

“WHAT SHALL IT PROFIT A MAN”

"For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?"
This question put by Jesus to His Disciples is often seen quoted on church notice boards. Because of the setting in which we often see that question, it may be that we do not always allow it to have the searching effect upon us that the Master intended when he asked that question of his own disciples.

It was posed by Jesus to his disciples in particular and at a very critical period of his own ministry. As we shall see, the events recorded in Matthew chapter 16 seem to mark a sort of dividing line in emphasis in his teaching. Up to now his work had been directed almost entirely to the preaching of the gospel to the masses of people who came to him, his works of healing and his words of comfort and encouragement. Little if any reference had so far been made to his approaching death, but from now on his conversation was more and more directed firstly to his immediate followers, and secondly, references were made to his coming day of suffering as it drew nearer and nearer. His veiled references, we notice, also increased, and the shadow of the cross began to influence all that he said and did.

In fact, it was the reaction of Peter to Jesus words, indicating for the first time to his disciples clearly that he must suffer and be killed, which led Jesus to pose the question we have quoted:

"What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?"

Peter had presumed to rebuke his Master for talking about his coming death by cruel hands. "Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee." In the strong reaction of Jesus to these words of Peter one feels that there is not only a correction of Peter's attitude but an indication also, surely, of the conflict which was going on in his own mind, and which Peter only succeeded in making more difficult for the Master to combat.

"Get thee behind me ? Satan: for thou art an offence unto me" Jesus said, or as another record has it, "You are a hindrance unto me." Peter was encouraging a fleshly approach to a problem, to a testing, which only increased the wrestling in the mind of Jesus as he thought upon it, "Thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men."

Quickly he presents the contrast, and the contrast is given to us in Matthew chapter 16 at verse 24:

"Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works."

The reward! What a wonderful thought! But a reward only offered for a right attitude towards the life which we live now. Well meaning as Peter was, he was guilty of

discouraging Jesus from continuing in the part which meant for him sorrow and sacrifice, but which at the same time was to bring everlasting life within the grasp of all who were prepared to accept it. Not long before this, Jesus had been encouraged by the confession of Peter of his conviction that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. That conviction, strong as it was, was not at that time developed sufficiently to appreciate the full implications of the position of Jesus. Had Peter have done so he would not at this moment have appeared as an adversary.

Jesus had charged them not to say anything of that great confession by Peter. They were not ready for this preaching of salvation through the work of Jesus. The power of death had yet to be destroyed in him, and the way in which it was to be done had to be experienced by the disciples themselves before they were qualified to preach remission of sins and resurrection through his name.

All of us today, naturally, hang on to life and all the material things which go with it. There is nothing against the Divine commandments in this, until we are faced with opposing demands. Life is sweet. God intended that it should be so. In health it is delightful. With God's blessing and the enjoyment of all that is pure and clean and energising, what a wonderful, thing life is, and how we can enjoy it! The beauties of nature, the wonders of the heavens, the delights of friendship, the interest of occupation, of homes and of families are repeatedly a cause for praise to God in the Word. There is no merit in having long faces or declining to enjoy the legitimate pleasures and relaxations in order to make our path seem more difficult than it really is.

But on the other hand, for the development of the godly man or woman the question must arise continually through life, are we prepared to sacrifice the advantages in the things of this life to serve and obey God? Are we prepared to devote time and energy in God's service when the demand comes upon us, or would we rather leave God's work to satisfy our natural feelings? We are back on the question of Jesus: *"What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?"*

We cannot, of course, literally gain the whole world, but the world to us is the things which we regard as those things we would like to have around us, and what we would like to do, those things which we desire most. The desires of the flesh and of the mind are always with us, and it is well that we at times look this question of Jesus in the face, and then look at our own way of life. Sooner or later it is certain that God will see fit for the development of our character, that we shall face a choice, perhaps many choices and then the issue will be, are we prepared to devote our lives to God, or are we going to please ourselves?

It is not always worldly ambitions or money, but in things which generally we like: unwise friendships, perhaps, pastimes which take us into wrong avenues of thought, wrong direction of family life, entertainment, or in simple fulfilment of the desire for food, clothing and comfort. We know the demands for obedience which God laid upon our Master, and he did them willingly. We can be thankful to God that those extreme demands are not made upon us today. But we know that the warnings are given to us in order that we might be his true followers.

When the moment of decision comes for us, it often comes in such a way that it does not seem easy for us to decide. It is then that we need to examine our real feelings, seeking the power of prayer, and to read again the Word, having a general willingness to allow God to show us the path which we should take. Do we really

value the things which are represented in the bread and the wine upon the table this morning? Is our love for Jesus strong enough, is our faith powerful enough to accept the fact that he has brought us deliverance from death, powerful enough to allow us to do our duty towards him when it means sacrificing things which naturally speaking we would rather do?

Well, in Genesis 25 we have a very simple but a very effective example of two young men who faced just this choice. A casual reading of the record in Genesis 25 suggests that it was a brief incident in their life, of very little importance. But their reactions to that situation decided, in God's overruling hand, the path they were to follow for the rest of their lives, and what is more, their end. God watched them then, He heard their words and He knew their real thoughts. Their words and their reactions were the result of faith or the lack of it, which had gradually developed through their boyhood into young manhood.

We are referring, of course, to the case of Esau and Jacob. It arose out of a little domestic situation, so simple, so understandable, and yet which in God's wisdom was to be of such importance to them both; importance to them, importance to their families and importance to the human race at large.

Now surely this fact holds a great lesson for us all. It makes us realise that God may be in some of what we feel to be the most casual situations in our daily lives. A decision sometimes has to be made on the spur of the moment, which takes us off our guard but which is affected by our attitude to the Truth, It will then depend upon the training which we have given our minds up to that time, how we will react.

The indication of the struggle which was to come between Esau and Jacob had been given by the Almighty before their birth. The children struggled together within their mother, and when the birth occurred Jacob took hold of Esau's heel. The two boys were of completely different temperaments, but both had the same advantages. They both had come from godly parents; they both had been brought up to know the promises made to their father and their grandfather. Esau had, in addition, natural advantages because he was the elder brother, but he was a wild boy, delighting in hunting, a man of the field and apparently difficult to discipline. Jacob, on the other hand, we are told, was a plain man dwelling in tents.

Now many of the critics of the Bible take that description of Jacob and try to suggest that he was unambitious and was a weak character, but there is nothing of weakness indicated in that word translated plain, but rather a firmness and a reliability of character. It can alternatively be translated "an upright man." The word in the book of Songs is translated undefiled; for example, "my sister, my dove, my love, my undefiled," and we know what that represents. The word is translated in the book of Job "perfect." Job was a perfect and an upright man, and we know what his character was.

Jacob had disadvantages. He saw his brother growing up without controlling himself in the way in which a godly young man should, yet naturally speaking - and Jacob would have known that God often works through natural ways - the promise would have gone to Esau. Furthermore, he may have been discouraged by the fact that his father preferred Esau, and the reason is given to us "because he did eat of his venison." Surely this was a discouragement to walk in an upright way of life!

But then a situation arose, because of the way of life which Esau followed, where he

was desperate for a meal. Seeing he was so ravenous Jacob, as brothers tend to do, drove a bargain on the spur of the moment. "Sell me thy birthright." We read the record so often that we may overlook certain aspects of this rather extraordinary dialogue. One wonders, why did Jacob raise the point at this particular moment? It is not a reaction one would expect, even in a godly young man, in a situation like this. A brother might have sought a bargain perhaps, but not on this subject. Yet Jacob did not ask Esau for money or material reward.

Is there not an indication here of the way in which God's promises were continually on his mind? He desired that promise very earnestly. Esau could have refused, but he not only complied but gave the reasons, and those reasons are very interesting. Let us just look at the record for a moment:

"Esau said, Behold, I am at the point to die: and what profit shall this birthright do to me?" Or, as the margin puts it, "I am going to die," or another rendering: "I am running daily risk of my life. What profit shall this birthright do me?" (Genesis 25:32)

Now, Esau's way of life was of his choice. He was like so many young, undisciplined men today. He delighted in living dangerously, caring nothing for the future, yet had he been right-minded this very risk that he was continually taking should have made the birthright more valuable to him. The trouble was that he could not look or was unwilling to look beyond the present. He had no faith in the resurrection and in consequence despised God's promise. He sold his birthright. The last few words of this chapter put it in that way: "Thus Esau despised his birthright." God could have arranged for Jacob to be the elder son, but He made Jacob strive for that position.

Now we have a birthright. Are we ever tempted to sell it, not perhaps for a meal, but for a companion, a wife, a home, advance in our education, or a job which requires time which we should be devoting to the Truth and our home life?

As, we continue reading the sad story of the turning of the will of Isaac, let us not allow our emotions to becloud our spiritual discernment of the lessons which we find here. Life's pattern is not always easy to follow, but let us remember that God watches. It is true love of His promises which makes men and women precious in the sight of God, and if we love His promises God can do for us things which we cannot conceive.

Let us remember it is written that it was by faith that Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come, and again, a warning of that same writer:

"Look diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God ... lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as was Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright."

It was a quick decision, but it was a despising of God's goodness. And so "afterwards, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no way to change his mind, though he sought it carefully with tears." Again the words of Jesus ring in our ears: "*What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?*"

We sit here quietly before these emblems to consider our own position. There is need for us all to examine ourselves, but no need for discouragement. For the

moment Jesus is still away and we are in the presence of the emblems of his sacrifice for sin. There is not one of us here this morning that is perfect, but now we have an opportunity of adjusting our attitude to our hope which we have received through him. Let us then, allow the Word to have its proper effect upon our mind. We do not always see our duty as clearly as we ought, but here is a weekly reminder to help us to get our balance again.

Jesus is present with us here this morning in spirit. The Master reads our hearts and if we are prepared to allow the Word to purge us there is no need for fear. He helps us in our weaknesses, he is our merciful and faithful high priest, and he has suffered in order that we might obtain forgiveness. Think of the way in which he acted during the days of his weakness, in those events which we have read together this morning. His stern rebuke to Peter soon changed to tenderness to his weakness.

Then think of the gentleness and the understanding of Jesus as he gradually probed the appreciation of his disciples of his own great work. "Whom do men say that I am?" Then finally, "But whom say ye that I am?" To hear that confession from Peter was an encouragement to Jesus. "Flesh and blood" he said "hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven." How had it been revealed to Peter? It was surely because he had allowed the example of his Master to have an effect upon his mind. It is said that those who live closest to people over a long period are able to see men and women for what they really are. Jesus, the Son of God, in his way of life, in his words and in his work had convinced Peter that he was indeed what he claimed to be, the Son of God.

The closer we draw to Him the fuller will be our appreciation of His character too and the greater our feeling of His love towards us. It will be that appreciation which will help us today over our temptations, which come so often when we are off our guard.

May we therefore draw near to Jesus by our remembrance of him, being more conscious of the offering which he has made for us, by our prayer in faith, and by our minds purged, take the bread and this wine in memory of him. Let us learn to react as the Psalmist reacted, exclaiming:

"O love the Lord, all ye his saints: for the Lord preserveth the faithful, and plentifully rewardeth the proud doer. Be of good courage, and he shall strengthen your heart, all ye that hope in the Lord."

In that confidence let us take the bread and the wine and remember our Master and all that He has done for us.

(J. C. W. 1973)