

The One who came down, laid down and sat down. Bethesda meditation. 26 December 2010.

This past week I was reminded of a set of videos which Linda and I once bought in a charity shop – it was a Readers Digest set entitled 'History Happened Here'. The advertisement on each video invites those who watch to 'witness events that changed our world' – and the videos cover such events as the 'D day landing' at Normandy, the first climbing of Everest, the sinking of the Titanic, and so on – but, very sadly, the videos omit any reference to the three great events to which God attaches the very greatest importance – events which really *did* change the history of the world – those of our Lord's birth, death and ascension.

And this morning I want us to focus briefly on these three events, *the timing of which* God clearly considered to be of the utmost importance. First, in connection with our Lord's birth, we read in Galatians 4 that, 'when *the fullness of the time* was come, *God sent forth his Son*, made of a woman ...'.¹ We sang just now the second verse of Charles Wesley's carol, 'Hark the herald angels sing' – a verse which contained the line, 'Late in time behold Him come' ... where Mr Wesley used the expression 'late in time', not in the sense of 'behind time' (perish the thought), but rather, against the backcloth of the preceding ages, 'of recent time, of recent date'.²

Then, second, we read in Romans 5 that, 'when we were yet without strength, *at the right time Christ died* for the ungodly'.³

And third, in the opening words of the Book of Acts, Luke speaks of 'the apostles whom He (the Lord Jesus) had chosen: to whom also He showed Himself alive after His passion by many proofs, being seen of them during *forty days*' – at the close of which He was 'taken up' out of their sight and into heaven.⁴ I find it interesting that, although the disciples needed only two or three days to satisfy them that the Saviour had really died, they were given no less than forty days to satisfy them that He had truly risen.

And this morning I want to link these three carefully-timed events – those of our Lord's birth, death and ascension – those of the cradle, the cross and the crown, if you like ... I want to link these events with three very well-known sayings of our Lord Jesus – each of which are recorded by the apostle John ...

First, in John 6, Jesus said, 'I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent me'.⁵

Then, in chapter 10, He said, 'I am the good shepherd ... I lay down my life for the sheep ... I lay down my life that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of myself ('of my own accord')'.⁶

And finally, in Revelation 3, when addressing the church in Laodicea, the Risen Lord said, 'To him who overcomes ('who conquers'), I will give to sit with me on my throne, even as I overcame ('as I conquered') and am sat down with my Father on His throne'.⁷

First, 'I have come down from heaven'. The apostle Paul spoke of the Lord Jesus in Ephesians 4 as the One who 'descended'⁸ – and 'descend' He most certainly did.

And this morning we bow in wonder anew when we consider ... such was His amazing condescension, that He, God's only begotten Son, deigned to become Mary's firstborn son ... when we consider, as we often have, that He exchanged :

- the splendour of heaven for the obscurity of Bethlehem
- the worship of seraphim for the visit of humble shepherds
- the royal robe of heaven for swaddling clothes, and
- the throne of the Lord of hosts for an animals' rough feeding trough.

The Saviour Himself spoke in Luke 10 of Satan '*falling*' from heaven,⁹ and the town clerk of Ephesus is on record in Acts 19 as having spoken of the image of the Greek goddess Artemis (one and the same as the Roman goddess 'Diana') which supposedly 'fell' from heaven.¹⁰ But the Lord Jesus didn't '*fall*' from heaven; He '*came down* from heaven'.¹¹ What a breathtaking – what a stupendous – stoop.

We read in Jonah 3 of the king of Nineveh – of the mighty King of Assyria, that is – in all likelihood one Aššur-dan III¹² – who 'arose from his throne, laid aside his robe, and covered himself with sackcloth'.¹³ But as believers we know Someone who rose up from a *far grander throne*, laid aside a *far more gorgeous robe*, and who clothed Himself with flesh – as we sang, 'veiled in *flesh* the Godhead see'. And all because He loved us!

John records in chapter 5 of his gospel how, when Jesus told the Jews, 'My Father has been working until now, and I have been working', they 'sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the sabbath, but also said that God was His own Father, *making Himself equal with God*'.¹⁴ John further reports in chapter 10 the words

of the Jews to the Lord Jesus, 'For a good work we do not stone you, but for blasphemy, and because *you, being a man, make yourself God*'.¹⁵ The irony lay in that the Jews asserted that He, 'a man', was making Himself out to be equal with God – yea, to be God Himself – whereas the truth was that He was only in the world at all because He, who was God, having refused to cling to His position of splendour as One on equality with God, had *become a man!*

And our Lord made it clear that He had not only *come down* from heaven, but that He would, of His own accord, lay down His life ... that for Him there was not only a cradle but a cross.

Shortly before He went to that Cross, He told His immediate disciples, 'Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends ... you are my friends'.¹⁶ The apostle John, one of the disciples then present, registered the point clearly. Years later, he wrote, 'by this we know love, because He *laid down* His life for us'.¹⁷

But we thank God this morning that our Lord's death was *not* the end of the story. Apart from anything else, 'death' could not possibly hold so pure and sinless a life as His – He had not earned any of sin's 'wages'.¹⁸ 'God raised Him up', Peter preached on the day of Pentecost, 'having loosed the pangs of *death*, because it was *not possible* for Him to be held by it'.¹⁹ The Living One Himself – the source and originator of life – could not be imprisoned by any tomb, hewn out of rock to house the dead!²⁰

Paul tells us that the One 'who *descended* is the same also that *ascended* up far above all heavens'.²¹ And, as we have already noted, forty days after His resurrection, the One who came down from heaven and laid down His life, sat down ... sat down at God's right hand – in the place of supreme dignity and honour.

Speaking of the Jewish priests of Old Testament days, the writer to the Hebrews says, 'every priest *stands* ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, *sat down* at the right hand of God'. That is to say, the Jewish priests never dared sit down in God's presence because their job was never finished. But our Lord Jesus took His place, sitting at God's right hand, as sure and certain evidence that He had completed the work He had been given to do.

Not, please, that our Lord is inactive today. Far from it. Paul spoke of Him as the One 'who died, yea, rather, who has been raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, *who also intercedes for us*'.²²

And at this very moment, Jesus represents - and pleads for - *every last one* of His people before the face of God. And through His untiring and all-prevailing intercession, He is able to uphold and to keep them – and keep us – all the way through.

We rejoice to know that, just as the *resurrection* of the Lord Jesus provides the supreme evidence of *the power of God*, so the cross of the Lord Jesus provides the supreme evidence of *His love*. But we rejoice to know too that our Lord's cross did not exhaust His love – that though *He* died, *His love* didn't.

This cold winter morning let us bask in the warmth of the wondrous truth that the Saviour (i) loved us when He came down from heaven, that He (ii) loved us when He laid down His life for us, and that He (iii) loves us now He is sat down at God's right hand. We are well aware that no gauge exists which can measure His limitless love – but we know too that the bread and wine here this morning go a long way to express in symbol that very love to each one of us.

Footnotes

¹ Gal. 4. 4.

² Much as we might speak today of 'the late snowfall'.

³ Rom. 5. 6.

⁴ Acts 1. 2-3. By way of indirect confirmation of the period of forty days, we read that, years later, Paul in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch, declared that Jesus 'was seen for many days of them that came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses unto the people', Acts 13. 31.

⁵ John 6. 38.

⁶ John 10. 14-18.

⁷ Rev. 3. 21.

⁸ Eph. 4. 9-10.

⁹ Luke 10. 18.

¹⁰ Acts 19. 35.

¹¹ The One who 'rides upon the heavens', Psa. 68. 4, 33, came 'down from heaven', John 6. 38. What grace!

¹² See Eugene Merrill, 'Kingdom of Priests', page 388.

¹³ Jonah 3. 6.

¹⁴ John 5. 17-18.

¹⁵ John 10. 33. The third occasion in John's gospel where the Jews attempted unsuccessfully to kill the Lord is in John 8. 59.

¹⁶ John 15. 13.

¹⁷ 1 John 3. 16.

¹⁸ Rom. 6. 23.

¹⁹ Acts 2. 24.

²⁰ Mark 15. 46.

²¹ Eph. 4. 10.

²² Rom. 8. 34.