives cheered by the prattle of childish lips. But their disappointed hopes had not made them morose or bitter. They had prayed about it, and so would not murmur. Unfulfilled desires did not hinder their devotions, or silence their prayers.

Let us now go from the humble home in the hills to the crowded temple courts. The aged and devout priest, Zacharias, had left his wife in solitude to ponder and pray while he was absent. He had gone up to minister for one week in the holy place, a service required twice a year from the priests of each course. As Zacharias was "of the course of Abia," which was the eighth, the time of his visit was the autumn of the year.

Zacharias was a good priest, but he lived among a degenerate priesthood. "It came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord." To be chosen to burn incense was regarded as a very great honor, and the choice was determined by lot. Incense was burned at the morning and evening sacrifice.

As the aged priest entered the temple, all without was silent, except for the quiet, murmured prayers of the throng. "And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense."

Celestial Visitors

This was probably on the Sabbath day, which would make the time and place all the more sacred to every one. This was indeed to be a great day for all the people.

Praying people, and pious priest! What a triumphant combination, what a glorious unity! A praying multitude still makes a powerful ministry. Invocation and incense brought the forerunner of the Christ in the long ago. And they will hasten the Messiah in this generation. What a beautiful and powerful appeal when prayers ascend to heaven as sweet incense! Their fragrance will surely bring peace and blessing to the soul.

No minister need fear that he will not receive cooperation, if he lives as the old priest of Abia did. When he fills the pulpit as he should, the people will fill the pews as they should. Every preacher needs the people at his back, and not on it. He often finds more sleeping sickness than does the physician. And if he occasionally preaches too long, it may be that the people's prayers for him have been too short.

Zacharias advanced into the holy place slowly and with solemn step, with the sacred incense in his hand. No mortal eye could behold his conduct. The curling incense, as it ascended, fittingly symbolized the going up of his heart's affections in hope and trust. This was the center of the worship of the day. He paused a little, waiting for the moment to come to place the incense upon the altar.

I wish we might get a glimpse of the venerable old priest that autumn day, as he ministered in the temple. The snows of many winters had fallen upon him. The figure of Zacharias was well known in the temple. In the evening of his life the flower of hope was still abloom. The lot had marked him to offer incense that day. The holy place was beautifully lighted by the sheen of the seven-branched candlestick.

We wonder what Elisabeth was doing that day, back in the home among the hills. Evidently she was not spinning at the wheel, or grinding at the mill, for it was the Sabbath day. Doubtless she was praying for herself, and for the aged husband who officiated in the temple that day. However, we do not know, for about this, Holy Writ is silent. But we are sure that whether praying or reading, she was devoutly serving God.

Zacharias was now standing before the golden altar in the holy place. He had made his offering, and a cloud of incense, with the prayers of Israel, was ascending to God. Suddenly he was aware that a holy presence was near him. "And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense." The godly prophet was surprised to see the angel. But his position indicated heaven's favor toward Zacharias, for the angel stood on the right side of the altar.

For many years the aged priest and his wife had prayed for the coming of the Redeemer. For a lifetime this had been their one all-absorbing hope. Now the Lord had sent His messenger to tell him that their prayers were about to be answered. The suddenness and glory of the angel made Zacharias afraid. "He was troubled, and fear fell upon him."

The first words that fell from the messenger's lips were, "Fear not, Zacharias." One can imagine the calm of heart, the peace of mind, that came to the devout man as the words of cheer fell upon his ears. If the saints "fear" at sight of an angel now, what will sinners do by and by? Zacharias had probably never seen an angel before. But the divine messenger had broken the silence of four hundred years, and had once more spoken to man.

Zacharias and his wife had prayed for many years for a son. At last they seem to have given up. In softest accents the angel said to the aged priest, "Thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shall call his name John."

The first words of the angel to him showed that their prayers had not been forgotten. He who overrules in the affairs of man, knows the best time to answer prayers which have been offered in faith. God often delays, but He never forgets. Blessings may come today as the answer to prayers which are almost forgotten. But the answers to long-delayed petitions are often the most comforting and helpful to men.

Remember that the hours of worship are the hours when angels visit men. The divine messenger comes to church when preacher and people are there, and praying. Suppose Zacharias had been absent that eventful day, or the people had remained at home? But the old man was in the temple, where he was supposed to be; and the people were in their places at the hour of prayer. Then the angel appeared to the priest like a beautiful vision of heavenly light.

Continuing his words to Zacharias, the angel said, "Thou shall have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his [John's] birth." Could many parents of today see the future of their newborn babes, they would weep instead of rejoice, not having lived as this pious couple lived, or having prayed as they prayed. Over the entrance gate of a certain playground for London's poor, is this inscription, "No Adults Allowed to Enter Unless Accompanied by Children."

Celestial Visitors

The angel said that the child should “be great in the sight of the Lord and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost even from his mother’s Womb.” Here is gold that will stand the test. God’s estimate of true greatness is not the world’s estimate. Great men do not drop out of the sky in evening dress. Clear thinking, clean living, and an intense devotion to God’s cause, constitute true greatness in His sight.

Zacharias well knew that Isaac had been born of aged parents. But for a moment the old priest turned his thoughts to the weakness of the flesh. He seemed to forget that what God had promised He was able to perform; and that what He had done once He could just as easily do again. He asks, “Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years.” He had “staggered” at the promise.

To the question of Zacharias, the angel said, “I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to show thee these glad tidings.” The angel of long ago had refused to tell Manoah and his wife his name; yet now this celestial messenger voluntarily reveals his name to Zacharias. Five hundred years before, Gabriel had patiently made known to Daniel the long prophetic period which was to extend to the birth of Christ.

Zacharias had expressed doubt about the angel’s words; for this he was not to speak until they were fulfilled. Said the angel, “Behold, thou shall be dumb until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believes not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season.” Thus he was condemned to utter silence for almost a year. And the angel disappeared as suddenly as he had come.

The angel tied up the tongue that had spoken doubt. The old man learned a lesson that day which he never forgot. Five words cost him many months’ silence. The tongue has no bones; yet it is often stronger than arms and legs. Some people’s teeth are in their tongues. After all, the only way to tame the tongue is for God to lay upon it a live coal from off the golden altar.

“The people waited for Zacharias, and marveled that he tarried so long in the temple.” A modern congregation would have dispersed and gone home if the minister was late in closing the service. But not so here. They patiently waited for the blessing which they expected from Zacharias when he should come out of the temple.

But “when he came out, he could not speak unto them.” What did it mean? What had happened? They saw a silent, gesticulating old man, standing helpless on the steps, facing an awe-struck assembly. But his face was shining with the very glory of God. “And they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple: for he beckoned unto them, and remained speechless.” They had begun to fear that he had been cut down by the severe judgments of God.

“It came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house.” Think of the joy of Zacharias, when his work for the week was fulfilled, as he toiled up Olivet, across the rolling plains toward Bethlehem, and up the hill country of Judea, to convey to Elisabeth the strange and wondrous news! With what supreme joy he must have informed her that a prayer of long standing was about to be answered in God’s gift of a son to them in their declining years!

The brief record continues, “After those days his wife Elisabeth hid herself.” Doubtless for duty, dedication, and devotion. But after nearly a year there was great rejoicing in the hill-country home. “Now Elisabeth’s full time came that she should be delivered; and she brought forth a son.” During this long time Zacharias had probably been deaf as well as dumb, because they had to make signs to him. Luke 1:62.

At the birth of the child, “her neighbors and her cousins heard how the Lord had showed great mercy upon her; and they rejoiced with her.” And of course every one wanted to name the child. “On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they called him Zacharias, after the name of his father.” They thought this name would be a very appropriate one.

But the mother quietly objected, saying, “Not so; but he shall be called John. And they said unto her, There is none of thy kindred that is called by this name.” Surely the child should be given some family name. Finally, in order to settle the matter, “They made signs to his father, how he would have him called.”

The aged priest “asked for a writing table, and wrote.” Doubtless every one watched his trembling hand as he slowly traced out the name. He was very sure about the angel’s words now. There was no doubting any more. Carefully he penned the simple phrase, “His name is John.” God had settled the matter, for it was the name given by the angel.

As soon as the name had been settled by Zacharias, “his mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue loosed, and he spoke.” He had not spoken a word since he had seen the angel, months ago. The organ that had uttered doubt and had been paralyzed, was now loosed. The long period of silence had not been in vain, but had been very profitable to Zacharias. Correction proved to be instruction.

For many months the old man’s heart had been filled with song. Now it burst forth, spontaneous as the song of a lark and free as the flowing river. It came streaming out in such eloquence as is seldom

Celestial Visitors

recorded even In Holy Writ. “He praised God.” And the song was far-off music of coming salvation to Israel. Let us join in the song of praise of the man whose tongue had been loosed, for Bethlehem and Calvary have made atonement for Eden.

23. On the Judean Hills

Luke 2:1-20

EARLY ONE MORNING a carpenter and his young wife started over the hills on a long journey. Being very poor, they set out with only one beast of burden, and a few of the bare necessities of life. They were accompanied by a number of neighbors and friends from the little village. However, because of the condition of the wife, the young couple soon lagged behind the others.

The man was much older than his companion. Her store of strength being small, he took special care of her, leading the donkey on which she rode. It was a tiresome journey of about twenty-five miles. It would take about three days to make it. The caravan route was hard traveling, and there was danger of robbers. And the pathways and the hoof ways were rough, and sometimes steep.

The little town they left was Nazareth, a village situated among the hills which constituted the south ridge of Lebanon, just before it sinks into the plain of Esdraelon. Joseph and Mary were on their way to Bethlehem, in answer to the decree of imperial Rome for enrollment. It was not an accident that the decree went out at just this time. God was timing things to suit His own will and purpose. For Mary’s child must be born in David’s city, and angels attended them on their way.

The long, weary day was closing as Joseph and Mary entered Bethlehem, the “house of bread.” The path up the hill was steep and rugged, and it was getting dark. This last stage of the journey was an added hardship on the already-exhausted young wife. Joseph did all he could to make it easy for her. In the city of their royal line, they were unrecognized and not honored.

Weary and homeless, they began searching for a resting place for the night. The inn was full. Every place was taken. Becoming alarmed, Joseph persisted in an effort to find lodgment. But there seemed to be no room anywhere. At last he found a place in a stable out behind an inn. Mary was grateful for even this, and crept into the straw in the stall. Tired, away from home, among strangers, her only bed was the hay in a stable.

Oh, why did not some one exchange places with Mary? Was there no one willing-to take the stable, and give her a bed? There ought to have been scores willing to do this. Many, comfortable for the night, saw the weary couple searching for quarters, but did not realize the importance of what wag to take place that night. Others doubtless felt very sorry for them, but did not offer help. Even so it would be today.

“And she brought forth her first-born son.” Something happened that night in Bethlehem that made the’ common stable a place of far greater grandeur than even the temple at Jerusalem. The Babe was her son, and yet not hers alone, for He belonged to the whole world. He was to be the Brother-Man to the entire human race. Laid in a manger; King of the poor! A humble cradle indeed, but it contained heaven’s priceless gift.

Thought is paralyzed when one attempts to fathom the mystery of how God became man. It cannot be explained. It is indeed the mystery of godliness. It was the greatest birthday since time began. All the world’s history led up to the night when death’s antagonist was born in a stable. But for the birth of Jesus our Savior, it were far better if none of us had ever been born.

Alone, without physician or nurse, hospital or home, Mary had to give her Babe the care that is usually left to others. She “wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger.” Did she really understand the Babe, as she pressed Him to her bosom with a wealth of young mother love? Only in part did she realize that the world’s Redeemer had been born to her. The whole world was to be brighter because of His presence. The swaddling band was to be the white flag of peace to all men.

In the crowded village there was ample room for the rich trafficker and the powerful sheik, but there was no room for Joseph and Mary in the inn. Room for Satan, but not for the Savior! When the Lord made the world, He made room for all; yet when He came to His own world, the only room He had at first was a manger, and at last a rugged cross.

In the hills near Bethlehem, where David had tended his father’s sheep, were “shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.” They were on historic ground. Through the silent

Celestial Visitors

hours these humble shepherds talked of the promised Savior, and prayed for His coming.

It was a cloudless night, and the stars shone brightly overhead. From their bivouac in the fields, the shepherds kept watch. No sound broke the stillness, except an occasional bleating of the sheep, or the howling of wolves in the hills beyond. They not only watched their flocks below, but watched the skies above. They looked up as well as down. What a man sees depends largely upon what he is. Which way are you looking, and what do you see?

While these humble herdsmen of the hills were watching their flocks, "lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them." Never had they seen such a spectacle as this. Suddenly a glory brighter than noonday shone about them, and the glory held the angel and the shepherds in a circle of light.

The out streaming glory of God enwrapped these humble men in a mantle of light. If they had been at home or at a neighbor's house, they would have missed the visit of the angel. Or if, like some present day folk, they had been attending a theater or a fair, they would not have heard the "Peace on earth" spoken. The best place to be, day or night, is at the post of duty.

"The glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid." As they shrank back, the angel said unto them, "Fear not." He had no message of condemnation for them. The tidings he brought were not evil, but the most precious ever heard by man. They should not fear their enemies, and need not fear their friends.

"Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy," he continued, "which shall be to all people." The humble shepherds were the first to receive the glad message. Neither was it to be kept secret by them, but was to be given "to all people," the wide world over.

"For unto you," the angel said, "is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord." The angel was the first evangelist to preach Christ. And the shepherds were the first to hear of the yearning of a strange Lamb. What a thrill came to the shepherds as the word "Savior" was spoken by the heavenly visitor! The Lord had come to the city of David, the place of which the prophets had spoken.

As the shepherds were wondering how they might find the Babe, the angel said, "This shall be a sign unto you: You shall find the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." Not by a halo of light about His head was He to be known, but by the swaddling clothes and the manger.

With kindly regard for their human weakness, the angel gave them time to become accustomed to the divine radiance. But the joy and glory of it all could be no longer restrained. The angel choir broke into song when Jesus came. The very hills were lighted up with the shining hosts of God. "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

"Earth was hushed, and heaven stooped to listen to the song." Such music this old world had never heard before. The angels chanted "Glory to God" out of the hymnbooks of the sky, bound in the black covers of the night. They hymned the blessed birth of Jesus, when peace was born in Bethlehem.

Music is the speech of angels, and they know how to sing. These choir singers from the New Jerusalem sang so that the humble shepherds on the hills of Bethlehem could understand what they said. God could not speak to men through the average church choir today, for the congregation is usually placed in the embarrassing predicament of Ahimaaz, who said to David, "I saw a great tumult, but I knew not what it was." 2 Sam. 18:29.

After the song, the multitude of angels disappeared as suddenly as they had come. As the anthem died away, the light faded from the hills, and night again fell upon the shepherds and their flocks. Doubtless the hills ever after seemed brighter to these peasants of Bethlehem. What a song they had heard, and what a message of joy had come to them!

When the light faded from the hills, "it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see the thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us." They did not question the truthfulness of the good news, neither did they tarry, but said, "Let us now go and see."

Although it was a late hour of the night, "They came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger." They did not wait until daylight to see the blessed Child. The sleeping little village of Bethlehem being near, it did not take them long to make the journey, and the joy of their hearts made the distance seem shorter.

They did not stop to think who would take care of their sheep while they were away, nor did they take turns in making the visit to Bethlehem, some going while the others waited. Doubtless they committed their flock to Him whom they obeyed. They were the first to hear the most wonderful words that ever came

Celestial Visitors

from angel lips, and they must be the first to see Bethlehem's Wonder.

But their sheep suffered no harm while they were away. What if they had? What if the wolves had come down from the hills, and killed them all? That would not have been too great a price to pay for what they saw. Today, when God asks men to go to Bethlehem, too often the answer is, "Who will look after the sheep?" just as though He would not care for them.

"They found Mary, and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger." The trip from sheepfold to manger had been quickly made. They found the manger, the swaddling clothes, and the Babe, just as the angel had said. Doubtless they told Joseph and Mary of the visit of the angel, and the song of the heavenly host, which must have brought joy to the young mother's heart, and greatly strengthened her faith. Her tender heart must have absorbed their story as the dry hills absorb the rain.

But the joyous beholders of the cradle could not long remain silent. "When they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning the Child." Every friend and neighbor shall be told the good news. "All they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds." The shepherds were plain, honest men, and their account of what they had seen convinced the people that the long-looked-for Messiah had indeed come.

The last account of them we have is the brief record, "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God." Their names are not recorded, nor are we told what became of them. But we are sure that they went back to their flock better shepherds than they were before. Their work was more dignified. The hills of Bethlehem took on a new sacredness for them, because of the glorious vision they had seen.

24. At Bethesda's Pool

John 5:1-16

IT WAS THE SABBATH DAY in old Jerusalem. Jesus had come into the Holy City, and made His way to the temple, for His heart was there. A feast of the Jews was being held, and He went up alone, unattended by any of His disciples. He heard the godless and haughty priest reading the Scriptures, saw the offering of the sacrifices, and heard the hollow thanksgivings. All too well He knew that while the people worshiped God with their lips, their hearts were far from Him. The polluted atmosphere of the temple was stifling to the spotless Son of man. So He withdrew, and went down into the crowded streets of Jerusalem. His heart was out of sympathy with the shallow mockery heard on every side. Where should He go to come in touch with those who felt their need, and desired help? His soul was burdened with the thought of an agonizing humanity, and with a sincere desire to aid some distressed soul.

He turned His steps toward the booths and tables by the sheep market, which were usually crowded at such a time. There could be heard the noisy cattle drovers, the clamor of sheep and goat sellers, and the jangle of many swarthy attendants. To the Savior this did not seem like Sabbath keeping. Walking alone, in apparent meditation and prayer, He came to a pool, around which many sick people were gathered.

This popular resort for invalids was probably outside Jerusalem, near the sheep gate. "Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches." Instead of "sheep market," the margin gives "sheep gate." This was probably the gate through which sheep were taken for sacrifice. Undoubtedly it was the same gate mentioned by Nehemiah. Nehemiah 3:1, 32. Bethesda means "house of mercy."

What were these five porches around this house of mercy, and how came they to be built? They were probably covered arcades, piazzas, or verandas. These roofed walks, or shelters, protected the afflicted ones from the heat of the sun. They might have been built by the more prosperous and generous of the country, or by those who had been healed at the pool. Or possibly charity funds were used in their construction.

"In these [porches] lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered." What a mighty multitude of misery! What a scene of wretchedness Bethesda presented! There were men paralyzed by evil habits, and suffering from afflictions brought on by dissipation. There were acute diseases and chronic diseases. The rich were there, for they had found healing nowhere else. The poor were there, for they could not afford a doctor, and the porches were free. "Make us well," was the one universal cry of suffering humanity gathered about the pool.

Celestial Visitors

The crowd had come, “waiting for the moving of the water.” Some had just recently dragged themselves into one of the porches, or had been assisted by ‘kind friends. Others had been waiting all day. Doubtless some had tarried there the night before. And there were some present that Sabbath who had been coming for weeks, months, and even years. All were patiently waiting in mercy’s house for the marvelous moving of the water, hoping that they might be healed of their afflictions.

Many theories have been presented regarding the reason for the waters’ being moved at certain seasons. But as one Bible commentator remarks: “Angels are God’s servants, and friends of mankind, and perhaps are more active in the removing of diseases, as evil spirits in the inflicting of them, than we are aware of.” Matthew Henry’s Commentary, Volume III, Page 392.

Dr. Adam Clarke remarks that “those who feel little or none of the works of God in their own hearts are not willing to allow that He works in others. Many deny the influences of God’s Spirit, merely because they never felt them. This is to make any man’s experience the rule by which the whole word of God is to be interpreted; and consequently to leave no more divinity in the Bible than is found in the heart of him who professes to explain it.”

“Bethesda,” continues Dr. Clarke, “signifies literally, the house of mercy. It got this name probably from the cures which God mercifully performed there. It is likely the porticoes were built for the more convenient reception of the poor and distressed, who came here to be healed. It does not appear that any person was obliged to pay man for what the mercy of God freely gave.” - Clarke’s Commentary, Volume 9, Page 548,549.

“How many are the afflictions of the afflicted in this world?” says Matthew Henry. “How full of complaints are all places, and what multitudes of impotent folk!

“Those that were sick of these bodily diseases, took the pains to come far, and had the patience to wait long, for a cure. Any of us would have done the same; and we ought to do so. But oh that men were as wise for their souls, and as solicitous to get their spiritual diseases healed! We are all by nature ‘impotent folk’ in spiritual things; ‘blind, halt, and withered;’ but effectual provision is made for our cure, if we will but observe orders.

“The laver of regeneration is to us as Bethesda’s pool, healing our spiritual diseases; not at certain seasons, but at all times: whoever will, let him come.” Henry’s Commentary, Volume III, Page 392.

When the water was stirred by the angel, “whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had.” Hundreds of poor sufferers came to this pool to be healed. But the crowd was so great that when the water was troubled, many of the weaker ones were trampled underfoot. Some could not even get near the pool, and others died upon its brink.

After Jesus left the temple, He made His way down through the sheep gate to the pool, where the sick and afflicted lay. Walking among the porches this Sabbath day, in apparent meditation and prayer, He came to one case of supreme wretchedness. It was a man who had been a helpless cripple for thirty-eight long years. “A certain man was there,” John records, “which had an infirmity thirty and eight years.”

This man, alone and friendless, felt that he was shut out from God’s mercy. He had been a great sufferer for more than half the average lifetime. Now he was getting old, and his life was literally wearing away. Thirty-eight summers and winters, autumns and springs, had dragged slowly by, and it seemed that the only relief from his suffering would be the grave. Yet he still was hoping for a cure.

This helpless cripple had waited so long at the pool that he became a well-known character. Yet he seemed to be friendless as well as helpless. However, some who pitied his utter helplessness would bear him to the porches at such times as it was expected that the waters were to be troubled. But they would leave him there, and at the favored moment he had no one to help him into the water.

Let us stand for a moment with Jesus on that Sabbath day, by the side of Bethesda’s healing pool. This afflicted man was selected by Jesus because his case was the most hopeless of all. The cripple was lying on a mat, and occasionally lifted his head and looked toward the pool, to see if the water was being troubled.

“Jesus saw him lie, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case.” He always knows where help is most needed. Probably the poor man had heard something about this new Preacher of Righteousness this Wonder Worker, and had longed to see Him. Those who had been healed in the troubled waters were not thoughtful enough to help him in. Perhaps this new Healer would, pass by someday, and would make him well.

To the question, “Wilt thou be made whole?” he wearily answered, “Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but while I am coming, another stepped down before me.” Each time, he had said, with a sickly smile, “Perhaps I will do better next time.” Oh, why did not those who were

Celestial Visitors

kind enough to bring him to Bethesda, remain with him until the waters were troubled, and help him into the pool? He could not use his own limbs; neither could he borrow any of his neighbors.

“I have no man.” What a piteous heart cry! It has been sounding down the ages, ever since the poor cripple lay helpless and alone in one of the porches of Bethesda that Sabbath day when the Master walked among men. When a man is waiting and willing to be saved, surely there ought to be godly men standing by to help him in. As a rule, men do not come to Christ alone. There should be Bethesdas all over the world today, and missionaries at every Bethesda.

Jerusalem represents the church, and the pool is the “fountain opened to the house of David . . . for sin and uncleanness.” Zechariah 13:1. The church is God’s Bethesda, His “house of mercy” for the miserable of every land and time. No true Christian will eat his bread alone; neither will he want to go to heaven alone. Pray for men. Watch for men. Help men. A single soul is worth a long, long hunt.

It would almost seem like a superfluous question to ask a man who had been hopelessly crippled for thirty-eight years, “Wilt thou be made whole?” “Will I?” he might reply. “Why have I been lying here all these weary years, if not to be made well?” He had been crippled about as long as some people live. “Wilt thou be made whole?” is a doctor’s familiar query. Christ took this man as a patient. And the Great Physician, who never lost a case, is asking this same question still. How will you answer it?

The poor sufferer was waiting, not for Jesus, but for the troubling of the water. He expected Christ to help him into the pool, for that was the only way of healing he knew anything about. Jesus had given him no assurance of divine help. The man had seen the water troubled again and again, but he had never seen Jesus before. He had often seen others healed, but he had never seen any miracle of the Great Teacher. Now something spoke to his heart, and assured him that his help had come at last.

Jesus did not ask him, “Does thou desire to be made whole?” but, “Wilt thou be made whole?” Christ is able and willing to heal completely, if one wills to be healed completely. And He never charges a fee for His blessed work. All He asks is the heart and life. His power is equal to the most hopeless cases. But He never forces a cure upon any one. When a sick man’s will yields to God’s will, then there is help for him, and not before.

Jesus did not ask the sufferer to exercise faith in Him. He simply said, “Rise, take up thy bed, and walk.” “Rise.” That meant the upward life, spiritually as well as physically. The poor man’s faith at once took hold of Christ’s words. They came to him like a shot out of a rifle, and they reached his heart. Jesus did not say, “Rise, and get into the pool.” But “Rise, . . . and walk.” Every nerve and muscle instantly thrilled with new life, as health came into his crippled body. He willed to do what the Master said.

“Immediately the man was made whole.” Springing to his feet, he found himself a well and active man, for the first time in nearly four decades. What a new world was opened up to him in a moment! Instantly he found strength pouring into every part of his sick body. How good it was to be completely well once more, his old aches and pains gone! Jesus had given power to the powerless, and the weak was made strong in His strength. This miracle is a death blow to evolution. It is the blessed revival of the unfit.

He “took up his bed, and walked.” joyfully and immediately he responded to the words of the Master. As the paralytic stooped to pick up his bed, and straightened himself up again, he looked around for his deliverer, but Jesus was lost in the crowd. He had not tarried even long enough to receive the grateful thanks of the once-afflicted man. His work at “mercy’s house” was done, the patient was well, and He had quietly slipped away to help somewhere else.

The paralytic’s bed was not a walnut, brass, or iron bedstead. It was probably an Oriental mat or rug, which could easily be rolled up and carried away, either on the shoulder or under the arm. He now joyfully bore the bed that had borne him for so long. His bed of sickness was thus turned into a trophy of victory. What a transformation in his whole life! One minute he could not even turn himself on his bed, and the next he was carrying it away.

The latter part of verse 9 is an interesting statement. “The same day was the Sabbath.” Bethesda’s pool was at Jerusalem, and the Holy City was a type of the church. The moving of the water reminds one of the “sound of a going in the tops of the mulberry trees,” when Israel routed the Philistines. (See 2 Sam. 5:24.)

As the paralytic joyfully hurried on his way, with a firm step and praising God, the Jews said to him, “It is the Sabbath day: it is not lawful for thee to carry thy bed.” This was an arrest of a so-called Sabbath breaker. But the poor man deserved congratulation, not condemnation. The Jews were willing for him to lie, and to die, in one of the porches on the Sabbath, but he must not walk or carry his bed on that day. That would be a sin.

But with more logic than they had anticipated, “He answered them, He that made me whole, the

Celestial Visitors

same said unto me, Take up thy bed, and walk.” He was surprised at the coldness they manifested as they heard his simple story. He could not defend himself against these learned men. So he boldly answered them by saying, “He gave me the power, and He had the right to tell me what to do with it.” The One who saves certainly has a right to command. And Jesus never commands what cannot and should not be done.

“Then they asked him, What man is that which said unto thee, Take up thy bed, and walk?” They well knew who it was that had performed this miracle; only One had shown Himself able to do such marvelous works. But these wily Pharisees wanted direct testimony from the healed man against Jesus, that they might condemn Him for Sabbath breaking, for, in their judgment, He was guilty.

When the now happy paralytic was asked who had done this for him, he could not tell. “He that was healed knew not who it was: for Jesus had conveyed Himself away, a multitude being in that place.” The Chief among ten thousand had again made Himself one of the throng. He wanted no publicity, and thus avoided the applause that His admirers might give, and also the censure of those who would accuse Him of breaking the Sabbath.

The healed man made his way first of all directly to the temple in Jerusalem. His very first visit in his newfound strength was to divine service. What a good example for men today. He had been crippled so long that it had been thirty-eight years since he had had the blessed privilege of attending the temple service. Now he was able to go, and this he did. Doubtless he went to the temple to make an offering, and to thank God for what had been done for him. Many whom God heals today do not show the same appreciation.

But the Great Healer had not left the poor man entirely alone. “Afterward Jesus finds him in the temple.” Dear reader, does He find you there on the Sabbath? Old members, and new converts as well, should be found “in the temple” on that day. Remember, the sheep of God flock together. It will do any one good to sit in some church pew on God’s Sabbath day.

Addressing the paralytic, Jesus said to him, “Behold, thou art made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee.”

“Sin no more.” Then that is possible. These are the Master’s words. He does not save man that he may do as he pleases. That is what this man had been doing before he met the Lord. God wants obedience. One cannot be genuinely religious without being obedient. And serving God is the very best way of serving self. After all, these are the parting words of the Great Physician to every healed one today—“Sin no more.”

Jesus cautioned the healed man to cease from sin, “lest a worse thing come unto thee.” Is it possible, then, that there is a worse thing than thirty-eight years of helpless invalidism?” Yes, there is. Death is the last enemy, but sin is the worst enemy. One sin is one too many. In fact, sin is never necessary. Since the poor man had fallen once, Jesus cautioned him not to fall again, lest his last state be worse than the first.

Observe how beautifully the evangelist combines spiritual and material blessings in this wonderful chapter. Both soul and body must be cared for. The temple and the pool were near each other. So the church and the hospital should work hand in hand for the salvation of humanity. The paralytic did not attend the temple worship until he had been healed of his infirmity. When the preacher takes an interest in the body, and the physician prays for the soul, God will richly bless both endeavors.

The Great Physician was also a preacher, and He will bless in both undertakings. Remember that in Bethesda it was man’s porches, but God’s pool. So the Lord and man should work side by side. It was not the porches, but God’s power that healed the man. Yet the former enabled the sick to take advantage of the latter. We cannot heal, but we can build porches. On the other hand, porches are utterly useless without a pool and troubled waters. And only God can make the pool a spiritual Bethesda for all.

The last account we have of the overjoyed paralytic is, “The man departed, and told the Jews that it was Jesus, which had made him whole.” He had only a few minutes in the presence of the blessed Master, and then he went to work for others. Would to God that all healed people might do that today!

25. In Joseph's Tomb

Matthew 28:1-8; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:14; John 20:1-13

SINCE THE INSTITUTION of the Sabbath in Eden there never had been such a Sabbath as that which rested upon old Jerusalem when the Savior of the world lay in Joseph’s new tomb. The greatest

Celestial Visitors

crime in all human history had been committed. The Light of the world had gone out. Men were dazed and bewildered. Scenes of the day before were traced, as with a pen of fire, upon the minds of the perplexed multitudes.

In mid afternoon of that fateful Friday, Jesus, with the agonizing cry, "It is finished," bowed His head upon His breast, and died. He had drained the bitter cup of human woe to the very dregs. Men seemed paralyzed as they witnessed the awful scene. A mighty earthquake added to the confusion and consternation. An unseen hand rent the veil in the temple from top to bottom, leaving it hanging in two unsightly, ragged parts. The most holy place, no longer sacred, was exposed for the first time to the gaze of the curious multitude.

Joseph secured permission from Pilate to take care of the body of Jesus. With the help of Nicodemus and John, he pulled the nails, gently removed the body of the Savior from the cross, and took it away. Tears of sympathy fell thick and fast as they carefully dressed the wounds. Not a bone had been broken by the Roman soldiers, but His great heart had been broken by the stupendous weight of the sins of the world.

The lines of care were tenderly smoothed out of that wonderful face. A white napkin was bound about the wounded brow, hiding the scars underneath the hair. The whole body, with the spices brought by Nicodemus, was wrapped in a linen sheet. Then the three disciples bore their precious burden to Joseph's new tomb in the garden near by.

His burial was a hurried one. There was no song, no funeral service, no tolling bell. No scripture or obituary was read, and no priest or minister offered a broken yet comforting prayer over the dead. To Jesus it was not granted to be buried from home, for He had no home; or from a synagogue, for He was not welcome there. From Calvary to cemetery, from Golgotha to grave, was but a short route, and it was quickly taken. The brief spring day was verging toward the Sabbath, and no time must be lost.

Every garden of life has its ghastly grave, where the tender things of life are laid. But how thankful we should be that the grave may be surrounded by a garden. In this garden of life there often grow the deadly nightshade, the hot passion flower of pain, and the bleeding heart of grief. But thank God there also bloom the blessed bluebells of purity and the forget me-not of His promises. Sharon's beautiful rose, with its wonderful fragrance, and the lily of the valley, with its purity, are also there. It may indeed be a "Garden of the Gods," more dear than any on earth.

It was a long, sorrowful Sabbath for the disciples of Jesus. They had never known one like it before, and would never experience one like it again. It was a day of black, blank, and silent despair for the eleven discouraged men. Their proudest hopes lay buried in the grave in the garden. Until the very last they had not believed He would die. Now they could hardly believe that He was really dead. They forgot His promise of a resurrection, and the future was dark with despair. The pain of the blow was over, but the ache of the blow still remained.

On the Sabbath the temple courts were filled with anxious worshipers. But no service was ever more hollow and abominable. Turbaned priests performed their formal duties as usual. But they feared it was not all over in regard to the dead Christ. Their hands were full of the blood of Jesus. They seemed to hear His groaning beneath the cross. His marvelous voice still pierced their very souls. The kindly eyes were now flashing ever and anon upon them, under which they trembled with consternation. They prayed, but they seemed to hear His voice say, "Your hands are stained with guilt." They could sing, but there was the dead Saint in the tomb not far away.

No living man could frighten wicked men as that dead Man did. Never in His life did Jesus attract the attention of the multitude as He did when He lay in the grave over that Sabbath. The tomb had been securely sealed by the authorities, and Roman guards had been placed there to watch. Yet the Savior seemed still to be walking among men. Gloomy foreboding and presentiments were in many hearts. Even Pilate doubted whether the Christ could be kept in the grave, for he had said in regard to the tomb, "Go your way, make it as sure as you can." The blackest night ever known settled down upon human grief.

Jesus rested. And how appropriate the rest! His toil was over. The long day of shame and torture had at last ended. With the Father, He had rested on the Sabbath from the work of creation. Now He rested on the Sabbath from the work of redemption. Asleep in the garden on the Sabbath! What a beautiful rest for the One who alone could give rest to men! Man fell in a garden. And the Savior must rise in a garden.

As the first gray dawn was streaking the eastern sky, some women left their homes, and made their various ways toward the rock-hewn tomb in the garden. Love loses sleep, and sorrow usually awakens early. They might have been seen stealing silently through the dark, narrow streets of the city. All along the way they passed many strangers sleeping under temporary shelters. Day was breaking over the Judean hills

Celestial Visitors

and the happy birds were singing in Joseph's garden as they neared the place where the body of Jesus had been laid.

The night of the first day of the week had nearly passed, and the darkest hour just before daybreak had come. Christ had not yet risen. The massive stone was securely in its place, and the seal had not yet been broken. The Roman guards were still keeping their faithful watch. Hosts of evil angels were there to keep Jesus in the rock-hewn tomb. But God's angels were also there to welcome the Prince of life when He should arise.

The mighty angel of the Lord was sent from the courts of glory to the garden tomb. "His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow." Clad in the snowy whiteness of God-given purity, he winged his joyful way toward the grave of Jesus. As he reached the earth, nature became agitated, and the ground trembled beneath his feet. One earthquake marked the death of Jesus; another marked His resurrection.

When the angel reached the earth, the Roman guard fell back. "For fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men." These strong men were struck to the earth by the brightness of the angel's face. Dauntless in the shock of battle, and brave amid the din of arms, they were now dumb before a being not of earth. The angel was just one keeper more than the Jews had planned for. When Jesus became alive, the guards became as dead men.

Sometime near the breaking of light on the first day of the week, the dead Jesus became the living Christ. Probably the full moon had already gone down, and the sun was not yet up, when He arose. The stars, quenched at noontide when He hung on the cross, were shining again. It was to be the brightest day that ever dawned upon men. It was in the fragrant freshness of the breaking dawn, when all nature silently worshiped her rising Lord.

As the angel, the mightiest of the Lord's host, approached the earth, the spirits of darkness fled. He rolled away the heavy stone as easily as a man would remove a pebble. The Roman soldiers heard him cry, "Son of God, come forth; Thy Father calls Thee!" Those guards, who never quailed in the presence of an enemy, saw Jesus come forth from the grave, and were held as captives taken without a battle. They had seen day made as night at the crucifixion; now they see night break into day at His resurrection.

As the women made their way to the grave in the early morning, they said among themselves, "Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulcher?" They knew they could not perform the heavy task alone; yet they kept right on their way. They had not all come from the same direction, but they had all arrived at about the same time. They had brought with them the precious spices to anoint the Savior's body.

Jesus remained in the grave long enough to prove that He had been dead, and yet not long enough for His body to see corruption. He did not break the prison of the grave, but an angel rolled the stone away, and set Him free. If Jesus had removed the stone, some one might have said that He had not died. Neither was He stolen by His friends, nor removed to another place by His enemies. But He arose of His own mighty power, and lighted the way for us from the cradle through the grave.

As the women lingered about the grave, they discovered that they were not alone. The angel of the resurrection, clothed in the garb of humanity, was sitting on the stone that had closed the tomb. They saw him in the place where the dead had been. The women found not a dead body, but a living angel. A flash of wonder passed through their minds as they saw the open tomb. But the open sepulcher was a seal of redemption for men.

The women were afraid, for the bright glory was still about the angel. When they turned to flee, he said, "Fear not you: for I know that you seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here: for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay." The angel reversed what is usually carved on the tombstone. We say of our dead, "Here lies." He said, "He is not here."

"Go quickly," the angel continued, "and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead. Lo, I have told you." The first gospel sermon after the resurrection was, "He is risen;" it was preached by the angel in white. An angel had proclaimed His nativity, and an angel announced His resurrection. He was the first evangelist to tell of the risen Savior. Since then the house of death is doorless, and it cannot always hold the dead.

The women "departed quickly from the sepulcher with fear and great joy; and did run to bring His disciples word." They did not need their spices now. Love's tribute was forgotten, for the Savior was living, and not dead. These women became apostles to the apostles. The angel gave the good news to the women, and they gave it to the apostles, and the apostles were to herald it to the ends of the earth.

Mary had not heard the good news. She ran to Peter and John with the sorrowful message, "They

Celestial Visitors

have taken away the Lord out of the sepulcher, and we know not where they have laid Him.” The apostles hurried to the tomb to see for themselves. They found the grave clothes carefully folded, and each laid in its place. And the napkin was folded, and placed by itself. The Savior’s own hand had folded them, and laid them carefully away.

It is interesting and helpful to meditate upon the things which our Savior left in the open grave after His resurrection. He left the sweet spices, typical of His own fragrant life. He left the grave clothes. He left the folded napkin. He also left two shining angels there. But most of all, He left the grave open, a glorious assurance of a resurrection for every saint until the end of time.

Mary Magdalene soon followed Peter and John to the tomb. But when they returned to Jerusalem, she remained behind. She “stood without at the sepulcher weeping: and as she wept, she stooped down, and looked into the sepulcher.” Grief filled her heart as she saw the tomb, empty of Jesus. Her intensive love for the Master needed more than an empty grave to satisfy its longings.

Looking into the sepulcher, Mary “sees two angels in white sitting, one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain.” The two angels, with radiant faces and folded wings, were like the two cherubim over the mercy seat on the golden ark of the sanctuary. Their presence there encourages us not to be afraid of the grave. Angels are interested in our sorrows, as well as our joys.

Addressing Mary, they said, “Woman, why weeps thou?” They well understood why she wept. They knew that the grave has ever been the old, old weeping place for brokenhearted men and women of all ages. Oceans of tears have been shed over the tomb. Mary wept then because the grave was empty. We weep today when it is full. Though we are often called to share in Mary’s tears, we may also share in Mary’s joy. It was best that she wept that day. But how much worse would it have been for Mary, and all the rest of us, had she found the tomb tenanted, as she had expected.

It is well that we are called upon to weep now and then, for by grief the heart is often made better. But why weep? The farmer doesn’t weep when, in the springtime, he covers the seed with the cold, heavy clods. He well knows that the sunshine and rain will by and by bring a glorious harvest of golden grain. just so it will be in the resurrection.

In her distress Mary answered the angels, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid Him.” “My Lord,” she said. Ah, that was the secret of her happy life. But the sight of the angels was not enough to satisfy her longings. She must find her Lord and Master. One Mary had lost Him when He was at the age of twelve, and now another Mary loses Him here. Through her bitter-sweet tears she was determined to look until she found Him.

As many others have done, Mary looked for Jesus where He was not to be found. The angels said, “Why seek you the living among the dead?” Because of Christ’s resurrection, every grave is to have an open door. Some try in vain to find Jesus among the musty books of so-called wise men. Others try to find Him in narrow church creeds or strange doctrines. Some will even make long pilgrimages to the Holy Land, hoping to find the Savior there. Yet many would be really frightened if they should, chance to find Him in their vain searching. We must live less in the tomb of dismal doubting, and more in the blessed resurrection experience.

Mary wept when she had lost her Lord. Many today do not do that. If they did, they would more often be rewarded as Mary was in her search for the lost Christ. But the very thought of losing Jesus surely should be enough to make any one weep. Weeping is a good way to find the One who will dry the bitter tears. What glorious results would follow if every minister and every church in the land, who has lost Jesus, would weep and seek as Mary did!

As Mary turned sadly away from the angels, thinking she must find some one who could tell her what had been done with the body of Jesus, another voice addressed her, saying, “Woman, why weeps thou? whom seeks thou?” She faint would know where the Lord was, and behold, He was at her side! She had longed to see His dead body, and, lo, she beheld Him alive! As in Eden of old, the Master was again walking in a garden in the cool of the day.

Through tear-dimmed eyes, Mary saw the form of a man standing near. “She, supposing Him to be the gardener, said unto Him, Sir, if thou have borne Him hence, tell me where thou has laid Him, and I will take Him away.”

“Supposing Him to be the gardener.” How many do that! Many today make the same mistake. Some think of Him only as a great social leader, a statesman, a politician, or just a very good and great man. But how few really see Him as the Savior, their personal Savior from every sin and defilement.

Jesus, in His own familiar voice, uttered the one word, “Mary!” Instantly she recognized Him. With unbounded joy, and forgetting everything else, she fell before Him, as if to embrace His feet, as she

Celestial Visitors

exclaimed, “Rabboni!” His and her greetings constitute an interesting little dialogue of only two words. But what words they were! As she sought to touch Him, He gently but firmly forbade her, saying, “Touch Me not; for I am not yet ascended to My Father.” He refused her homage until He had seen the Father, and had the assurance that His sacrifice had been accepted.

Continuing, Jesus said to Mary, “Go to My brethren, and say unto them, I ascend to My Father, and your Father; and to My God, and your God.”

At this, Mary did not tarry to talk with her Lord, but speedily hastened away to tell others what she had heard. Through Mary, Jesus thus spoke to all humanity everywhere. And all down the ages, noble women, like Mary, have been telling to the world the glad news of the resurrection. Reader, are you telling the same sweet story?

“Go tell My brethren.” Immediately the request began to be carried out. Fast and far the glad news traveled. First the women gave the message; then it was joyfully caught up by the disciples. After that His loyal people everywhere, and through all time, have sounded far and near the good news. The only man among the twelve disciples who did not become a missionary of the gospel, was the traitor. Let us ever remember that none of the Lord’s vessels are for ornament only, but vessels fit for the Master’s use. And His blessed work has never stopped. If we should fail Him personally, He would give His work to some one else to do, or it would be done in some other way.

Like a pebble dropped into a lake, the ripples widening until they touch the shores on every side, so the tidings of a crucified, buried, risen, ascended, and soon-coming Savior have spread throughout nearly the known world. There is scarcely a patch of coral anywhere in the ocean, large enough for the foot of man, where the wonderful story has not been told and its transforming power felt. May holy men spread the news, and a holy God send quickly His Son!

26. With Eleven Men on Olivet

Psalms 24:7-10; Luke 24:50-52; Acts 1:9-11

ONE BEAUTIFUL SUMMER DAY, eleven young men slowly made their way through the eastern gate of old Jerusalem. This little company was led by One who, just a few weeks before, had died on a bleak hilltop not far away. The eleven men knew not that this was to be the last interview with their Leader. There had been twelve of them, but one of their number was missing. When last seen, his swollen body was being devoured by dogs, and a broken rope dangled overhead.

The Leader was giving the eleven men His final instructions, for He was soon to leave them. Presently they approached a garden. He paused, that the men might call to mind the agony, the bloody sweat, the prostrate form, and the thrice-repeated prayer. Then resuming their journey, they looked upon the vine that had been used to represent their unity with heaven. Thus they were treading familiar ground.

Jesus “led them out as far as to Bethany.” Ah, what tender memories clustered about that village on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, a little over a mile from Jerusalem! Here, where a young man and his two sisters lived, the Great Teacher, when weary and longing for escape from suspicion and jealousy, had ever found a refuge of peace and understanding.

He led the eleven men across the summit of the Mount of Olives to a place just above Bethany. Here the disciples gathered about Him. He looked lovingly upon them, and addressed them in the most tender tones. His work on earth was done. It had been forty days since His passion, and now He had come to the final act of His life. He stood on Olivet, ready to depart. There was to be no pomp or splendor about His going away, but simplicity and sublimity combined. The record is strangely brief about one of the most important events recorded in the Scriptures.

Jesus did not choose Mount Zion, the place of David’s city, for His ascension. Neither did He select Mt. Moriah, the temple site. But Olivet was to receive the last print of His footsteps, the spot hallowed on so many occasions. The glens of the mountainside had been consecrated by His prayers and tears. And upon the summit of Olivet His feet will rest when the New Jerusalem shall descend “prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”

While the ascension did not take place in public, it was not something done in a corner. Jesus led His disciples in open daylight up the Mount of Olives. All the hallelujahs were reserved until He should enter the gates of heaven. There was as little pomp shown as there was at His humble birth. Mt. Olivet was

Celestial Visitors

His pulpit, and eleven men were His audience, when He bade farewell to the world.

While the eleven men were grouped closely about Him, the final moment came. With hands outstretched in blessing, He slowly ascended from among them. He was drawn heavenward by no earthly power. And all He had to leave the disciples was His blessing. Such a farewell was a fitting climax to His sojourn on earth.

As He went up, His hands outstretched, the disciples could plainly see the nail prints. The pierced hands showed the hiding of His power. As He passed slowly upward, seemingly loath to leave them, His awe-stricken followers looked with straining eyes for the last glimpse of their ascending Lord.

Then a white cloud drifted down from the sky to meet Him. This was the ascension cloud, a cloud of shining angels from the regions beyond. Unlike Elijah, He needed no chariot of fire. No whirlwind was to lift Him to His Father's throne. The disciples seemed riveted to the hallowed spot, as they viewed their Lord for the last time.

When their eyes could follow Jesus no longer, a bright cloud seemed to wrap itself about Him. Swathed in radiant splendor, He disappeared from their sight. The brief record is, "While they beheld, He was taken up; and a cloud received Him out of their sight." The now lonely disciples would gladly have followed Him if that had been possible.

"While they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold two men stood by them in white apparel." These came from the company that had been waiting in the cloud. They were probably the resurrection angels, and had been with Jesus throughout His earthly ministry. When He went up, the angels came down. They appeared in human form, so as not to alarm the disciples. Faint would they have joined the host that welcomed Jesus. But out of love for those whom He had left, they remained behind for a little while.

The eleven were completely absorbed by the ascension of their departing Lord. They continued gazing heavenward after He had passed from their sight. Then they were aroused from their reverie by voices at their side.

The angels said, "You men of Galilee, why stand you gazing up into heaven?" It was all right for them to look up while He was going away. It was a good thing to look up then. But now it was a good thing also to look down. The mountaintop is an excellent place for vision and inspiration; but the valley is the place of sin, sickness, and solitude.

They now had a work to do, and were to report for duty. They were to gird their loins for service, and begin the stupendous campaign of the ages. They no longer feared the future, for they knew that Jesus was in heaven, and that they had a Friend at God's throne. It would be a new and blessed experience to present their requests to the Father in the name of Jesus.

The brief record is that "they worshiped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy." Evidently they worshiped on Olivet before they left. They were not stunned and afraid, after the ascension, but went away "with great joy." Why should they grieve when they had an Intercessor in heaven? Full of courage and zeal, they returned to Jerusalem.

Jesus had told the disciples, "Tarry you in the city of Jerusalem, until you be endued with power from on high." He had gone away, that the Holy Ghost might come upon them. They were, to be armored with power before entering the battlefield. The waiting time would not be wasted.

The eleven hurried to Jerusalem, and to the upper room. When everything was made right, there came down upon them tongues of fire. Tongues of fire touched tongues of flesh, and many tongues spoke one thing. Tongues that before had been silent, were now loosed, and fifteen countries heard the Pentecostal message.

On that day, Peter, the fisherman, with the scent of the nets scarcely off his hands, poured forth such a Scriptural sermon as has seldom been heard. His voice swept from end to end of that vast multitude. Like a veritable stream of fire, it touched the innermost secrets of every heart. Tears and sobs overspread the assembly. Heads bowed, knees trembled, and stony hearts were melted until men were shaking like fields of ripened grain in the warm summer breeze.

Peter preached no smooth things, nor minced the truth one whit. For the first time the terrible sin of the crucifixion was charged directly to the stony hearts of the Jews. Some of those present had, but a few weeks before, uttered the cry, "Crucify Him!" At last from the depths of the crowd the voice of the preacher was met by a cry of repentance. Suddenly the whole multitude was carried away, and exclaimed as if by one voice, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?"

The fisherman had let down a good net into the depths of human misery and woe, and a great draft was the result. From that one haul he drew to the shore of safety three thousand souls. The message soon

Celestial Visitors

spread far and wide. Down the crowded streets, out by the market place, out and on, and ever onward, until today almost the whole world has heard the glad news.

As the cloud that bore Jesus upward disappeared, there floated down to the disciples sweet and joyous music from the angel choir. He looked lovingly upon the eleven men, until they gradually faded from His sight. Mt. Olivet next disappeared, then Jerusalem faded away, and with the angelic host He was on His way to the metropolis of the universe.

Now the cloudy chariot swings onward. The moon becomes as a footstool, and He mounts still higher into vast distances. On and on, past planets, belted and ringed, and with moons whirling rapidly about them, beyond our own great solar system, and through others, and yet others, more glorious and magnificent, unsullied by sin or shame.

Orion, with its shining bands, is to the south; the Great Bear, or Dipper, is on the north; both are soon left behind. Still He mounts higher and yet higher, while amazing distances unfold beyond. On past stars, suns, and systems, and then beyond the Milky Way, with its splendid billows of light. Giant worlds, peopled by the unfallen, cease to be seen. On He goes toward the shining city of God.

Then the pearly gates of the heavenly city, shining like ten thousand suns, appear in the distance. A multitude of captives, set free at His resurrection, are with Him as He ascends to the gates. The host of escorting angels give the challenge, "Lift up your heads, O you gates; and be you lift up, you everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in."

Joyfully the waiting sentinels from within respond, "Who is this King of glory?" This they ask, not because they do not know who He is, but because they would hear again the words of exalted praise. It is like two gigantic choirs, one within the golden city and one without. The escorting angels reply, "The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle."

Continuing, they say, "Lift up your heads, O you gates; even lift them up, you everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in." Again the challenge comes from beyond the jewel-garnished walls, "Who is this King of glory?" The angels are never weary of hearing His name exalted. The mighty Conqueror was coming home after the greatest battle ever fought in heaven or earth. Then again the answer, "The Lord of hosts, He is the King of glory." He was opening a way for humanity that was never again to be closed.

Lift up, you pearly gates! Lift up, you everlasting doors! The lintels are too low for His wounded head. These doors are gray with the antiquity of eternity, and hoary with the cons of ages. At His matchless name, the mighty gates were flung open. They were opened for Him and the blood-bought first fruits from the earth.

The portals being open, the King of glory entered amid a burst of rapturous music, and the joyful acclamations of ten thousand times ten thousand happy beings. He had gone to His rest, for His earthly work was done. There is the throne, encircled by the rainbow of promise. Cherubim, seraphim, angels, and the inhabitants of unfallen worlds are there. And soon, if we are faithful, we also may be there.

The world has not seen the last of Jesus. He has gone to prepare a place for us, and soon will return. The two angels said to the eleven waiting men on Olivet, "This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as you have seen Him go into heaven." This glorious promise will soon be fulfilled.

His children saw Him go away, and His children will see Him return. A cloud took Him up, and a cloud will bring Him down. While the disciples looked upon Him, He went away, and to "them that look for Him shall He appear the second time." And since it was right to look up when He left, it is also right to look up for His return. By and by, heaven will be the glorious meeting place of all the waiting saints of God. Dear reader, will you be there?

27. With Peter in Prison

Acts 12:1-19

TO LET ONE PREACHER BE KILLED and another be thrown into prison, is not man's way of propagating the church. But God's ways are not man's ways. Under His guidance, a broken-up church is never broken down. In His scheme of things, killing the workmen never causes the work to stop. The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church.

Celestial Visitors

While in the warfare for righteousness there is no fighting with carnal weapons, some soldiers must go into camp wounded. The bodies of others are brought in on stretchers, or left to perish on the battlefield. Still others languish in dark and dreary dungeons, for the evil one battles with weapons the saints may not employ. The price of devotion in Christian endeavor is sometimes persecution. And the church of the living God has always had all the success it was willing to pay for, and no more.

Whenever God's people are not willing to render to Caesar the things, that belong to God, then there is persecution. Whenever dangers threaten the sheep, they hasten to the fold and the shepherd. So in times of spiritual danger the sheep of God flock together.

It was Paul's "stocks and bonds" that caused him to sing a midnight melody until an earthquake shook the prison, and set him free. Men should seek the congregation, for it is not good for man to dwell alone. The assembly promotes brotherhood. When One is our Master, it makes us all brethren. And brotherly love forms a bond that cannot easily be broken.

"Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword." Keeping Judas out of view, this was the first break in the apostolic circle. But James sleeps none the less securely in his grave, nor will he awaken the less triumphantly, because of his untimely martyrdom at the very beginning of his career.

They at the front often must fall first. "He killed James with the sword." Only six little words yet how much they tell! One might have expected more than a brief clause to record the death of a chief man, and the first martyr among the apostles. The martyrdom of Stephen, a deacon, reaches out over two chapters. That of James is tucked into a corner with a single sentence. But such are God's wise, yet often mysterious, ways.

When James and John had wanted to sit on the right hand and on the left in Christ's kingdom, Jesus had asked them, "Are you able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" Courageously and nobly they had responded by saying, "We are able." Now the bitter cup, the baptism of martyrdom, came to James, and he drank it nobly and well.

"Because he [Herod] saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also." Men pleasers are not all dead yet. The fawning tribe is not extinct. While Herod's act of putting James to death was applauded by the Jews, yet some complained of the private manner in which it was accomplished. They thought that a public execution would more thoroughly intimidate the believers, and those who sympathized with them. Hence a different course was now to be taken in regard to the apostle Peter.

"And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quarternions of soldiers to keep him." Sixteen soldiers were set to guard Peter, and prevent his escape. That is, four were to keep watch at a time, by courses. Yet sixteen armed men could not keep him whom God wished to release. If there had been sixteen thousand men, all armed to the teeth, set to keep Peter, the prison doors would have swung open just the same.

Herod was "intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people." It was a crowded time in old Jerusalem. People from all parts of the country were there. It was suggested to Herod that it would not be safe to execute the veteran apostle just then. The pity of the multitude might be excited. The priests feared that Peter might make one of his usual powerful appeals, which had so often stirred the people. So they reasoned, plotted, and waited.

"Peter was therefore kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him." That little word "but," of only three letters, has great meaning. Here is a real, pitched battle on the two sides of the colon in this terse sentence. Herod had Peter in prison, but the church had him on their hearts. The force of arms and the force of prayer set against each other in battle array, the power of Rome and the power of God in open contest. Who will win? We shall soon see.

"Prayer without ceasing." The delay in Peter's execution gave the church ample time for prayer. And they made the most of it. They turned the grand artillery of supplication against the towering walls of the enemy. They prayed not only in the public assembly, but in the family circle, and in the secret chamber. Prayer was the only weapon with which they could fight, and they all seemed to be using this most powerful weapon. Herod's soldiers were of but little use when the church kept praying. No guards on earth could stand such a siege.

Their prayers were definite. They were not like arrows shot at random into the air, or like letters which require no answers. They prayed to the point. It was all for Peter. Their cry was, "Hear us, O Lord, hear us, for our enemies have stoned Stephen, and beheaded James, and now they have Peter in prison!" There were no tame generalities, or scattering phrases. No futile appeal was made to angels, to Mary, or to the saints. But they went direct to God, and held on.

Celestial Visitors

Their experience was a concrete example of Paul's statement to the Corinthian church, "Whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it." 1 Corinthians 12:26. It was Peter's passion, and the church's compassion. And it would be easier for Herod to control the wind than to hinder the prayers of God's people in the apostle's behalf. When God heard their fervent appeals for help, He sent angels to watch over the imprisoned apostle.

Some people escape prison by breaking out, but Peter could not do that. Others seek release by bribing the guards, but the infant church had no wealth to offer as a ransom. Still others gain their freedom through the intercession of some prominent individual who is a friend of the court. But the church had no such human mediator. But they did know One who had power greater than that of Herod. So they appealed to Him. He had the keys to both the inner and the outer prison.

And as the little band prayed on, their appeals reached the heart of God. They boldly took hold of the arm of Omnipotence. What if Peter was inside the iron gate, behind stone walls, and bound in chains? There is more than one way to get the saint out of prison. When the prayers of the whole church are centered on one man, relief must come, if it is God's will. He is pleased when His children literally storm the gates of heaven with their intercessions.

At last the day of Peter's execution was appointed. "And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night Peter was sleeping between two soldiers." While Herod is in his palace, the soldiers are on guard, the church prays, and Peter peacefully sleeps. He could sleep because the church prayed, and his own heart was right. It was their time for action, but his time for repose, and he meant to have as good a night as he could.

It was the very climax of faith that Peter had learned to sleep under such perilous conditions. Doubtless there were many things that might have kept him awake besides his own imprisonment. He must have thought of his good wife in faraway Capernaum, and of what would be the fate of the infant church that he loved so well. Personally he could not reasonably expect a better fate than that which had befallen Stephen and James. He very well knew that his head might come off the next day; yet he slept.

Three times it is recorded that Peter slept. Once on the mount of transfiguration, then in the Garden of Gethsemane, and here in the dungeon. He slept in Gethsemane through the weakness of the flesh, but he slept in prison through the strength of faith. He could not have slept more peacefully had he been in a palace. He was probably the only Christian in Jerusalem who did sleep that night. The rest were wide awake, praying. But a man with a good conscience and strong faith can usually sleep well on a hard bed.

There was nothing better Peter could do than sleep. If he had remained awake nothing good would have been accomplished. If he had stirred, the soldiers would have awakened. He had put his case in the hands of God, and he knew it would be managed well. The church could not close their eyes that night, but Peter closed his in peaceful slumber. The church was in its infancy, and one of the chief pillars of it was about to be removed; so how could they sleep?

Peter was not only sleeping between two soldiers, but he was "bound with two chains: and the keepers before the door kept the prison." Two soldiers, two chains, and the keepers! The art and skill of man could do no more, humanly speaking, to make the apostle secure. Gates and guards could keep friends away, but they could not keep the angels away. Even a rock-hewn cell, and bolted and barred doors, could not hold him whom God would set free.

While Peter slept, "Behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison." Suddenly the dungeon was illuminated with the glory of the Lord. God knew in just what cell Peter was kept; so He commissioned a mighty angel from heaven to rescue His servant. The strong gates opened without human hands, and as the celestial visitor passed through, the gates closed noiselessly behind him. As he entered the cell, he saw Peter sleeping the peaceful sleep of perfect trust.

The light that surrounded the angel did not arouse the apostle. Not until he felt the gentle touch of the angel's hand did he awaken. "And he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly." There was no peal of thunder, no convulsive earthquake, no mighty tempest, accompanying the visit of the angel. But a radiant light, a gentle touch, a lifting hand, and a kindly voice revealed the messenger of glory standing over Peter.

As the wondering apostle obeyed the word spoken to him, "his chains fell off from his hands." The godly man is a Samson of towering strength when the Lord is with him. The angel had nothing to fear in the dungeon; neither had Peter now. The Christian is safe anywhere duty calls and the blessed angels go.

Again the voice of the heavenly messenger bids Peter, "Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals." The angel had lighted up the cell for the apostle; hence it was not necessary for him to dress in the dark. There

Celestial Visitors

was no need of confusion. When God takes care of men, He takes good care of them. But God did not do for Peter what he could do for himself. Peter might have clean forgotten his sandals had not the angel called his attention to them.

Continuing, the angel said, "Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me." He moved toward the door of the dungeon, and was followed by Peter, now dumb with amazement. "And he went out, and followed him." The armed soldiers were as still as if they were chained to the floor, as Peter stepped over their prostrate forms. The heavily bolted door swung open of its own accord, and closed again noiselessly behind them. The guards within and without were motionless and still at their posts.

The apostle "know not that it was true which was done by the angel; but thought he saw a vision." No word was spoken, and there was no sound of footsteps. The angel, encircled by a dazzling light, led the way. "The iron gate that leads unto the city opened to them of his own accord." It opened to let them through, and then shut again behind them. The sixteen soldiers, the stone cell, and the iron gates meant nothing when an angel led the way.

The mission of the angel being accomplished, he suddenly disappeared. "And forthwith the angel departed from him." Peter was now out of danger from his enemies, and needed no further guard. "When Peter was come to himself, he said, Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent His angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews."

Now he was out under the shining stars once more. The fresh night air blew upon his brow, and he better understood what had happened. When left to himself, he came to himself. His wrists were still swollen from the manacles, but were free. He found himself fully dressed and girded. At last he realized that his freedom was no delusion, but a blessed reality. He had literally been prayed out of prison by the church.

"When he had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark; where many were gathered together praying." The apostle first thought of God, and then he thought of the prayer meeting in Mary's house. He knew the church were very anxious about him, and doubtless were praying for him. They were like lambs amid wolves. But they could pray, and this they did. So he went to Mary's house.

The record says, "Many were gathered together praying." Mary's house was crowded that night. She evidently had a large home, and Peter no doubt was a frequent visitor there. A church in a home makes it a little sanctuary. They had not met to hear a sermon, or to sing, but to pray. Is your home a place for prayer meeting? Remember, the church of the living God was born at a prayer meeting.

The people who prayed for the prison doors to be unlocked, kept their own doors securely fastened. "And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a damsel came to hearken, named Rhoda." Probably she stopped praying to answer the knock. It seems that she came to hearken, more than to open the door. Stealthily she crept up and listened. Fearfully she asked who was there. Peter evidently soon quieted her fears, and asked for admission.

"Rhoda" means "a rose," and this rose has kept its bloom and fragrance for over nineteen hundred years. This girl at the door of Mary's house won fame simply by answering the knock of the great apostle.

Peter was hardly through knocking before Rhoda was at the door. She was familiar with his voice. Doubtless she had heard him pray and preach many times. But instead of immediately letting him in, "when she knew Peter's voice, she opened not the gate for gladness, but ran in, and told how Peter stood before the gate."

When she told those assembled in the house that Peter was at the gate, they said, "Thou art mad." "Nonsense," they said, "Peter is in prison." She was not at all disconcerted by the reply she received, "but she constantly affirmed that it was even so." Still unbelieving, they said, "It is his angel." Perhaps they thought it was Peter's guardian angel, come with tidings of some sort from the prison.

While they were arguing with Rhoda, the apostle kept knocking at the door. The record says, "Peter continued knocking." While they hesitated, the answer to their prayers stood at the door, waiting to be let in. Peter had more difficulty in getting into the prayer meeting room than he did in getting out of prison. The great iron gate had opened without his knocking, but the door of his friend's house was hard of access. It doubtless seemed like a cold reception to Peter, so lately released from prison.

At last they timidly opened to him. "When they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished." Many professed Christians today would be greatly surprised if their prayers should be answered. Thank God there are some, however, who, when they pray, proceed to the door to look for the answer.

When they finally realized that their prayers had indeed been answered, they crowded about Peter

Celestial Visitors

in a tumult of unrestrained joy. “But he, beckoning unto them with the hand to hold their peace, declared unto them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison.” Doubtless he remained with them long enough that night to give thanks to God for His signal blessings. For what is won by prayer, must be won in praise. Peter “departed, and went into another place.”

The next morning a great throng of people gathered to witness the execution of Peter. He was to be brought with great display of military power. Guards were dispatched to the prison. They found the soldiers still at the door, and the bolts and bars still fast. The chains were still on the wrists of the two soldiers, but the prisoner was gone. Diligent search was made for Peter, but God had hidden him well.

After all, Herod’s death was much nearer than Peter’s. God sent the same angel who had come from the royal courts to rescue Peter, to be the messenger of wrath to Herod. The angel smote Peter to awaken him, in order to lift him up and set him free. He smote Herod to cast him down into utter darkness. Peter eventually died, rejoicing in complete victory, given him by the One whom he had loved and served. The haughty king died in defeat, and in great agony of mind and body.

The closing statement in this wonderful story is, “The word of God grew and multiplied.” The devil lost, and the Lord gained ground. Thus it is today. The Scriptures are not like a spent bullet. There is power in them yet, and always will be. There is not an arrow in the devil’s quiver that has not been fired at the Bible. But such missiles only rebound to harm the sender. Remember, the world’s Maker is the Bible’s Author, and He defends His own. May Peter’s experience help us as it did the infant church of old!

28. Aboard Ship With Paul

Acts 27

THE NARRATIVE RECORDED in the twenty seventh chapter of Acts reads like a page out of an ancient logbook, kept by some old seafaring veteran. Even a lands man finds it intensely interesting. It is a thrilling account of the most famous sea storm in all the Bible. It was written by a physician-evangelist, who was on board this old corn ship, adrift in the Mediterranean Sea.

The ship was an old-fashioned one, with one mast, and was little better than a modern scow or a canal boat. It was bluntly rounded at both ends, stem and stern being almost alike. It could easily scud before a favorable wind, but was not built to bear up against a gale. It would carry about three hundred passengers, and some cargo in the hold.

There was no chart on which the ship’s course had been delineated. Nor was there any quadrant to indicate its location on the sea. Neither had it a chronometer to mark its progress as it tumbled over the storm tossed billows. Good navigation in that long-ago time depended largely upon a clear sky and a visible shore. When the sun and stars were hidden, both captain and crew were indeed “at sea.”

Perhaps no shipwreck since men began to navigate the sea has been of wider and deeper interest than the one here recorded. The story is an old one, yet eve new. We may read it over a score of times; yet it never loses its thrill, or loosens its hold upon human interest One can almost think himself listening to some aged tar, relating his adventures of the old whaling days.

Had it not been for one man on board, and his two Christian companions, the other two hundred seventy three probably would never have been heard of. That one man was Paul the apostle. He was on his way to Rome. “When it was determined that we should sail into Italy,” it is recorded, “they delivered Paul and certain other prisoners unto one named Julius, a centurion of Augustus’ band.”

On board this grain ship with Paul were Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, and Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica. The companionship of these two men greatly lightened the hardships of Paul’s lot. He was so comforted by their presence that he afterward referred to “Aristarchus my fellow prisoner.” Colossians 4:10. This man seems to have chosen voluntarily to share Paul’s bondage, that he might be a comfort to him in his afflictions.

The voyage began prosperously. The day after leaving Caesarea, they cast anchor at Sidon. Here “Julius courteously entreated Paul, and gave him liberty to go unto his friends to refresh himself.” His brief stay with them was like an oasis in the desert to the apostle, who was now in feeble health. It proved a comfort to him during the long, dreary weeks upon the stormy sea. As the ship pulled out of the harbor, and the shore faded away, Paul had a last glimpse of his homeland, to which he was never again to return. Luke says, “When we had launched from thence, we sailed under Cyprus, because the winds were contrary.”

Celestial Visitors

Progress was thus slow and hazardous, as the ship felt its way along. Continuing, the writer says, "When we had sailed over the sea of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra, a city of Lycia. And there the centurion found a ship of Alexandria sailing unto Italy; and he put us therein."

But still the winds were contrary, and the ship's progress was slow and difficult. Says Luke, "When we had sailed slowly many days, and scarce were come over against Cnidus, the wind not suffering us, we sailed under Crete, over against Salmone; and, hardly passing it, came unto a place which is called the Fair Havens." Thus for a few miles they had gone in good faith and with high hopes. But Fair Havens was not to be their fair haven.

They were compelled to remain at Fair Havens for some time, waiting for favorable winds. During this time the season for safe navigation ended. The question now was, whether to stay where they were, or to attempt to make a more favorable port for the winter. Thus "much time was spent, and sailing was now dangerous, because the fast was now already past." So they gave up hope of reaching their destination, because the season for travel was over.

After the matter had been earnestly discussed, Paul was asked for his advice. He had won the respect not only of the centurion, but of the sailors and soldiers as well. He unhesitatingly advised remaining where they were. Said he, "Sirs, I perceive that this voyage will be with hurt and much damage, not only to the lading and ship, but also of our lives." "Nevertheless the centurion believed the master and owner of the ship, more than those things which were spoken by Paul." None were willing to accept his counsel. Fair Havens, they said, had not a properly protected harbor, and the little town could hardly afford occupation for nearly three hundred sailors and passengers during a stay of several months. So why not go to the port of Phenice, only thirty-five miles away? "Let Paul stick to his preaching," they said, "and we will run the boat."

"And because the haven was not commodious to winter in, the more part advised to depart thence also, if by any means they might attain to Phenice and there to winter; which is a haven of Crete." Evidently they thought that Paul, being a lands man knew nothing whatever about navigation. Just so men reason today. However, the advice of one Christian man is often worth more than that of two hundred seventy men with only their own wits to direct them.

So the centurion decided to follow the judgment of the majority. "When the south wind blew softly, supposing that they had obtained their purpose, loosing thence, they sailed close by Crete." They evidently thought that the mild south wind gave the lie to Paul's forecast. Tell men of impending danger today, and they will point to the "south wind" as evidence that their course must be right. But they should remember that a ship built for fair weather only is not seaworthy. For journeys must be made in December, as well as in June.

"Not long after there arose against it a tempestuous, wind, called Euroclydon." This sudden tempest burst upon them with merciless fury. From the moment the vessel was struck by the wind, its condition seemed to be hopeless. The men had not a moment's warning in which to prepare. They could only leave the ship to the mercy of the storm. The south wind does not always blow softly.

"When the ship was caught, and could not bear up into the wind, we let her drive." There was apparently nothing else to do. The voyage that had begun so softly, ended in a terrible tempest. "And running under a certain island which is called Claudia, we had much work to come by the boat." While in the shelter of this island, they did all they could, which was not very much, to make ready for the worst.

The lifeboat, being their only means of escape should the ship founder was hoisted on board for safety. All possible precautions were taken to strengthen the vessel and prepare it to withstand the tempest. So "they used helps, under girding the ship; and, fearing lest they should fall into the quick sands, strake sail, and so were driven."

So ended the first eventful day of the voyage begun with soft breezes and high hopes. Do you under gird your ship with prayer in time of danger?

All that night the tempest continued to rage, and the frail vessel leaked badly. There was nothing to do but stand by and wait. "And we being exceedingly tossed with a tempest, the next day they lightened the ship." They cast out the less valuable things first, hoping thus to save the rest. So we must cast away, or become castaways on life's voyage. Which will be your choice? May the Lord help us to heave out the load of sin, and let it sink into the depths of the sea.

Night came on again, and the wild wind still howled about them, and beat upon the frail vessel. There was no rift in the clouds, either by day or by night, and no abating of the tempest. The storm beaten ship, masts shattered and sails rent, was tossed hither and yon by the furious gale. There was no rest for any one on board. Luke says, "The third day we cast out with our own hands the tackling of the ship." Every

Celestial Visitors

moment it seemed that the groaning timbers must give way, and cast all on board into the raging sea.

“When neither sun nor stars in many days appeared,” continues the writer, “and no small tempest lay on us, all hope that we should be saved was then taken away.” Sun and stars could not pierce the darkness of the storm, but the eye of God could. “All hope” was gone from two hundred seventy-three people. But with Paul it was different. With him it was as calm within as though there had been no tempest. He was the only unafraid man on board the ship.

By and by, during a temporary lull in the tempest, “Paul stood forth in the midst of them, and said, Sirs, you should have hearkened unto me, and not have loosed from Crete, and to have gained this harm and loss.” He was the only person on board capable of taking command in such a time, and this he did, giving them wise counsel. While the oldest sailor was overwhelmed, the lands man was calm and unafraid. Euroclydon meant no more to him than a “south wind.”

In spite of the fact that all hope of being saved was gone, Paul said, “I exhort you to be of good cheer: for there shall be no loss of any man’s life among you, but of the ship.” The apostle’s cry, “Be of good cheer,” brought courage to fainting hearts about him. His sky had been clear and calm all the time. Unlike Jonah, he was a comfort in storm, and not the cause of it. Some men’s characters shine forth in storm, and Paul’s was one of them.

The secret of Paul’s cheer is found in verse 23: “There stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve.” Paul was lost, but the angel knew exactly where he was. He had stood by the apostle, and not by the captain of the ship. And if faithful, we may be assured, as we are driven up and down life’s rough Adria, that the angel of the Lord will come to our rescue when the waves are highest and when the need is greatest.

Paul, speaking of God, said, “whose I am.” In other words, “I belong to God, and it is His pleasure to look after me. He will surely take care of His own property.” Every moment death was looking over the bulwarks of the old ship, hungry for its prey. But the aged apostle was not alarmed. Dear reader, do you belong to God? Remember, if we trust Him as we should, there are no howling winds or pounding waves that can sink our ship.

The angel said, “Fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar. . . And, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee.” It had been written down in the logbook, “It was determined that we should sail into Italy,” and to Italy they were bound to go. God had determined, long before Festus did, that the apostle should go there.

The apostle planted his feet firmly upon the slippery, reeling deck of the old ship, and exclaimed, “Be of good cheer: for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me. Howbeit we must be cast upon a certain island.” At these words, hope revived in all hearts. Crew and passengers were aroused from gloom and despondency. The angels of God always bring “good cheer” to His trusting children, when life’s ship is pulling hard over the black and boundless ocean of life.

“But when the fourteenth night was come, as we were driven up and down in Adria, about midnight the ship men deemed that they drew near to some country.” For half a month they had lived in terror and torture. Slowly, laboriously, they had drifted about, plowing a wide furrow in the angry sea, until they had almost lost count of time. They had been one moment tossed up to heaven, and the next sunk down to the grave.

About midnight they heard a noise that threw them into a greater panic of fear. It was the terrific sound of breakers on some rocky, unknown shore. Then they “sounded, and found it twenty fathoms: and when they had gone a little farther, they sounded again, and found it fifteen fathoms.”

“Then fearing lest we should have fallen upon rocks, they cast four anchors out of the stern, and wished for the day.” To cast anchor and pray is a good thing to do even yet. There is never a wind let loose by the enemy of souls, that can hinder a heartfelt prayer for help. Paul prayed for souls more than for the ship.

At break of day the dark outline of a strange coast was dimly visible. Afraid, the heathen sailors “were about to flee from the ship, when they had let down the boat into the sea, under color as though they would have cast anchors out of the fore ship.” But Paul, perceiving their design, said to the centurion and to the soldiers, “Except these abide in the ship, you cannot be saved. Then the soldiers cut off the ropes of the boat, and let her fall off.”

The most critical hour was yet before them. Hence “Paul besought them all to take meat, saying, This day is the fourteenth day that you have tarried and continued fasting, having taken nothing. Wherefore I pray you to take some meat: for this is for your health: for there shall not a hair fall from the head of any of you.

Celestial Visitors

“When he had thus spoken, he took bread, and gave thanks to God in the presence of them all: and when he had broken it, he began to eat. “ It was worth while to thank God for even stale sea biscuit, for Paul recognized that bread and billows come from the same divine hand. There is always time to ask the blessing of God upon all we do. It was wise that he saw the propriety of feeding these hungry men before talking to them about their souls.

That worn, drenched throng of two hundred seventy-five souls took fresh courage, and “were all of good cheer, and they also took some meat.” Paul’s thanks had touched their hearts, and the outlook was brighter after a good meal. While hungry, wet, and sleepless, they were in no condition to swim to safety. “We were in all in the ship two hundred threescore and sixteen souls.” Paul seemed to be master of ceremonies, as he stood upon the wet and heaving deck.

At last “falling into a place where two seas met, they ran the ship aground; and the fore part stuck fast, and remained unmovable, but the hinder part was broken with the violence of the waves.” Many a man’s vessel today goes to pieces “where two seas meet.”

Finally, “the centurion commanded that they which could swim should cast themselves first into the sea, and get to land: and the rest, some on boards, and some on broken pieces of the ship.” Thus, swimming, seizing planks, splintered spars, and broken wreckage, every man was carried land ward by the rolling waves. Haggard and enfeebled by two weeks of famine and anxiety, they fought manfully to reach the near-by shore.

“And so it came to pass, that they escaped all safe to land.” But it was neither broken spar, floating rudder, nor skillful swimming that saved Paul that eventful day. Faith makes a better life belt than any man can supply. When the roll was called, not one was missing. Nearly three hundred souls stood safely that cold, stormy day on, the rocky shores of Melita.

29. At the Pearly Gates Celestial Visitors

Revelation 21

AN AGED JEW WAS SITTING one Sabbath day on the rocky ledge of a small island in the Aegean Sea. In his youth he had been a fisherman. But one day a great Friend came along, and asked the youth to go with Him in His work. Leaving his unmended nets and his long-used boat, the fisherman followed Him, until by and by the Friend went away, and left him.

Yet the fisherman never again returned to his boat and nets, but went out, bearing the message his Friend had given him. His preaching was with such power and authority that finally, after about sixty years had passed, the Roman emperor Domitian banished him to this little sea girt island on the west coast of Asia Minor. To this barren, desolate place were exiled the greatest villains of the age.

On this particular Sabbath the aged man was having his solitary devotions. While meditating upon the things of God, and gazing out across the desolate sea, he heard behind him “a great voice, as of a trumpet.” Turning about, he heard the voice saying, “I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou sees, write in a book.”

This aged man was John, the beloved apostle, the only remaining one of the twelve. He was here alone and yet not alone. A good man’s solitude need not be lonely, and for John the Isle of Patmos became the gate of heaven. The very deed which Domitian thought would silence the aged man’s voice, resulted in his giving to the world the most sublime and lofty unveiling of truth that men have ever had. The book of Revelation is a veritable song of the exiled apostle.

One day a shining angel came to John. He says of this angel, “He carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God.” Looking up into the heavens, John saw in plain view this glorious city of the skies. Such a dazzling glimpse of supernal radiance no mortal eye had ever beheld.

No human hand or earthly architect furnished the design for this ideal city, but its “builder and maker is God.” Hebrews 11:10. There is no stint in God’s creation; there are no bounds to His lavish munificence. This city which John saw was the very highest degree of beauty and perfection. “Having the glory of God,” it came “down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”

This city “had a wall great and high,” which “had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.” These foundations were garnished with all manner of precious stones

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“The first foundation was jasper; the second, sapphire; the third, a chalcedony; the fourth, an emerald; the fifth, sardonyx; the sixth, sardius; the seventh, chrysolite; the eighth, beryl; the ninth, a topaz; the tenth, a chrysopterus; the eleventh, a jacinth; the twelfth, an amethyst.”

Rising above the foundations, “the building of the wall of it was of jasper.” Hence the base and the top were of the same material, and thus the whole city was surrounded by jasper walls, which no enemy could ever scale. “And he measured the wall thereof, a hundred and forty and four cubits.” Reckoning the cubit at twenty-two inches, the wall would be about two hundred sixty-four feet high.

This city had twelve gates, “on the east three gates; on the north three gates; on the south three gates; and on the west three gates.” “And the twelve gates were twelve pearls: every several gate was of one pearl.” Gates opened in all directions; the city was accessible from all quarters of the earth.

These are not the beautiful Kashmir Gate of Delhi, where occurred an act of daring heroism; not the famous Lucknow Gate, still dented and scarred by the Sepoy bombardment; not the Madeline Gate, with its splendid emblazonry in bronze; not even the one hundred gates of Thebes, the proud wonder of many momentous centuries. Nay, all these sink out of sight before the glorious gates of the city in the inspired Apocalypse.

There is no gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, or stone in these beautiful gates. From top to base, from side to side, each gate is one iridescent pearl. Not one piece picked up from the famed Ceylon banks, and another gleaned from the Persian Gulf, and still others from faraway Arabia or East India, but each massive gate is one solid, gorgeous pearl of dazzling beauty, picked up by heavenly hands from the shimmering beach of everlasting light, and hoisted and swung by the Almighty amid the exultant shouts of the angels.

Imperial parks and lordly manors often have one expensive gateway, and others more humble. It is not so here. There are no back gates, no side gates, no small gates, but all are alike glorious, yet beautifully different in their gorgeous splendor. Thank God, they are not on one side only, or on two sides, or even on three; but pearly portals swing ajar at every point of the compass.

Gates on the north, the south, the east, and the west, offer access to mansions for the redeemed of every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. On the north three gates! On the south three gates! On the east three gates! On the west three gates! Twelve gates, and twelve angel gatekeepers! No ruthless formulators of creeds keep watch, but radiant seraphim. Not bigoted, black-gowned priests, but beautiful, white-robed cherubim, guard the glorious portals of the Wonderland!

O you gates I Sin without, salvation within I Against thy Cyclopean strength, on the one side dash all the splendors of earthly power and beauty, on the other side beat the swelling surges of eternal joy and glory! Come, you North, East, West, and South, and swell the triumphant tread of God’s conquerors! Let N, E, W, and S hear the gospel N-E-W-S of salvation, and enter the high flung gates of everlasting pearl!

“The city lies foursquare and he measured the city with a reed, twelve thousand furlongs. The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal.” Fifteen hundred miles around. Three hundred seventy-five miles across—large enough to accommodate all the millions of the redeemed.

Three broad streets run each way across the city, three hundred seventy-five miles long, each one of “pure gold, as it were transparent glass.” Six principal avenues run at right angles from wall to wall.

Dear reader, what will it mean when God shall open the gates of pearl, and lead His people into fields of shimmering glory? Mansions of light, built of opals, sapphires, rubies, and pearls, no two alike, and none old or hoary with age, or bare and untenanted. “The city was of pure gold, like unto clear glass.” Transparent, for there is nothing to hide in that fair land, where the gates will never be closed again.

This great metropolis of the universe has a marvelous lighting system. “The city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof.” “There shall be no night there.” No night ever darkens the one glorious day. But the Lamb’s mighty illumination shines every dark corner away.

Said the apostle, “Her light was . . . even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal.” There is a glorious shining on the hills of God, of a light that never goes out. The new, unsetting day has a wondrous effulgence of light, such as was never seen on land or sea. The city will shine with such brilliancy and splendor that to the unfallen worlds it will appear as a beautiful gem on the fair bosom of the universe.

Thank God for the Holy City! Dear reader, would you know the way? Your passport is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Your ticket is the commandments of God. Revelation 22.14. Your dress is the white robe Of Christ’s righteousness. Jesus says, “Come!” He is not afraid of inviting too many into the coveted city of the sky. Behold it now, and enter the open portals by and by. Look, linger, and long, until God bids you enter. And if an outside view is so gloriously beautiful, what will an inside view be? Let us

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prepare to go and see.

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