

Heaven Opened.

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In the New Testament we have four great occasions brought before us of the heavens being opened. At the baptism of Jesus, when the Father expressed His delight in the Blessed One, at the death of Stephen to whom was granted a sight of the glory of God, and of Jesus standing on the right hand of God; at the public appearing of the Lord Jesus as given in Rev. 19; and in a subsequent day* when the angels of God shall be seen ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. The last scripture (John 1: 51) looks forward to the millennium.

At the baptism of Jesus we have a very lovely scene. He is there seen coming forth from the retirement of Nazareth to bear His public testimony for God among men. John had been sent of God to the nation to make ready a people prepared for Jehovah, he had called upon the nation to repent of its sins, and submit to his baptism. The result we know, the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God against themselves, and spurned John's baptism, while the publicans and sinners, those in whose heart God had wrought — the true remnant of their day — took their true place before God in the waters of Jordan, confessing their sins. This was surely a movement of faith, an act morally pleasing to God, fruit of His gracious operation within. And Jesus would, in grace, take His place with them in this; in His eyes they were the excellent of the earth in whom was all His delight (Ps. 16). Not that He had sins to confess — far be the thought — but the act was in His case a fulfilment of all righteousness, as He Himself said to the hesitating Baptist. He had taken His place in wondrous grace, as man below to be obedient in all things, and He would be with the remnant therefore — perfect spotless One though He was — in this movement of their souls toward God. Luke tells us He came up "praying." I may say in passing that such a notice of the Blessed One is quite in keeping with the character of the third Gospel, which presents Him to us as Son of Man (see especially Luke 6: 12; 9: 29; 11: 1; 22: 44).

And coming up thus from the water, "the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon Him; and, lo, a voice from heaven, saying, This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased." What a sight and what a thought for our hearts! The very heavens opened unto a Man below, and the Father was heard expressing the infinite delight of His heart in Him! To whom had the heavens been opened in such a manner before? To whom had the Father rendered such a testimony?

*[Only it is well to bear in mind that the introductory phrase of our Lord is not " Hereafter" as in the A.V. following the common and uncritical text but "Henceforth." The angels should emphatically serve the Son of Man — right out from the day of His humiliation to that of His millennial display — Ed. B.T.]

Constantly in scripture does God express pleasure in certain of His saints (witness Enoch, who "pleased God," and David, described by Jehovah as "a man after mine own heart"); but never had God seen perfection till the Son stooped to walk below. There the Father saw what gave His heart perfect delight, satisfaction, and rest, — dependence perfectly displayed, obedience begun, which would not stop short of even the cross of Calvary. One is reminded of the angel's utterance on the wondrous night of the incarnation: "Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, good pleasure in men" (Luke 2: 14, Darby's Translation). These are some of the results of the coming into the world of that wondrous Babe: God has been and shall yet be glorified, peace shall yet obtain upon the earth (delayed because of

Christ's rejection, Matt. 10: 34), and God's pleasure in men, which has been marred by the entrance of sin shall be restored. But in Jesus on earth God beheld One in Whom He could find pleasure — anticipative pleasure, one may say — "I am well pleased." What an answer to any one who would lower the glory of the Blessed One by insinuating a life of sin-bearing! Sin-bearing involves the displeasure of God, as is solemnly seen at the cross. What a change for the blessed Jesus there! No opened heavens, no Father's voice, but three hours of (to us) impenetrable darkness and abandonment of God. He cried in the day-time but was not heard, in the night season and was not silent. He was alone, forsaken, because bearing sin. But sin-bearing is not seen at Jordan, nor anywhere else during His path till the cross was reached, there and there alone had He to do with sin; there He suffered for our sins.

But not only do we see the Father's delight in Him shown out on the occasion we are considering, but there was the anointing with the Holy Ghost. The meat-offering of old was mingled with oil, and the unleavened cake was anointed with oil when made (Lev. 3): type of Christ begotten by the power of the Spirit, and anointed as man on earth by the Spirit, as here. Nor needed He to wait until the accomplishment of His sacrifice,* before the Spirit could be conferred upon Him. He was owned as Son, and the Spirit descended because of the perfection of His Person, and of the Divine pleasure in Him. Far otherwise is it with ourselves: we are brought through grace into the place of sons, we are owned as such, and the Spirit has been given as the seal of the relationship (Gal. 4); but the ground is the accomplished work of Christ. The gift of the Spirit to the saints is the expression of divine delight in Christ and His work.

* Aaron, in Lev. 8 a type of Christ anointed with oil before the sacrifices were slain; his sons afterwards.

The scene at the atoning of Stephen is wholly different. We there see one who had borne a faithful testimony for Christ, sharing his Master's rejection and sufferings, drinking of His cup. The Lord had forewarned His disciples of such treatment. "They shall put you out of the synagogues, yea, the time cometh that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father nor Me" (John 16: 2, 3). But Stephen was wonderfully sustained: his very face shone as an angel's; and "he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God." Here again is heaven opened, but not upon Jesus as Man on earth, but to a saint, who beholds his Lord in the place of glory on high. And one cannot but remark here the contrast between Stephen's death, and the death of the Lord. To Christ whilst bearing sine upon the tree the heavens were as iron and brass; in the hour of His deepest woe He was forsaken, He stood alone. But heaven is open now in virtue of His blood, and His martyr could look above and behold Jesus, the object of his heart, at the right hand of God. Thus was he strengthened with all might, according to the power of His glory, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness" (Col. 1: 11).

To us also heaven is open, and faith can say, "we see Jesus" (Heb. 2: 9). Of old God dwelt in the midst of His people in the sanctuary, but the veil was there, and there was no way of approach to God. Now, the veil is rent, heaven — not the sanctuary on earth — is open. The way into the holiest of all is made manifest. The Epistle to the Hebrews throughout maintains this, for our place is strewn as worshippers in the presence of God, in "the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, and not man" (Heb. 8: 2). And not only is heaven opened to us as worshippers, but 2 Cor. 3 presents to us a rather different thought. In the context the apostle contrasts the glory of the law, as seen in the face of Moses, with the glory of God, which is now seen in the face of Jesus Christ, and concludes by saying, "But we all, with unveiled face beholding the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to

glory, even as by the Lord the Spirit." Wondrous privilege! To gaze by faith upon Him there in the glory! Thus do we become like Him, we are changed into the same image.* Is there a truer way of becoming practically heavenly? Mere acquaintance with the doctrine of our heavenly position will not have this transforming effect; but occupation of heart with the heavenly Man cannot fail to influence the soul, and to detach us from all here. Christianity is in this respect altogether higher than law, it presents to us (not a legal code, but) a blessed Person, Whom we are set to learn.

*This is strikingly seen in Stephen; he prayed, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." How like Christ's utterance! "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." Stephen, however, did not add the last clause.

Did Stephen look up "filled with the Holy Ghost"? It is one great feature of Christianity that the Spirit of God is here, the gift of the Father to all who believe in the Son. There is a difference however between being "sealed" with the Spirit, and being "filled" with the Spirit, which surely is to allow the divine In-dweller His own blessed way with us, producing in us precious fruit to the glory of God. To this we are exhorted.

The third occasion of the opened heavens is deeply solemn. "And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse, and He that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He doth judge and make war." It is the day when God will bring His First-Begotten into the world once more to establish His throne and His kingdom, and to deal with men for their sins, and rejection of His grace. The world has not seen Jesus since the day of Calvary (His disciples alone saw Him during the forty days, Acts 1: 3); but it will see Him yet again. "Behold, He cometh with clouds and every eye shall see Him, and they also which pierced Him; and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of Him. Even so, Amen " (Rev. 1: 7). He is called Faithful and True and this in connection with judgment; for not a word spoken concerning judgment for the ungodly will fall to the ground: all will be solemnly accomplished. He judges and makes war in righteousness, men will have no ground for complaint on that score, but what will righteousness, unmingled with mercy, mean for them? He is "clothed with a vesture dipped in blood"; not the blood of atonement but of foes, as declared by the prophet in Isaiah 63: 3. "His name is called the Word of God," for He is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of men's hearts. He also bears another name on His vesture and thigh, "King of kings and Lord of lords." The time will then have arrived for the world-kingdom to become our Lord's and His Christ's; and He shall reign for ever and ever" (Rev. 11: 15).

And, manifested in all this glory, He has companions; for the heavenly armies follow Him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen and clean. Here we have the heavenly saints in whom He will be glorified and admired, the objects of His grace and the sharers of His throne. Angels attend: — so 2 Thess. 1: 7 speaks. They are His ministers who do His pleasure, but they do not reign, "unto angels hath He not put in subjection the world to come, whereof we speak."

But Christ shall reign "till He hath put all enemies under His feet." Then will heaven and earth be morally united, — no longer severed as now. The angels of God shall be seen ascending and descending upon the Son of Man (John 1: 51). When the Psalmist thought of the day when the whole earth shall be filled with His glory, he said,

"The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended" (Ps. 72: 20). What had he left to ask for? W. W. F.