

THE GREATNESS OF GOD (PSALM 145:3)

During World War II, thousands of children were evacuated from London to find new homes in the country. To them it was the greatest adventure of their lives; they left little of value in the dirty and dangerous suburbs of the British metropolis. One of those boys came to live with my parents in Crosskeys, Monmouthshire. His arrival almost caused a panic. He was proud of his new shoes, but, unfortunately, he had never seen a bath and considered them to be excellent skate boards with which to slide from the shallow end toward the sink! Day after day my mother's blood pressure reached record levels. Many stories could be told of the reactions of those refugee children to the way of life they discovered away from the gloom and depression of the suburbs of London. One day, a small boy looked up and exclaimed, "Oooooooh! What a big sky they've got `ere." He had been overshadowed by the tall dirty buildings of his old home, and had never seen the vast expanse of the heavens. In the country, where there were no towering buildings, the little fellow could see the far-reaching sky, and the view filled him with awe.

There are innumerable people who have never appreciated the greatness of God's grace. They live in the shadows where the outlook is bleak and forbidding. When they first discover the immensity of the Lord's provision their souls are filled with astonishment.

His great love... Informing... (Eph. 2:4)

"But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ." The importance of this statement may be seen in the answers to three simple questions. (1) Why? Å "God was rich in mercy." Mankind had disappointed the Creator and deserved judgment. Yet the Lord continued to love sinners, and nothing could prevent His endeavor to regain what had been lost. (2) When? Å "Even when we were dead in sins." Since sinners were "dead" in sins, they could do nothing to save themselves. Hence the statement "By grace are ye saved"

47

(Eph. 2:5). Paul said: "For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:6-8). (3) What? Å "He hath quickened us together with Christ... and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places, in Christ Jesus. That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:5-7). Probably this statement was one of the most comprehensive ever made by the apostle. It included the past Å "when we were dead in sins, he quickened us"; the present Å "And hath raised us up together with Christ and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus . . ."; the future Å "That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus." The love of God is all-embracing.

His Great Salvation. . . Insisting... (Heb. 2:3-4)

The writer to the Hebrews asked the only unanswerable question in the Bible. "How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord,

## THE GREATNESS OF GOD

and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with diverse miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit according to his own will?" There never can be any escape for those who reject God's greatest gift. It is significant that the Son expressed the Gospel... which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord." The Father endorsed it "God also bearing them witness." The Holy Spirit emphasized it... with gifts of the Holy Ghost according to his own will."

Each member of the divine Family helped to propagate the greatest story ever told. Jewish law insisted favor with the Almighty depended on human merit. The only righteousness known was obtained through conformity to Hebrew law; and since it was impossible to obey the innumerable details of legal requirements, men had no hope of eternal salvation. The Savior

48

announced forgiveness was given freely; that justification was obtained through faith and not works. God sacrificed His Son to provide salvation, and to reject this superlative offer would be suicidal. There would never be another way to obtain eternal security. It was this indisputable truth which made Paul say: "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8).

His Great Power... Imparted... (Acts 4:33)

"And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus..." Throughout the history of the church, sceptics challenged the fact of the resurrection, and all kinds of inconclusive arguments were advanced to prove Jesus of Nazareth remained dead. Unfortunately, most of the antagonists never considered that probably the greatest proof of Christ's resurrection was the amazing change which transformed weaklings into giants! It was written that all the disciples forsook the Lord and fled (Mark 14:50). Yet, those same disciples became new men! Simon Peter, who was scared by a maid, and who, consequently, feared for his life, became a dynamic preacher who, on the day of Pentecost, confronted thousands of enraged listeners caring not whether he lived or died. Timid people became bold, and forgetting their fears, went into the arena to sing as they died. When Nero tried to exterminate Christianity, he burned saints in the palace gardens, but the fire within the hearts of the martyrs surpassed anything kindled by the emperor. If the resurrection of Christ did not happen, it would be interesting to discover what changed the early believers.

The spiritual dynamic of the early church might be summarized under three headings.

(1) They had power to speak both to God and men. None of the original disciples studied in a theological college, and there is no evidence they had been convincing public speakers. Peter and John were ordinary fishermen, and were only experienced in the art of discussing the weather and prospects of excellent fishing. Yet, these men suddenly ranked among the world's greatest orators. Fearlessly, they addressed the learned leaders

49

of the Sanhedrin, and their knowledge of the Scriptures was amazing.

(2) They had power to save. When asked by a beggar at the temple to supply a gift of money, "... Peter, fastening his eyes upon him with John, said, Look on us. And he gave heed unto them, expecting to receive something of them. Then Peter said,

#### THE GREATNESS OF GOD

Silver and gold have I none: but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk. And he took him by the right hand, and lifted him up. And immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength. And he leaping up stood, and walked, and entered with them into the temple, walking, and leaping, and praising God" (Acts 3:4-8). Probably those men had performed miracles earlier when in the Name of their Master they preached in the villages of Palestine. Yet, at that time, they were very conscious of the presence and power of their Lord. Later, they stood alone – or did they? Their Master was still alive – living within their souls.

(3) They had power to sacrifice. People can be extremely selfish. Yet the early Christians were ..... of one heart, and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common. ... Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold. And laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need" (Acts 4:32, 34-35).

His Great Grace... Influencing (Acts 4:33)

and great grace was upon them all." It would be impossible to overestimate the economic problems which confronted the early believers. Their conversion to Christianity meant loss of jobs and income. As time progressed, the inevitability of choice became a challenge to their unity. When Ananias and Sapphira died because of their deception, relatives or friends could have vehemently disagreed with the sentence imposed by Peter. This may have been exceedingly damaging to the harmony of the first church. Even the leaders were not immune from temptation, and this became evident when Paul and Barnabas

50

disagreed about John Mark's reinstatement into the missionary party (Acts 15:37-41). The membership of the early church was diverse, for men and women of many nations had been initiated into a fellowship previously unknown. People were different in every age, and their thoughts and actions were very provocative. Unless great grace had filled the souls of the Christians, the unity of the church would have been impossible.

The people shared their resources and gave without hesitation; they never asked if certain recipients deserved assistance, nor inquired how to benefit personally by their sacrifice. When problems arose, they did not convene a special meeting in which to criticize the decisions of superiors. They did not divide the church in Jerusalem. When arguments had to be settled, people met humbly at the foot of the cross "and great grace was upon them all."

The Great High Priest... Interceding (Heb. 4:14)

"Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession." Most of the converts won for Christ on the day of Pentecost were acquainted with priestly representation. Even though many lived in foreign countries, they knew the priest acted on their behalf each time he ministered within the temple. When they accepted the new doctrines, they gained an entirely new conception of the intercessory work of the Lord. His ministry exceeded anything they had known.

(1) Christ was greater than the Aaronic priests in that His ministry was not terminated by death. "By so much was Jesus made a surety of a better testament. And they truly were many

## THE GREATNESS OF GOD

priests, because they were not suffered to continue by reason of death: But this man, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood" (Heb. 7:22-24).

(2) Christ was greater in that He was personally acquainted with those He represented. "For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15).

(3) Christ was greater because He was always accessible to His people. This was unknown during the Aaronic priesthood.

51

"Let us come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16).

(4) Christ was greater in that He went into heaven to appear directly before the throne of God. "For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us" (Heb. 9:24).

(5) Christ was greater in that He did not offer the blood of animals. He offered His own blood. "Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us" (Heb. 9:12).

(6) Christ was greater in that He was more than human. He was born of God. ". . . his Son... Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb. 1:2-3).

(7) Christ was greater than any other priest, for He did not offer many sacrifices. He offered Himself once, and that was sufficient. "Nor yet that he should offer himself often, as the high priest entereth into the holy place every year with blood of others: For then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb. 9:12, 25-28). It is extremely doubtful whether any other priest was ever called "great."

His Great Shepherd. . . Inviting (Heb. 13:20-21)

"Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant; Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well pleasing in his sight. . . ." The Savior was called the Good Shepherd Who redeems (John 10:11); the Great Shepherd Who responds (Heb. 13:20); the Chief Shepherd Who rewards (1 Peter 5:4). A true shepherd supplies three things for his sheep.

52

Devotion. It would be more desirable to sleep in a warm bed than to lie beneath a hedge, or behind a wall. The shepherd knew His flock, and was able to call the sheep. His voice was recognized, and his commands obeyed. His staying with the sheep at all times indicated they were considered a vital part of his life; he loved them.

Direction. It was the shepherd's duty to find suitable pasture. A Bedouin leads his sheep, goats or camels over great areas of his desertlike surroundings; without his guidance the animals would starve. When one pasture becomes inadequate, he leads to another, and as long as the animals follow his guidance, their future is assured.

Defense. When David was a shepherd on the hills of Bethle-

#### THE GREATNESS OF GOD

hem, he fought against a lion and a bear. If the sheep were in the sheepfold, he lay in the doorway; if they roamed the hills, he protected them against all enemies. When they were sick, he cradled their heads in his arms and remained with them as long as it was necessary. It was significant Jesus said: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27). The apostle Peter urged the elders the church to "Feed the flock of God which is among you. . ." (1 Peter 5:2). Christ was able to supply what was expected of a good and great leader. This fact gave increasing value to His invitation: "Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mail. 11:28).

His Great Promises... Inspiring (2 Peter 1:4)

"Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust." Webster's Dictionary defines a promise as "An oral or written agreement to do or not to do something—a vow. To give a basis for hopes or expectation." Obviously, many promises are either broken or forgotten. Sincere people regard a vow as a pledge never to be violated; a guarantee of fulfillment. The Savior commanded His disciples to ". . . wait for the promise of the Father . . ." (Acts 14). Those words were fulfilled at Pentecost, but the guarantee that it would happen was based on

53

the immutability of God. He never broke any of His promises. The veracity of His word and the reliability of His covenants remained unbroken since the beginning of time.

Peter evidently had difficulty in expressing himself. He might have referred to the promises of God as "precious" but the term seemed inadequate. Then he wrote "great and precious promises," but even that did not satisfy him. The apostle considered for a moment and finally wrote: "exceeding great and precious promises. . . ." Had he been asked "How great? how exceeding?" he might have lifted his hands in despair. It is impossible to measure infinity; and it is useless trying to express the inexpressible.

The Bible supplies promises to help the young, the very old, and others who are between the two extremes. David was correct when he wrote: "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (Ps. 119:105).

His Great City... Incredible (Rev. 21:10)

"And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God." The Holy City will be the greatest architectural achievement of all ages. Its characteristics may be summarized under five headings:

(1) Its Great Size. The Savior said: "In my Father's house are many mansions [dwelling places]; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:2). The city of which He spoke was mentioned by the apostle John, who wrote: "And the city lieth foursquare, and the length is as large as the breadth: and he measured the city with the reed, twelve thousand furlongs. The length and the breadth and the height thereof are equal" (Rev. 21:16). There has never been a city to be compared with that which will be the center of attraction throughout eternity. If it descended today, it would cover two-thirds of the United States of America (see the author's book *What in the World Will Happen Next?*, pgs. 175-176).

## THE GREATNESS OF GOD

(2) Its Great Significance. "And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it; and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honor into it" (Rev. 21:24). This is a

54

remarkable statement for it reveals events to happen throughout eternity. Peter said: "Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness" (2 Peter 3:13). Evidently upon that new earth will be a race of sinless beings; there will be kings and governments, but the population of the entire earth will pay homage to the King of Kings.

(3) Its Great Sovereign. The Son of God Who will reign upon earth for a thousand years, will continue His reign forever. It was written: ". . . the saints would see His face" (Rev. 22:4). The citizens of the eternal city will also see the population of the New Earth coming to worship their Lord. When Christ first came to earth, "He came unto his own, and his own received him not" (John 1:11). Throughout eternity everybody will accept, love and serve Him.

(4) Its Great Serenity. "And the gates of the city shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there. And they shall bring the glory and honour of the nations into it. And there shall in no wise enter into it anything that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life" (Rev. 21:25-27). Within the city of the King there will never be a hospital; a cemetery; a retirement home for the aged; a doctor's office; a prison.

(5) Its Great Security. . . . . the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever" (Rev. 11:15). Finite minds cannot comprehend the magnitude of God's provision for His people. It is difficult to understand how the Holy City will be fifteen hundred miles high, and appreciate all that will take place within it. Its wonder will never diminish, and age cannot threaten its continuance. God's far-reaching kindness is beyond comprehension.

55□

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