

THE LAND IN EPHESIANS

—Excerpts from a Lecture by G. Bell

When we mention "The Land," Palestine and its conquest described in Joshua or its description in Deuteronomy comes to mind. In this article, however, I like to present what I feel is the land in New Testament language, for I believe this to be very important. To profit fully by what follows it would be best if at this point you would read Ephesians 1 for yourself.

Now that you have done so, I would like to say that the spiritual blessings belonging to us as being in Christ, which are found in verses 1-14, are the New Testament counterpart of the land. The prayer at the end of Ephesians 1 expresses the yearnings of the apostle's heart. He wants the Ephesians to enter into, to lay hold of, and to enjoy what he had set before them in the early part of the chapter. It is God's intention that we should enjoy these things even now before we get to heaven in actuality. I believe this was also in the apostle's mind when he prayed at the end of this chapter that the eyes of their understanding might be enlightened so that they might know the hope of their calling and, knowing what these things are, enjoy them. Someone once told me that there are seven blessings; I would not like to suggest, however, that all the spiritual blessings the believer has in Christ Jesus are limited by that number.

The first blessing is found in verse 4 of this chapter. But first of all (v. 3) Paul overflows with worship: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ." The outcome of our study should of course be: worshipping hearts. The apostle, thinking of what he is about to write, worships the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In type our spiritual blessings are found in Joshua; there they are earthly things in the land of Canaan, whereas in the New Testament our blessings are in heavenly places. In Ephesians we have in answer to the type in Joshua: "Every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies." These blessings are secured to us in Christ, quite apart from the fact that we ourselves are in the flesh and even apart from our recognition that our flesh has found its end in judgment at the cross. As we can see, all these blessings are wrapped up in our place in Christ. This is true of everybody who believes in Christ. You are in Christ and God has blessed you with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ. These are not earthly blessings, not Canaan, but a heavenly inheritance.

One of the first items the apostle brings before the saints is that God had chosen them in Christ before the foundation of the world. This, brothers and sisters, is a wonderful blessing to get a hold of: we, individually, were foreknown in Christ even before the foundation of the world, insignificant as we may be as far as this world is concerned. Oh, what a marvelous grace that God has so acted towards us. Now notice that if this is true, if our beginning, our roots, is before the foundation of the world, then our spiritual blessings lie right outside of this poor world and all its miserableness.

Oh, young brothers and sisters get a hold of this! Maybe some of you have just begun your Christian journey and remember the day when you said, "Christ for me." What a wonderful moment that was, wasn't it? Then, on the night you were converted, you did not realize that God had chosen you in Christ before the foundation of the world, did you? To get a hold of this gives us an immense stability. We cannot be moved if we see that our blessings are traced back to the foreknowledge of God before the foundation of the world.

Then it says, "Chosen us in Him before the world's foundation, that we should be holy and blameless before Him in love." This shows that we have been given the capacity to respond to the God who has so graced us before Him in love.

Now specially note the next verse, "Having marked us out beforehand for adoption (or sonship) through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will." Very simply, if God has taken us up in Christ before the foundation of the world, He had a place in view for each one of us. And the place which is presented to us in Ephesians is that of sonship, the relationship of sons. In Christ Jesus God has made all of us, brothers and sisters alike, sons of God by faith in Christ Jesus.

Now let us look at two remarkable little words in this verse. It says, "Adoption through Jesus Christ *to Himself*." What has God made us sons for? So that *we* might enjoy *ourselves*? So that *we* might be happy in His blessings, in His grace? No, *to Himself*! God has made us sons for His *own* delight and for His *own* joy. How sad it is that we find so little response to this, to these two little words: *to Himself*. They occur twice in this Epistle. In chapter 5, Christ is going to present the Church to

Himself in the day which is yet to come. But for the moment we have been made sons to God Himself. God wants His portion. God wants His response from these hearts of ours into which He has poured the Spirit of His Son whereby we cry Abba Father. It is in this way that God is getting His portion from the place He has given us as sons. This of course according to the good pleasure of His will. Yes, what we have in Ephesians 1 is right outside man's actings altogether. It is God acting for Himself. In fact, God pleases Himself in Ephesians 1. This was the second blessing I liked to point out; it is sonship by Jesus Christ to Himself.

Then thirdly, we have another beautiful verse, "To the praise of the glory of His grace through which He has made us accepted in the Beloved." He does not say, "in Christ," but, "in the Beloved," which seems to suggest that we are brought into a place of love supreme. Indeed, does it not mean: His place is our place? His place is the measure of our place; as He is, so are we in this world; the love which is His, shines on us! This is what it means to be "accepted in the Beloved." Now I appeal to you, reader, to lay hold of these things. So far we have found three spiritual blessings: chosen, marked out beforehand to sonship, accepted in the Beloved.

I believe that these things are what we have in "the land," in Christ, outside of the flesh. As I mentioned before, the apostle bent his knees and prayed with all his heart and soul that the Ephesian saints would lay hold upon these things. It was the great desire of the blessed God and the desire of the apostle, just as it is our desire for ourselves, that we should lay hold upon these wonderful truths; that we would make them our own and respond to the blessed God who has blessed us. The word: "Sons through Jesus Christ to Himself" tell me that God wants a response from those who are saturated by the wonder of the grace of God who has taken us into favour.

Let us now proceed with verse 7. Some have suggested that here we come down a bit. But I am not so sure about that. "in whom we have redemption, through His blood, the forgiveness of offences." This is a wonderful blessing, isn't it? Let us not call it a simple blessing. How could we ever understand or enjoy sonship if we did not see the complete clearance of every trace of guilt? How could we ever enter into our acceptance in divine favour if we did not know with certainty that every such question has been settled once and for all? The same idea is found in John's Epistle where John would have us to enter into the joy of eternal life. He tells us, "I write to you, children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake."

Brethren, unless our consciences and our hearts are at rest in the presence of God, we will never enjoy our sonship's place, we will never enjoy adoption, nor enjoy acceptance. Oh, thank God for the work of Christ, in whom we have redemption through His blood. Oh, let us thank God for this lovely verse: "In whom we have... the forgiveness of offences." Do not let us refer to it as one of the elementary blessings! Maybe it is one of the starting points; that is as far as I would go. David described the blessedness of the man whose sins are forgiven; it is a wonderful blessing! We find it back here in the middle of this chapter which scales the heights: "in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of offences." Oh, we should never get very far away from the work of Christ. Everything finds its centre there; all our blessings are secured at the cross, where we receive redemption through His blood even the forgiveness of our sins.

But let us continue. The same grace which brought us the forgiveness of sins has introduced us into a wonderful secret. God has made known to us His secrets. God has, as it were, said, "Look, I am going to tell you about the place that I have in My very bosom for My beloved Son, the Lord Jesus Christ." Are you interested in this my dear Christian friend? Surely, we are interested when God tells us what He has destined His beloved Son for. Brethren, we ought to be vitally interested in this.

Let us look once more at the passage, "Which He has caused to abound towards us in all wisdom and intelligence, having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself." Here it is, "For the administration of the fulness of times; to head up all things in the Christ, the things in the heavens and the things upon the earth." The world knows nothing about these things; they are occupied with their problems. But God has told *us* the secrets of His own heart. He has told us what He intends to do with the Person who is your Saviour and mine. The One who has brought us redemption through His blood, the One in whom we are blessed before God, the One who is placed there and who is the measure of our acceptance. God has bent down in His infinite love and grace and told us exactly the place that He has in mind for Christ. What kind of place does God have for Christ? My brethren are you not thrilled when you think of a day which is yet to come in which the Lord Jesus will be the Centre of a universe of bliss?

We often sing, "Of the vast universe of bliss, the Centre Thou, and Sun." This is what God has whispered as it were into our hearts. He led us into His secrets for we are His friends, not servants. The servant does not know what his lord does, the friend does. And here in the Epistle to the Ephesians, God has told us that Christ is going to be the Centre of all things in heaven and on earth. Brethren, these things ought to fill, thrill and flood our hearts. Just to think of it: the Person who has won our hearts' affections, the blessed Man of Calvary's cross is going to fill the universe. Fill it; yes, flood it! The

knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth, as the waters cover the sea. Everything will be headed up in the Lord Jesus Christ.

When we realize these things, we will be filled with a sense of the dignity which God has conferred upon us as saints of God. I do not say, of course, that we will become swollen-headed. No, if we get these things in the power of the Spirit we will not get swollen heads dear brethren. The apostle who wrote these blessed words said, "To me, *less than the least of all saints* has this grace been given." If we lay a hold of these things, it will not inflate us. It will keep us low, yet at the same time it will give us a dignity, to think of the place and portion which is ours in Christ.

Now let us go to verse 11 where he says, "in whom we have also obtained an inheritance, being marked out beforehand according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His own will." We are not the inheritance, we are those who share the inheritance with Him. As we read elsewhere, we are sons and heirs, co-heirs. Here we read the same thing, "In whom we have also obtained an inheritance. We have been marked out for this very position, we share it with Him. How wonderful: linked with Him we have died with Him, are raised with Him, and are seated in Him in heavenly places. Now the day is coming, beloved, when we will be co-heirs with Him of the inheritance, when the things in the heavens and the things upon the earth will be subjected to Him.

Then he goes on to say, "in whom ye also have trusted, having heard the word of the truth, the glad tidings of your salvation; in whom also, having believed (after ye believed), ye have been sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise." Here we have another wonderful blessing before we get to the end: we have been sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise. God has marked us off as His own property. We often hear how farmers brand their sheep, they mark the sheep as their property. This is the idea, I think, of this seal; after believing the gospel of our salvation we are sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise. Everyone of us who believes has God's seal upon him, God's mark of ownership if you like.

Then that same Spirit is presented as the earnest of the inheritance. An earnest is a part payment, so the Spirit of God is a part payment, a surety, that all that the apostle delineated for us in this chapter will surely be ours one day in His matchless grace. God has given us, in the power of His Spirit the capacity to enjoy these things now. How else can we make these divine things our own? What power do we have in ourselves? Nothing whatever! Only in the Spirit's power do we lay hold upon these divine things, it is in the power of the Spirit that we enter the land.

Now I would like to repeat: what we have in Ephesians 1 answers to the land in Joshua 5. The apostle prayed earnestly that the saints of God might lay hold of the things he had told them in the first chapter. In chapter 3 he again bends his knees; one senses his earnestness. In Colossians he agonizes about it, for that is the sense of the word he uses there for his praying. His deep desire is that the saints might not only hear these things and receive them, but that they might enjoy them, entering into them in the power of the Holy Spirit which God has given them. May this be so for our readers, too.

THE OFFERINGS (22)

—H. L. Heijkoop

Leviticus 4:22-35

In the first part of this chapter we saw those cases in which the anointed priest and the entire assembly of Israel had sinned through inadvertence. As a result of this the fellowship between God and the assembly was interrupted. This asked for blood to be applied to the horns of the golden altar of incense. Now we come to the case where someone from among the people has sinned. Certainly, a prince is mentioned first of all, but he is also one of the people. No matter how serious his sin is, it does not result in a break of fellowship between God and the entire assembly. Therefore this case did not require that blood be brought into the sanctuary, but that it be put on the horns of the altar of burnt-offering. That altar is the place where one meets God upon earth, for in these chapters the altar of burnt-offering speaks of the Lord's table.

It is serious when a prince sins. He is someone who occupies a very important position in the midst of the people of God and he must possess spiritual qualities which make him worthy of it. It is possible that someone puts himself in this position, but of this the Word of God does not speak here; here it deals with someone who received it from God. That it is not the same as the priestly position can be seen in Nehemiah. He was a leader among the people, but not a priest. Ezra was a priest, and we notice that he was much more spiritual than Nehemiah. Yet God used Nehemiah as a chief among the people.

His position and his moral qualities as chief made it all the more serious for him to sin. In verse 22 it says, "When a prince sinneth and through inadvertence doeth (somewhat against) any of all the commandments of Jehovah his God (in things) which should not be done." A leader among the believers must maintain a special relationship with God. He must lead the people of God as God's representative; for this reason it is very serious when he sins. Through his relationship with God he ought to know what should not be done, and this should prevent his sinning through inadvertence. If he does so anyway, he must offer a sin-offering. This means that he has to return to the cross to once again learn there how terrible sin is, also the particular sin that he has committed.

We saw already that, when the entire assembly had sinned, a young bullock had to be sacrificed. According to Leviticus 16, the same sacrifice was required for the house of Aaron and it speaks of a thorough knowledge of the work of the Lord Jesus. Here, however, a prince had to bring "a buck of the goats, a male without blemish" (v. 23). In Leviticus 16 Aaron had to take also two bucks of the goats for the people. Matthew 25 can give us some insight in this. There we see the Lord, seated upon His judgment seat in the beginning of the Millennium, distinguishing between the sheep and the goats; the latter ones are set for judgment. This shows that in God's Word, a buck of the goats speaks specially of God's judgment over sin; it is the true sin-offering. Therefore a chief had to bring a buck of the goats, and it had to be one without blemish.

The female animal speaks of position but the male of the energy wherewith the position is realized. And since the goat is particularly a type of the Lord Jesus as sin-offering, the buck of the goat speaks of the power with which He has given Himself as such, He was not only passively made sin to die. True, 2 Corinthians 5:21 shows the Lord in such a passive condition: God made Him a sin-offering. But Hebrews 9:26 says that He has been manifested "once in the consummation of the ages... for the putting away of sin by His sacrifice." In that verse we see the power with which the Lord has accomplished the work. His whole desire was, to do away with sin. And this shows how terrible sin was in His eyes. A prince who had sinned had to become aware of this.

No doubt, God is merciful. But when it is a matter of fellowship between man and God, then all has to be according to His holiness and it cannot be left up to man to say what is sufficient. However, God, in His grace, takes account of the person concerned. One's responsibility increases with one's insight in God's thoughts and the position one occupies in the midst of the believers. A prince of the people has more responsibility than a normal person from among the people; God expects from him more insight in the work of the Lord Jesus. And insofar he has considered it, observing how terrible sin is in God's eyes and in the eyes of the Lord Jesus, he brings a buck (v. 23). And then he will "lay his hand on the head of the goat, and slaughter it at the place where they slaughter the burnt-offering before the Jehovah: it is a sin-offering" (v. 24). This means that he had to look to the cross to see how the Lord has died for our sins, preferring to go into death rather than to let sin continue to exist. In this manner he saw how terrible sin is, and then, laying his hands on the head of the buck, he made himself one with the Lord Jesus, upon whose head the judgment of God was executed. Afterwards he had to slaughter the buck, he had to become aware that the Lord Jesus has died for that particular sin of his. This brings to true self-judgment. Once we see how terrible sin is in God's eyes and how much the Lord had to suffer for it, we learn to hate sin and to judge ourselves in the light of God.

Then we see in verse 25 what the priest had to do. The prince was not allowed to do it himself, but the priest had to do it, for he was used to be in the presence of God and knew what was needed to restore fellowship. "And the priest shall take of the blood of the sin-offering with his finger, and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt-offering, and shall pour out its blood at the bottom of the altar of burnt-offering." The Lord's table would have become defiled if he had taken his place there. But now that he had judged himself, he is cleansed and the fellowship is restored.

In verse 26 we see something very beautiful connected with what preceded: "He shall burn all its fat on the altar, as the fat of the sacrifice of peace-offering; and the priest shall make atonement for him to cleanse him from his sin, and it shall be forgiven him." We know that the peace-offering speaks of the fellowship of the Father and of the Lord Jesus with His people. It is practically the service that we have on Sunday morning. When someone has sinned he is unfit to partake of it. But when he, through self-judgment, has cleansed himself, the fellowship is restored and he can once again take part in the celebration of this feast. This is now brought to his attention so that he may no longer remain under the burden of what he has done, but see that the Lord Jesus has borne his judgment, and that he is allowed to take his place once again.

The priest caused the fat of the sin-offering to go up in smoke on the altar, just as the fat of the peace-offering. The fat speaks of the energy of the will. It presents the wonderful power with which the Lord Jesus has accomplished the work and it directs our thoughts to the burnt-offering. If one has really brought a sin-offering, he will, without fail, arrive at the burnt-offering. For when we judge ourselves, seeing at the cross how terrible our sin is, God will continue His work in us and the Holy Spirit will lead us on. Then we will not only see that the Lord Jesus bore our sins, but that He at the same time has fully glorified God. Our Advocate is the Lord Jesus, the righteous One. As soon as a prince has come so far that he senses in his soul what lives in the heart of God, as shown in the burnt-offering, that which is written at the end of verse

26 becomes a reality for him: "And the priest shall make atonement for him to cleanse him from his sin, and it shall be forgiven him."

From verse 27 onward, the chapter speaks of the sin of one of the people of the land. As has been said before, the seriousness of the sin depends upon the person who has committed it. Yet, for every believer it holds true that the fellowship has been broken by his sin. God cannot lower His measure of holiness. Although He can take account of each individual's personal responsibility or insight, the sin must be judged. Therefore, this man had to bring something and to realize that his deed was sin. Consequently, this is also maintained in verse 27: "And if any one of the people of the land sin through inadvertence, that he do somewhat against any of the commandments of Jehovah in things which should not be done, and be guilty; if his sin, which he hath sinned, come to his knowledge, . . ." This last clause is not found in the section dealing with the sin-offering for a priest. It was possible that it never reached the conscience of this man of the people that his deed was really sin; and that had to be recognized first of all. He only had to offer "a goat, a female without blemish," it did not need to be a buck. Still his sacrifice spoke of God's judgment over sin. The female animal refers to the condition, to the fact that the Lord has been made sin. Rather than looking to the power with which the Lord has accomplished the work upon the cross, it speaks of the fact that God had to execute judgment over the sin. It tells us that the Lord *had* to die, but not that He *wanted* to do this to put sin away.

We clearly see that this sacrifice is somewhat weaker than that for a prince. Nevertheless, also this man had to put his hand upon the head of the sacrifice and to slaughter it in the place where one slaughters the burnt-offering (v. 29). He also had to be aware that the Lord had died for his sins; he himself had to slaughter the goat, but he had to do so at the place where the burnt-offering was slaughtered. Even a sin-offering was slaughtered there, where everything speaks of the burnt-offering, and in the burnt-offering we saw what we have become before God on the basis of the work of the Lord Jesus.

Also here the priest puts the blood of the goat on the horns of the altar of burnt-offering; this restores the fellowship at the Lord's table. Then we find in verse 31 a specific grace of God: "And he shall take away all the fat thereof, as the fat is taken away from off the sacrifice of peace-offering; and the priest shall burn it on the altar, for a sweet odour to Jehovah." One might perhaps think this instruction to be identical to the one given for the prince, but here is added: "for a sweet odour to Jehovah." This is the only time these words occur in this chapter. They are not used in the instructions for a prince, neither in those for the anointed priest or for the entire assembly; here only they are used in connection with a sin-offering. This sentence has been added here because God wished to make this weak believer aware of his restoration. Now this believer can, very consciously, make the restoration of his soul into a reality. "And the priest will make atonement for him, and it shall be forgiven him."

In verses 32-35 we have an exceptional case. The sacrifice for the anointed priest, for the entire assembly and for a chief was a prescribed sacrifice; it was not possible to depart from it. Here, however, this was allowed. If someone could not bring a goat, it was possible for him to come with a lamb, "A female without blemish shall he bring it." The lamb also speaks of the work of the Lord Jesus, but it speaks of the meekness and patience with which He accomplished the work, rather than of God's judgment over sin. It therefore gives a weaker presentation of the sin-offering than a goat. In this we see God's grace, which is willing to be satisfied with a lamb.

It may be well to repeat at this point that a prince was not allowed to bring a lamb, nor was anyone else who wanted to do so. God considers each one according to his spiritual condition. He takes account of the fact that someone has been converted only recently, or whether, through special circumstances, someone is not yet very spiritual. But that does not mean that we may boast in this. A prince was not allowed to say, "I am sorry," and then think that all is all right He had to bring a buck of the goats to the entrance of the tent of meeting, that is to say he had to acknowledge his sin in the midst of the assembly. But in the case of one who was spiritually poor (and God knows whether we are spiritually rich or poor), God was satisfied with a lamb only, as long as it spoke of the work of the Lord Jesus upon the cross. Only at the cross we can learn what sin is and only there we can come to a true self-judgment. But God knows what each can give according to his spiritual wealth.

As far as the rest (vv. 33-35) is concerned, we find the same thing as in the previous verses. This man too had to put his hands on the head of the sacrifice and to slaughter it. Also for him the priest had to put the blood upon the horns of the altar of burnt offering and to remove the fat, just as he had to do for the peace-offering. But in verse 35 we see again something special, "And the priest shall burn them on the altar, with Jehovah's offerings by fire." This we did not find with any of the other sin-offerings. Only in the case where a lamb is brought is it mentioned that God connects it with *every* aspect of the work of the Lord Jesus, and not just with that aspect which relates to God's judgment over sin. For this reason the lamb's fat had to be put upon the offerings by fire of the Lord, so as to give a soul a better knowledge of the work of the Lord Jesus; of course insofar as this soul was able to understand this.

To Be cont'd

WHEN WOULD YOU LEAVE YOUR CHURCH?

—J. G. Fijnvandraat

(Translated from the Dutch, out of: Bode van het Heil in Christus — Dec. 1979)

We were visiting some Christian friends who were alarmed about the present situation in their denomination. They had told us in detail about the circumstances which prevailed there and the doctrines which had recently been introduced.

From our side we had tried to evaluate these things in the light of God's Word. When we had said all there was to say, we intended to leave but then our host came with this concrete question: "When would you leave your church?"

Leaving the term church for what it was, I answered rather abruptly: "As soon as the rights of Christ as Lord over His house and as Head of His body would no longer be recognized."

Our friend pondered this for a moment, and then returned the pointed question, "And when would you say this would be the case?"

My answer was, "To me this would be the case when, through human organizational decrees, the exercise of the priesthood of all believers would be hindered or the free exercise of the gifts under the leading of the Holy Spirit would be restricted."

This, of course, was not the end of the conversation; we started, so to say, from square one. Here I like to relate a few of the points which are of importance for this question.

1. There are plenty of people who leave a particular denomination for the sake of the atmosphere, the climate so to say, that prevails there. Such a purely subjective consideration, however, may never be our yardstick. In the assembly in Corinth the people were not at all "so nice" and the atmosphere was anything but good. Yet, Paul does not advise the believers to leave.

2. Then there are some who do not look at the people but who take the "sermon" as yardstick. As long as a gifted speaker brings a good message all is well; but a sermon of doubtful quality will cause them to pack and leave to find it somewhere else. This, however, is not to be the test either, in spite of the fact that recently a minister defended such action with the words, "Don't you buy your bread at the bakery which bakes the best bread?"

3. In both these cases the concern of the persons involved is: whether or not they receive what they consider desirable. Such a starting point, however, is wrong. It is not a question of *our* receiving what we need, but whether or not *God* receives His due. Israel's altar service was not determined by the question whether Israel received what it thought it needed. The question was whether or not God received what was rightfully His. Well then, God has a right to our sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving. He has made us all priests. God has reserved for Himself the right to use, through the Holy Spirit, whom He will, to give thanks, to give out a hymn, to praise God or to honour Him by reading a portion of Scripture. When we limit that right, we fail to give God His due, and ignore the rights of the Lord Jesus.

4. For the ministry of the Word, God has given gifts for the edification of the body of Christ. To the one He has given a word of knowledge, to the other a word of wisdom. And in the meetings God wants each one to exercise his gift under the leading of His Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:4-11). When, through organizational measures, this is no longer possible, it has been made impossible for Christ to minister to His body as He will.

5. Quite a number of Christians are ill at ease about the way things are going in "their" denomination. And true enough, many of them are in dire circumstances. They notice how wrong doctrine is getting the overhand. They observe how God's Word is put aside as far as the practical life is concerned. They no longer receive spiritual food. No doubt this is a sad and sorrowful situation. What I am about to say now may seem hard, but those believers are nevertheless not sufficiently concerned. For, although they are alarmed about the outward signs of decline, they have never been alarmed about the fact that, by their Church system, God-given precepts have been put aside. This, nevertheless, is the case; and not seldom it is admitted with the words, "Yes, that is how the Bible says it, but nowadays this can no longer be done."

I believe that it is essential that we bring these things to the attention of any Christian we encounter who is alarmed about the conditions. Happily there are occasions when we meet such fellow Christians. When they visit meetings where

Christians meet unto the name of the Lord Jesus, they are often noticeably refreshed. They even say so; they express to be glad to be in a place where the authority of the Bible is still recognized. They are glad to receive some spiritual food. However, if this is their only motive for being there, they will sooner or later be disappointed. For they do not go there because they realize that God wants them there, but because they have been offered a well spread spiritual sandwich which suited their taste. If, however, the ministry turns out to be a little below par, and when the atmosphere is not quite what they were looking for, well... then they go again somewhere else.

In saying this I do not seek to excuse those Christians who gather unto the name of the Lord Jesus. They are obligated to read the Scriptures intensively, thereby developing themselves spiritually so that God can indeed use them to give good, sound, spiritual ministry. They must see to it that the spiritual climate which they create amongst themselves is sound and that the "flesh" does not spoil the atmosphere. They have a responsibility towards believers who seek contact with them. They can serve their brethren by showing them that not only what they do is important, but that the motive for their actions weighs just as heavy. In connection with this last remark I like to add: it is essential to show them that not *our* interests, but God's interests alone are allowed to be the motive for leaving or joining a certain fellowship.

WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WORDS: TO BE GATHERED UNTO THE NAME...?

—J. Ph. Fijnvandraat

(From the Dutch — Bode van het Heil in Christus — Feb. 1980)

I. THE PARTICULAR CHOICE OF WORDS IN MATTHEW 18:20

Every language has its own rules. For instance we know various forms of verbs, singular and plural forms, "cases" etc. The types and numbers of these forms can vary quite a bit from language to language.

Similarly there is a considerable difference between the Greek of the New Testament and English. To translate well is therefore often a difficult task. There are cases in which it is necessary to clarify the sense of a particular expression by means of a more detailed description. That problem we encounter with the above Bible verse.

On top of this we have the added difficulty that a lack of feel for language can play tricks with us in reading. This is especially so in our time, in which we are bombarded with words by the various media; we run the risk to "listen" superficially, even when we read.

For instance, the distinction between "have gathered" and "are gathered" (cf. "have gathered together" in the NASB and "come together" in the NIV — the translator.) will escape many who read only superficially.

Not too long ago, this struck me when I received a letter sent "on behalf of the saints who had gathered at..." This expression we do not find in Scripture. Persons acquainted with the Greek tell us that Matthew 18:20 contains a grammatical form we do not find in our language. Consequently there is some clarification needed to understand this verse fully. The need for this is not only evident from the ease wherewith some replace the "are gathered" by "have gathered," but also from the way some misuse this verse.

II. THE GRAMMATICAL CHARACTER OF THESE WORDS

Greek scholars assure us that we are looking at a "passive" expression, and that besides this, we are dealing with a completed action.

This leads to a few important conclusions!

1. "To be gathered together" is consequently the result of a completed action.

The perfect tense in which it is written indicates that the being gathered together has been completed. This means that these believers are permanently joined together. Their meeting with one another is therefore not by chance. The following verses contain the same thought: "So that, my brethren, when ye come together to eat, wait for one another" (1

Corinthians 11:33); "Aquila and Priscilla, with the assembly in their house, salute you much in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 16:19).

2. *Is the expression meant to be passive?*

The grammatical form used here does not always ask for a passive form in other languages, for the simple fact that gathering, in itself, is an action. Why do we, in spite of this, not translate "have gathered (themselves)", but "are gathered together"? The answer to this flows from the answer to another question.

If this gathering involves an action, whose action is it then? To put it differently, who or what is the gathering power here? The answer to this should not be too hard for any believer: it is the Holy Spirit. If this is so, it is immediately clear why the verse is to be translated: "are gathered together" and not: "have gathered." This will become much more clear when we observe that other Scripture verses also show that our coming to the Lord is not a matter of our own initiative but of God's guidance in our lives.

It is obviously true that at one time or another we ourselves must resolve to go to the meeting. But such a decision is inseparably connected with three things:

- a. Such a meeting must be made possible, i.e. a meeting that takes place on the basis which God has given to His children in the work of redemption of Christ, in the ascension of Christ and in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.
- b. We ourselves must somehow have become acquainted with this basis and with the practical possibility to still meet on this basis in our time.
- c. We must be prepared — in spite of the possible price to be paid, e.g. loss of friends, loss of an influential position in the church, loss of income, mockery, or whatever may be the case — to take this step!

I don't think that we need to elaborate on it that each of these three things are given or worked by God! "it is God who works in you both the willing and the working according to His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). And this holds all the more true when it concerns our coming to the Lord!

In John 11:52 the Lord says that He would die "that He should also gather into one the children of God who were scattered abroad." Obviously, these children of God did not do this themselves. Similarly John 12:32 says, "And I, if I be lifted up out of the earth, will draw all to me."

III. *THE IMPORTANT CONSEQUENCES*

1. *The Lord gathers His own to Himself.*

The being gathered together in Matthew 18:20 is therefore a *result* of a work done by the Lord. A converted Jehovah Witness asked me which denomination he ought to join. It was apparent from what he told me that he had asked this question without satisfactory result in the evangelical interdenominational group where he had come to know the Lord. They left it up to his own judgment, since in such interdenominational groups they could not express preference for any circle; didn't they all go to different "churches"? Our friend, who had learned from the Jehovah Witnesses that the Scriptures must be the guide for all our actions, was hardly satisfied with their answers. Initially he seemed to be disappointed once more when I myself also refused to tell him where to go. But this disappointment disappeared when I told him that I was able to show him a foolproof way whereby he himself could find the proper place. I told him to read Matthew 18:20 and asked him, who would be the one who gathered the believers unto the name. Upon a moment's reflection he replied, "That must be the Lord Himself." I reacted to this with a simple, "Well, in that case the solution is clear enough. You should not ask men where you ought to go, for then Mr. A. will send you here and Mr. B. there and you end up going from pillar to post. You will discover that some gather on the basis of an identical insight in the application of baptism. Others are not satisfied with this and gather upon the acceptance of a creed formulated by men. Others again do not even consider this sufficient, but insist on one's subjection to a well documented liturgy, entirely established by men, as well as one's acceptance of the institution they have established. Therefore you should ask the Lord to lead your life in such a way that you will find those who 'are gathered together unto His name' and you should not be satisfied with anything less! He will not fail your faith and He will certainly answer a prayer of faith in this matter." A few months later I found him in the presence of believers who are gathered unto the name of the Lord.

2. The basis is not determined by us!

Many Christians are of course well aware that the basis and manner of their meetings deviates sharply from that of the first Christians. They "explain" this with an appeal to "the hand of God in the history of the Church" or "the path along which the Holy Spirit has led the Church in the course of the ages" or some other expression of similar significance. However, when one asks how we can be sure of this, and whereby we can test whether a certain development is indeed to be seen as "the hand of God" or "the leading of the God's Spirit," the entire discussion becomes rather foggy. If one desires to use Scripture as the criterion, the conversation not seldom ends with an accusation of "biblicism" — the exact meaning of which turns out to be just as foggy, but in any case it seems always to be a great sin. And then there are also those believers who gather outside the large "official" (by the way, what is that in this connection?) churches who also choose their own basis.

Let us take an example to clarify what I mean. Our dear Baptist brethren gather themselves on the basis of the baptism of believers by means of submersion. Although I personally subscribe wholeheartedly to the claim that only believers ought to be baptized, I am not allowed to elevate this practice *derived* from Scripture to the basis of oneness and fellowship. If other Christians with sincere hearts believe to be obedient to the Lord by honouring His command to baptize, but in doing so believe that Scripture teaches them a different practice of baptism (e.g. household baptism), I must honour their conscience. Not baptism, but the Lord unites us.

3. I must listen.

If, then, it is the Lord who by His Spirit desires to bring believers together, I must ask the Lord to lead me to that place in Christendom where believers are gathered together unto His name. If this longing lives in my heart but there are no believers in my surroundings who are gathered together on this basis, then I can only ask the Lord to open the eyes of others in my surroundings so that they may see the simple basis upon which He desires to gather His own, and that He will cause me to get acquainted with them. Some years ago some Christians began to meet unto the name of the Lord Jesus in just this manner not far from where I lived. Naturally, one would also ask the Lord for contact with those who meet on this basis in other places. If travel opportunities are available, one would - as long as no other believers in one's own surroundings had found this basis - as much as possible visit meetings of this type in distant places, even if this could not be done each week.

To be cont'd

QUOTES

Being gathered unto the name of the Lord Jesus ... is nothing less than the constitutive principle of the church, abides always (even when not assembled) in its relation and its consequences, and has its "within" and "without" with incumbent duties permanently.

In earlier days believers were freely received (amongst those gathered unto the name of the Lord Jesus) as Christ's members who, having no right notion of the church, were hardly counted guilty of departure from what was of God. Yet those who personally departed could plead for no such favour.

But there is now an ominous change foreboding "the apostasy." No saint in those days tolerated the sacerdotalism of Christendom with its lie of apostolic succession as the warrant, its saving ordinances and its idolatry with the real presence of a demon. Still less had (they) to challenge those who countenanced the gross skepticism of the Higher critics, though (they) had to refuse such as fell into the denial of God's judgment of sins or the soul's natural immortality. We are now bound to apply these later tests of Scripture.

(WK in "The Bible Treasury" — Vol. N5, pg. 297)