

The Two Beginnings

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It would be a very wonderful thing if we could spend some time in seeing God's line right from the beginning up to Christ. There were many generations which came to an end, and in one place there is a large summary of what came and what finished. It says 'So-and-so lived, for so long, and he died.' That is said about a long list of people - they lived and then they died. However, right through there is one line that is the living line, continuing straight through history up to Christ. You can follow that line quite clearly, although, at times, it seemed to go underground.

At a certain point in that movement of God, we find ourselves in the presence of His beginning with Israel. It has moved from individuals to the point where the nation comes into view. Up to then the movement had been with individuals - Abel, Enoch, Noah. Then, when it reached Abraham the nation came on the horizon, that is, the Israel of history, of this earth.

We are going to note how God began with Israel, and how the principle of that beginning is transferred to the new, heavenly Israel in Christ. It is very impressive to find that the beginning of the first Israel is in the New Testament, in the Book of the Acts. Note that, for it is a significant thing. The Book of the Acts is the link between the old and the new: the focal point of the transition from the one to the other is there. Interestingly enough, it is in the discourse of the martyr, Stephen. The new Israel received a great impetus by his death.

The first thing that Stephen said to the old Israel was: "The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia" (Acts 7:2)... "The God of glory appeared." That was the first movement toward the old Israel, and that is exactly the first movement toward the new Israel: and we find that beginning in the New Testament.

We turn again to the Gospel by John: "In the beginning was the Word... and the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us": now note! "and we beheld his glory" (John 1:1-14 - R.V. margin). Then turn again to the Letter to the Hebrews: "God... hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in his Son... the effulgence of his glory" (Hebrews 1:1-3)... "The God of glory appeared... and hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in his Son... the effulgence of his glory."

First of all, then, God is breaking into human history. That is how it was with the first Israel. Away there, in Ur of the Chaldees, a pagan country with two thousand other gods, the God of glory broke in and changed the course of history. Thus He took His first step toward the securing of Israel.

The first chapter of John shows the God of glory breaking into human history in a new way.

That, of course, is in the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments, and you may have taken it in mentally, viewing it in an objective way. But you must just take hold of that and let it apply to you personally, because it relates to you and to me. You and I are called by God to be the companions of Christ in a heavenly calling and this belongs to all of us. The very beginning of our history as God's heavenly Israel is His intervention in our lives. Perhaps it was just as unexpected to some of us as it was to Abraham in Ur of the Chaldees. We were living our lives in this world, were mixed up in the course of things here and were ruled by the god of this world. We were just there, one in a great crowd... and then God broke in. When God breaks into a life there is no doubt about it. It is a turning-point in our history, and the nature of the change is that we no longer belong to this world. We have become members of a new Israel, of a heavenly people with a new spiritual nature. It may not have been with us just as it was with Abraham, but it is essential for every one of us to know that God has entered into our human history. In the first place it was not something from our side, but it was from God's side. He took the initiative, perhaps in a wonderful way, or in a very simple way. It may belong to a moment in time, or it may belong to days, weeks or months. However, the fact is that God came in where we were. How did God come in? How should we put it, if we wanted to put it into words? Well, it says here about the old Israel: "The God of glory appeared". Could you put it like that in your experience?

These words in the New Testament explain that. God came in Jesus Christ, and in Him is the glory of God. And as we have seen Jesus Christ, so we have come into touch with the God of glory. In the words of the Letter to the Hebrews: "God... hath... spoken unto us in his son". All those who know that Jesus Christ has come into their lives really do know that the God of glory has come in. And so John, after saying that "the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us", says, "and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father".

And what is the glory? John goes on to say "full of grace and truth". You will notice that in the New Testament grace and glory always go together. If you want to know what is the glory of God, well, it is the grace of God, and if you want to know what is the grace of God, it is the glory of God. It is the glory of God to be gracious. He glories in being gracious, and when you know the grace of God, then you know the glory of God. The glory of God will always come to us along the line of grace, and so, because of grace, we shall be able to say: "We beheld his glory".

Perhaps you know that that word 'glory' is one of the big words in John's Gospel. If you have never done so, I advise you to go through the Gospel and underline that word.

(Now, just a little word to the young Christians who have not yet done a lot of Bible study. I had not thought of saying this, but perhaps it will be helpful. I do not profess to know a great deal about the Bible, indeed, I know very little of it, but I will tell you how I started to study it. I bought a box of coloured pencils and a new Bible. I started first with John's Gospel and I gave a certain colour to the same word through the Gospel. Of course, I always put green where the word 'life' is found! You see it all around - green speaks of life. Wherever the word 'glory' appears I put blue - that is the colour for heaven. I put red whenever anything to do with the blood or the Cross appeared - and so I went on. I had a wonderful result in the Gospel of John when I had finished! That is only a suggestion, but I hope that you may find it a helpful one. There are a lot more colours than those three!)

We are saying that 'glory' is one of John's great words, and all the references in his Gospel to Christ's glory are related to His super-natural person and His super-natural power. When John wrote "We beheld his glory" it was many years after the Lord Jesus had come and gone. John's Gospel is one of the last books of the New Testament. All the other Apostles had probably gone to the Lord when John wrote it. So he was looking back over all that history and putting his impressions into words, and as he thought of the Lord Jesus, His life, His work, His teaching and everything else about Him, he summed it all up in this: "We beheld his glory".

How did John behold the glory of the Lord Jesus? He did so on many occasions and by a whole series of humanly impossible situations.

(That is another line of study for you! Go to the Gospel by John and see how many impossible situations you can find.)

The Gospel is just full of impossible situations. There is the marriage in Cana, when the wine failed. Humanly, that is an impossible situation. Then there is Nicodemus and what is it that he is saying? "How can a man be born when he is old?" (John 3:4). An impossible situation! Think of the woman of Samaria. She had tried everything to find satisfaction. An impossible situation! And you can go right on like that. In all these situations Jesus came in and turned the impossible into actuality. Thus it says at the end of the account of the marriage in Cana: "This beginning of his signs did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested his glory" (John 2:11). That was the principle which governed everything. It does not always say so in those words, but if you went back with that woman of Samaria into the city and heard her shouting to all the people: "Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: can this be the Christ?" (John 4:29), you would conclude that she had beheld His glory.

So you go right on to Lazarus. Jesus said: "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified thereby" (John 11:4). And in the difficulty being faced by the sisters, when they could not altogether accept the fact that their problem was going to be solved at once, and they said: "I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day" (John 11:24), Jesus replied: "Said I not unto thee, that if thou believedst, thou shouldst see the glory of God?" (John 11:40). You see, the glory of God in Jesus Christ related to what God could do that no one else could do. It was the supernatural person and power of the Son of God.

That is the glory of God: and that is why we sometimes have such a difficulty in getting through. Perhaps you have often been troubled because of the difficulty some soul has in getting through to the Lord? It almost seems as though the Lord does not want to save them. They go through difficulties, sometimes for days, weeks or months, and all the time they are arguing and bringing up their problems, but nothing seems to happen. Then, at last, it does happen and they come through. Why is that? God is emphatically saying: 'This is going to be of Me, and not of yourself,' No man or woman can save himself or herself, even with all the goodwill of other people to help. The salvation of a soul is an impossible thing but for God, and He sees to it that it is put upon the supernatural basis. He very often does not come in until we have come to the point of despair - but He does come in then.

And what is true about salvation is so often true about our spiritual history. Again and again we are brought to the point where situations are quite impossible where man is concerned. We find we cannot solve that problem ourselves, or change that situation. If we were people of this world we might be able to do it, but somehow or other, because we are the Lord's people, it just does not work. All our cleverness fails. Naturally there is no reason why we should not get on, but the fact is that we just do not. We try everything and are greatly perplexed. We are being brought more and more to despair, and finally to the point where we say: 'Well, only the Lord can do this!' - and that is exactly what the Lord has been working for. When the God of glory appears, He appears as the God of glory. Do you see the point? Well, I said that the word 'glory' in John's Gospel is connected with the supernatural power of Jesus Christ, and we can only learn who Jesus is by coming up against situations in which He is the only one who can help us. The more we go on to learn about the Lord Jesus the more impossible will life be, and situations become, on this earth.

That is the beginning of the God of glory.

Note the next thing: God's glory in Abraham reached its climax in sonship. There were many things in the life of Abraham when the God of glory needed to come in and so we read that in different situations 'the Lord appeared unto Abraham'. However, the peak of all God's appearances to Abraham was in connection with Isaac - that is, it was bound up with this matter of sonship. The covenant of God with Abraham was going to be realized along the line of sonship, and all God's purposes in him were bound up with Isaac. Of course, at the beginning Isaac was an impossibility, but at the end he was a still greater impossibility - "Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, even Isaac, ... and offer him there for a burnt offering" (Genesis 22:2). All the promise and covenant are wrapped up in Isaac, who is to be slain with a knife. This is an impossible situation! Isaac to die? There is no possibility of another Isaac, indeed, I doubt whether Abraham would have wanted another. It was a matter of life or death to him and is a quite impossible situation if Isaac lies dead on the altar. But you know what happened! And you know what the New Testament says about that: "Accounting that God is able to raise up, even from the dead; from whence he did also in a parable receive him back" (Hebrews 11:19).

Has anyone but God ever raised someone from the dead? Man can do a great deal in prolonging life, and he thinks he will reach the time when he will raise the dead. Well, we have not reached that time yet, and we shall see whether God will surrender His own one prerogative - that is, to bring back a departed spirit into a dead body. That is God's act and is resurrection and not resuscitation.

I was saying that the glory of God reached its climax in Abraham's case along the line of sonship. Later on we shall have to look at this more closely in connection with Lazarus, but let us come back to our beginning.

We turn to John again - "We beheld his glory". How do we behold His glory? "He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become sons of God" (John 1:12 - A.V.) - He gave them the authority to be sons. That is our history. We are able to say: 'By God's intervention I am a child of God.' Then you notice how John analyzes this: "which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13). We are children of God by His intervention and by a direct act on His part. We are born from above and are made children of God. The glory of God is revealed in Jesus Christ in sonship.

Are you glorying in the fact that you are a born again child of God?

This same John, many years later, wrote these words, with a very full heart: "Beloved, now are we children of God, and it is not yet made manifest what we shall be. We know that, if he shall be manifested, we shall be like him; for we shall see him even as he is" (I John 3:2). And connected with that, John said: "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God" (I John 3:1).

It is a wonderful thing to be a child of God! John said so, and he knew what he was talking about.

The glory, then, is in sonship. And it is at that point that Israel comes into view: Abraham's seed through Isaac. It is the nation that is coming into view and, as we have said, God said to Pharaoh: 'Let my son go.' That word 'son' was a comprehensive word, meaning the whole nation. God saw that nation as one son and would not surrender one fragment, because sonship is such a complete thing. Pharaoh said 'Well, let the men go. Leave the women and children and the flocks and herds'. but Moses said: 'Not one single hoof of one single animal shall be left behind.' God had said 'My son', and that included the nation.