

Christ Past and Future

SURROUNDING this table once again, we stand related to wonderful facts which can never be too vividly remembered. They stretch away like lines of landscape from the spot where we stand, to a distant horizon behind us—a definite horizon on which the Biblical telescope can make out the leading objects with wonderful distinctness; they also lead away in front to the future to which our faces are turned; a prospect so close to us as to be abrupt in a scenic point of view—Christ before, Christ behind. The whole landscape is coloured with Christ. We are here to look at it again. It is well to withdraw thus for such a purpose. We are weak and apt to forget. We are apt to have our eyes dimmed by the dust of the way. We are liable to be overcome with fatigue and to get into some bypath and sit down and make ourselves comfortable. Christ knew our danger; therefore, he left us this command, to assemble and "*do this*" in remembrance of him.

Behind us, we see Christ a babe, born in the rude surroundings of a village inn, and the stable of *that*; an unnoticed object in a crowd of bustling visitors, who had repaired to Bethlehem on private business connected with the approaching taxation ordered by Augustus. We see shepherds arrive from the neighbouring fields, and make known the importance of the event which they had learnt by angelic announcement. We see men arrive with strange enquiry for the born King of the Jews; we see Joseph and Mary depart with their babe for distant Egypt; we witness a subsequent slaughter of children on the same spot, and the piercing wail of the bereaved daughters of Rachel. We see the murderous instigator of the bloody deed die; and Joseph and Mary return with their wonderful babe to the land, and turn aside to the privacy of an unimportant village, where the veil drops upon the everyday life of a carpenter with a growing family. Ten years pass, and the curtain rises for a moment and reveals Joseph and his household on the way with their neighbours— a happy band— to keep the Passover at Jerusalem. The feast over, they start on the return journey, but miss Mary's first-born on the second day, on which, while the rest pursue their homeward journey, Joseph and Mary return in anxious haste to the city of God, and after search, discover their beloved boy in a circle of the learned men of the nation in the temple, astonishing them by the difficult questions he put, and by the understanding he displayed in the answers he gave to the questions put to him.

Again the curtain drops, and in eighteen more years, we see a strange preacher on the banks of the Jordan, to whom the people repair in crowds, and submit to baptism at his hands. Among the crowds, there appears the form of Mary's son, now a man of thirty, come to John to be baptised like all the people. John objects to baptise a sinless man, since his baptism was a baptism of repentance. Jesus claims to submit to every appointment of God; John gives way; Jesus is baptised; and before there is time for another to follow his example, a shaft of Spirit-light strikes from heaven, and concentrating in dove-like form over the obedient son of Abraham, settles on his head and abides on him. And then the people hear a voice proclaiming that the man thus openly identified before them is not only "*Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham,*" but the beloved Son of the God of Israel, in whom He is well pleased. Then we see him the object of curiosity on the part of sundry of John's disciples, who walk after him, introduce themselves to him, and follow him home. Thence forward there is no more dropping of the veil till the mortal scene is finished. After his forty days' absence in the wilderness of temptation, Jesus is before the people day and night.

He speaks in a manner that strikes all the hearers with astonishment. They see that this is no ordinary man. He speaks as one having authority—as never man spake. He performs works unheard of in any nation. He cures every form of disease with a word; he has power over the elements of nature to combine them for the production of bread, or restrain the violence of tempest on the sea. He raises the dead. The people follow him in crowds. They are attracted by his miracles. They are pleased with his denunciation of the Scribes and Pharisees, and with his forcible inculcation of righteousness; they are drawn by his tender care and compassion on the wants of the multitude. As he passes from city to city, the excitement spreads till the whole nation is roused. "The world is gone after him," say the leaders;" if we do not put some check upon it, the people will elect him king, and they will revolt against the Romans, and the Romans will come and take away our place and nation." But the leaders are powerless for three years and a half. Jesus makes no attempt at sedition; he even forbids the declaration that he is the Christ, and avoids the crowd when they show a disposition to take him by force and make him a king. But the leaders, probably, do not understand this. They are envious at the attention bestowed on him by the people, and exasperated at the condemnation he freely hurls at them in his discourses. They plot against him: they fail in all their attempts to destroy him until the hour arrives—pre-arranged in the Father's purpose—for the power of darkness to prevail; and then one of his own disciples is the means of delivering him up to the power and fury of his adversaries.

And then, brethren and sisters, we see him on the cross, under a frowning sky, piercing the air with a cry of agony, dying that we might live, and by-and-bye, all is silent, and his dead body is taken down and given to a rich man, who wraps it in clean linen, and lays it in his own private grave, hewn in the rock, in a garden hard by. Then we see the disciples secrete themselves in terror, and spend their time in grief—the women broken-hearted—the men in strange dismay. For the best part of three days all is darkness and despair. The glorious man who, by the power of God, had filled the land with joy for three years and a half, lies cold and dead, in a rock hewn chamber, with brutal soldiers at the door. But, on the third day, all is changed. Darkness suddenly flies before the glorious light of morning. An angel descends in brightness and power; the Roman guards are overpowered by a strange paralysis. The stone barrier of the sepulchre door is violently removed; the occupant of the tomb returns to life and comes forth; the women who had come to anoint him with the fragrant spices for the dead, are apprised of the event, and see the evidence of it in their own beloved Lord himself. They carry the joyful tidings to the sorrow-struck disciples. These believe them not, and are afterwards reproved for their unbelief by the Lord standing in their presence and shewing them his hands and feet. Then are the disciples glad when they see the Lord.

New thoughts and new hopes arise. In six weeks he walks with them to a neighbouring solitude. They are hopeful of the speedy realisation of their hope concerning the kingdom. They ask him if he will, at that time, restore the kingdom again to Israel. He tells them instead that they have a testimony to give for him among the nations of the earth that the times and seasons are hid—that power would come to them for the work to be done. Then he is taken away; they watch him with amazement as he departs; he finally disappears from their sight. Then stand by them two angels, who express surprise at the steadfast heavenward gaze of the disciples, assuring them that the Lord who had been taken away from them, would assuredly return in the

same, manner as he had departed. Then follows a brief interval, during which the disciples are much together privately, spending the time in joyful contemplation and prayer; after which we witness a new starting point—the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit upon them—the public proclamation of Christ's resurrection divinely confirmed by the display of superhuman gifts the preaching of the name of Christ for the justification of sinners unto eternal life. Then we behold, succeeding, a period of great and prosperous activity among the apostles, the rapid multiplication of believers, the formation of communities of brethren everywhere, the prevalence of comfort and joy and the fear of the Lord among the thousands who received the Word. Then we see persecution and trouble; then delay in the expected judgments on Jerusalem; then the uprising of questions, strifes of words, heresies; the perverse disputing of men of corrupt minds; the death of the apostles one by one except John; the cooling of zeal among professors, the growth of corruption among them in faith and practice; then the publication of Christ's message to seven typical ecclesias in Asia, through John in Patmos, shining out in the thickening gloom with the brightness of a great light in heaven. Then John dies, the light goes out, darkness settles on the scene; philosophy and vain deceit prevail over the simplicity of the Gospel, through the ingenuities of carnally-minded teachers; Christians (so-called) turn soldiers and politicians; they become a party in the State; and in less than three centuries, they put "Christianity" on the throne by the sword of Constantine. Christianity, as a State institution, breeds political and ambitious bishops; these strive for the mastery, even unto bloodshed. Rome and Constantinople become the leading rivals; the controversy is decided in favour of Rome, and the monstrous Papal dynasty appears on the scene, and inaugurates a tyranny more odious and dreadful than anything the world has ever seen. More than twelve centuries of darkness and turmoil drag wearily by; —by the will of God Gospel light revives—and here we stand at the end of the time appointed, looking for that re-appearance of the Lord promised to the disciples on the summit of Olivet.

When we direct our eyes forward, we see Christ more distinctly than even in the past. We see ourselves on the verge of that great change by which the kingdoms of the world are to be abolished, and transferred to a new order of rulers who have been in slow and painful preparation for ages past. Anon we see Christ again in the world, rousing his dead friends from their slumbers, apprising his living friends of his presence, and summoning them all before him for that grand assortment which has been both their hope and fear from the beginning. The judgment past, and the unfit sent back from his presence, we see him take part in the affairs of nations. We see him crush immense armies; we see him send messages to the governments; we see his claims set at naught, and mighty armaments raised to roll back the tide of his power. We behold a time of trouble such as never was. We hear the dreadful shock of war—universal war; we see armies shattered, fleets destroyed, fortresses and cities in ruins, commerce at a standstill. We see the tempest roar with unremitting fury till the whole world is a wreck at the feet of Judah's Lion. Then slowly, calm ensues; the storm abates; the sun shines; order returns; a new government rises out of the universal chaos. The kingdom of God spreads overall; the immortal friends of Christ take power everywhere in the name of "Divine right"; peace overspreads the scene; soldiers disbanded; fortresses dismantled; arsenals emptied, the arts of war suppressed, and mankind set free to worship God under Heaven-sent guides and governors, and to live in joyful harmony everywhere, surrounded with plenty, and delivered from disease. *"Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth and goodwill among men."*

This is the picture before and behind us, as we take this bread in our hand, and drink this wine with thanksgiving, in remembrance of him who commanded this. It is no fiction of fancy; it is no product of the imagination. It is the offspring of "*words of truth and soberness*." It is a sure and certain hope, built upon past and contemporary facts, as deep and solid and irrefutable as the everlasting foundations of the earth. The only uncertain element in the case pertains to our own individualities. Shall we be counted worthy of so great a salvation? Is our attitude towards the Eternal Majesty of the heavens sufficiently acceptable before Him as to ensure for us an entrance into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ? Are we obedient, loyal, devoted, self-sacrificing, enthusiastic servants of this coming King of kings, and Lord of lords, who is now to us an absent Lord, to whom as stewards we shall give account? Do we show ourselves his friends in carrying his cross and upholding his name and keeping his commandments? Are we sufficiently wise to love him more than the things the world loves, and more than the things that we loved in the days of our ignorance? Upon the answers to these questions, which will be infallibly given one day soon, will hang our destiny in this great matter. Suppose the judge says, "NOT WORTHY OF ME," what grief, what vexation, what consternation, what unavailing tears of repentance, what horror of soul, what awful desolation will be ours! Our groans, our "weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth" will recoil upon our ruined heads and increase our agony. Better weep now. Let the mind be sobered by the word and prayer. Realise thus what it is that Christ requires of us in all holiness and godly conversation, "denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, and living soberly, righteously, and godly in this present evil world, looking for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of our great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people zealous of good works." Then shall we assure our hearts before him, "that when he shall appear, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before him at his coming."

(Taken from "Seasons of Comfort" Volume 1, pages 54-58 by Bro. R. Roberts.)