

WHAT HAPPENED WHEN CHRIST WENT TO CHURCH!

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Originally, there was only one place of worship in Israel. At first it was a tent-the tabernacle which God commanded Moses to erect among the Hebrews as they journeyed from Egypt to the Promised Land. This was followed by a temple which David prepared and Solomon built in Jerusalem. All the national festivals were held there and every family was expected to attend. This custom continued until enemies destroyed the sanctuary and confiscated its treasures. At one time in their history Hebrews were forbidden even to visit the city of their fathers. Subsequently, other arrangements were made, and synagogues began to make their appearance in many Hebrew communities. It was more convenient for Jews to worship in their own locality than to make the long journey to Jerusalem.

These buildings were not used exclusively for religious services. They were educational centers, where rabbis instructed children; social centers; and occasionally, when travelers needed accommodation, the synagogues became hostels. Many activities were held there, but on the Sabbath, God was honored and the laws of Moses explained. The entire life of the community revolved around the sanctuary. It could be compared with the meeting house which stood at the center of every Maori village in New Zealand, or the local chapel such as I knew in the valleys of Wales. Such churches were available for use at any time, and every person in the community respected the house of the Lord.

When Jesus began to preach in Galilee, synagogues had been erected in many of the cities, and it was in them He delivered His first messages. It is a safe assumption that during the Lord's lifetime, most Jews attended the synagogue. It was incumbent upon all citizens to support their local rabbi.

Hebrew services have changed considerably. When I attended the synagogue in Pretoria, South Africa, I was introduced to something I never before experienced. There was a high pulpit at one end of the building, and the

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congregation of men faced each other across the sanctuary. The singing was led by the Cantor - church people would call him the director of music. When he sang, every person was attentive. He possessed a marvelous voice, and his boys' choir, which occupied seats in the balcony, would have charmed angels. I was astounded when the rabbi delivered his sermon, for many in the congregation began to read newspapers. The women who were seated near the choir did not listen for they were staring at me-the visitor who wore a clerical collar! There is no way of knowing whether such conditions prevailed when Jesus went to the synagogues, but a verse in the Gospels deserves examination.

A Continuing Custom. . . Remarkable

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read (Luke 4:16).

The early life of Jesus remains shrouded in mystery. When He was twelve years of age, He accompanied Joseph and Mary to the feast at Jerusalem, but what happened during the

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following eighteen years is unknown unless it is gleaned from certain texts. Tradition suggests He worked in the carpenter's shop owned by Joseph, and it is believed He lived with His parents. Luke says the Lord attended services in the synagogue every Sabbath. This was His unchanging custom. Unless circumstances prevented this, Jesus was present at every service. Was He ever bored, disappointed, or angry? Did the rabbi speak for thirty minutes and say nothing? Did the priest express all kinds of ideas but fail to stir the souls of the congregation? Were the eyes of the Savior alight with pleasure, or did His face reflect disappointment as He listened to mere dogma? It is not known whether or not the Lord enjoyed those services, but one fact remains irrefutable-He continued to attend. That custom continued throughout His life and should be emulated by every believer.

When Christians refrain from attending church, they become the equivalent of the unfortunate people who sleep on

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sidewalks and park benches. They are God's homeless people. As Jesus attended the services in the synagogues, certain things became evident.

His Faith

When people saw Jesus worshiping in the synagogue, it became evident He was a devout believer in God. He often climbed the hills to be alone with His Father and probably enjoyed that experience far more than listening to something already known. The Lord knew critics were watching, and if He expected others to attend the house of God, it was necessary to set a good example. When the writer to the Hebrews wrote to his friends he said: "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is" (Heb. 10:25).

His Fellowship

People need fellowship; hermits seldom help anybody. The Master enjoyed lifting burdens and solving problems, and it was significant that several miracles were performed in synagogues. It is not difficult to visualize the Savior's moving among the congregation and enjoying every contact, especially with children. A sanctuary is an excellent place to meet people. Less attractive persons do not find pleasure in the House of God.

His Finances

The Lord never had any spare money. The financial resources of the disciples were held by Judas, and it is significant that in order to pay His taxes, Jesus sent Peter on a fishing expedition (see Matt. 17:27). It was customary for worshipers to bring an offering to the temple services, and this applied also to synagogues. The Lord who saw a widow placing two mites into the treasury (see Mark 12:42) would obviously bring His gift. Probably it was not great, but its value was multiplied by love. Men who never support God's cause inevitably die poor! God promised to honor those who honored Him, and such a reward could hardly be given to misers. Although it became evident that Jesus did not agree

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with everything taught by the rabbi, His opinions did not

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prevent Him from bringing a gift to support God's work.
Wise Christians follow His example.

His Feelings

The Son of God came to earth to help people, and these could always be found near the sanctuary. Some came to beg from affluent visitors. Others realized God alone could heal their diseases. Luke described how the Savior restored life to a man's withered arm. Blessed are they who truthfully say, "I went to church and met Christ." Most people attend places of worship in the hope of receiving something. Jesus went to give. It is interesting to remember that although He was always busy, He made a special effort to be in the sanctuary on the Sabbath. It would be refreshing if this could be said of all who claim to be God's children.

A Contemptible Congregation. . . Rejecting

The citizens of Nazareth were interested in one of their Sabbath school scholars. Jesus, whom they all knew, had suddenly become famous. His miracles had thrilled the people of Galilee, and His fame had spread throughout the area. Rumor said he was expected to attend the service, and the synagogue was filled when He entered the building. Silence followed the initial excitement, and the audience watched as the priest invited Him to read the lesson chosen for that day. The Lord found the selected place and began to read.

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound. To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD (Isa. 61:1-2).

Jesus was gracious, appealing, and commendable. "And all bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth" (Luke 4:22). Did the listeners

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wonder why He stopped so abruptly? The Lord closed the book without saying "And the vengeance of our God." When He said, "This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears," the listeners became restless. The Carpenter was insinuating He was the fulfillment of the Messianic prediction. When they said, "Is not this the son of Joseph?" the Savior's spirit was chilled. They did not understand the day of vengeance had not arrived. Christ terminated the reading so suddenly because He was introducing a period of unprecedented blessedness. The congregation expressed their doubt by asking, "Is not this the carpenter's son?"

They continued listening, but then the sanctity of the service was shattered. "All they in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath. And rose up, and thrust him out of the city, and led him unto the brow of the hill whereon the city was built, that they might cast him down headlong. But he passing through the midst of them, went his way" (Luke 4:28-30). Unfortunately, the miracles witnessed in Capernaum were never seen in Nazareth. The citizens knew not the time of their visitation. Christ came to His own. and His own received Him not (see John 1:11).

A Chilling Cry... Resounding

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And [Jesus] came down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee, and taught them on the sabbath days. . . . And in the synagogue

there was a man who had a spirit of an unclean devil, and cried out with a loud voice, . . . And Jesus rebuked him, saying, Hold thy peace, and come Out of him. And when the devil had thrown him in the midst, he came out of him, and hurt him not (Luke 4:31-36).

I have visited what is left of the ancient synagogue in Capernaum. The long stone bench upon which sat the elders has survived the attacks of weather, fire, and invading armies, but the smoke blackened beams indicate the ferocity with which Roman soldiers ruined the place. Long ago that sanctuary was probably filled with Jewish families that came from the nearby homes, and among the congregation was Simon Peter and

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members of his family. His wife was at home caring for her sick mother. The day was destined to become memorable, for both the Savior and a devil had come to church! Everything was peaceful and calm until Jesus entered the building, but then a screeching voice shouted, "Let us alone. What have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? Art thou come to destroy us? I know thee who thou art; The Holy One of God" (Luke 4:34).

One wonders what would happen if that scene were repeated today! Women might gasp, elders would attempt to remove the man, and the pastor would wish he were on vacation!

It is thought provoking that demons recognized the Lord while the congregation only saw a visitor. "We know Thee" was a claim Jesus could not deny. If those evil spirits had been expelled from heaven when their leader Lucifer fell from high office, they had not forgotten the glory of the One by whom all things existed (see John 1:1-3). Three details should be considered. (1) FEAR. Evidently the demons were scared, for they knew Jesus had the power to destroy them. That will be their fate when everything unclean is banished from God's new world. (2) FAME. "And the fame of him went out into every place of the country round about." God's presence had filled His house. The fact that such power is seldom seen today remains a cause for regret. (3) FELLOWSHIP. After the service in the synagogue, Jesus was invited to share a meal in Peter's nearby home. When He heard of the illness of Simon's mother-in-law, Christ healed her and smiled as the delightful lady hurried to the kitchen either to prepare or superintend serving the meal. She knew it was better to be on her feet helping than to be on her back doing nothing. It was thrilling when Simon Peter discovered the blessings experienced in the sanctuary could be greater in his own home. As it was then, so it can be today for all who invite Christ to share their hospitality.

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