

Rejoice that Your Names are Recorded in Heaven

by Dr. D. A. Carson

Electrically Recorded



I cannot forbear to mention that as the students crossed the platform this evening, I started doing some arithmetic and remembered that it was 45 and 46 years ago respectively that my father and my mother passed this way as well.

I recently received a rather moving and sensitive letter from a graduate of the seminary where I now teach. He is engaged in a church planting ministry in the state of Michigan. He started in a small community where there was no evangelical witness. The church has now grown to the point where it is self-supporting. This brother is involved in all kinds of grass roots evangelism, discipleship training, preaching and teaching the Word of God. This chap was never the best student. He worked very hard for everything he got and it was not much. But he worked faithfully. He kept Biblical priorities: he never sacrificed his family and he grew spiritually while he was at seminary. He is now discovering new and growing spiritual powers; and not only spiritual powers, but intellectual powers within the context of local church ministry. In his letter he detailed some of the books he had recently been reading and then he wrote these words: "I now understand more than ever what it means to love God with my mind. That is all very encouraging to me especially in the light of a growing ministry in areas to which I have felt more naturally inclined: that of visiting widows and shut-ins, of labouring alongside the saints so as not to be a financial burden to them, of sharing the Word of God with them, of preaching it in a way that is personal and meaningful and in a way that is bearing fruit for Jesus." Then he says, "I am fulfilled in my ministry."

Now I wonder if it would have been appropriate for me to write back and say, "Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your name is written in heaven." It would have sounded rather anticlimactic, don't you think? Yet, in effect, that is rather the answer that Jesus gives in the passage that was read earlier, Luke, chapter 10. The setting is the sending out of the seventy or seventy-two in the first larger trainee preaching session. Jesus had already sent out the twelve on one occasion. They had come back. Now He sends out a larger group of disciples. According to Luke 10, this issue arose out of the large need that He saw: "The harvest is plentiful," He says, "but the workers are few." After all, during the days of His incarnation, when Jesus Himself was in Jericho, He was not in Jerusalem; when He was in Jerusalem, He was not in Bethany; when He was in Bethany, He was not in Cana. In the light of the need, He multiplied Himself, as it were, through the preaching of these disciples. Then He warned them not only of the danger but also

of the division that would follow in the wake of their ministry. He pointed out that not everybody would be happy with the kind of work they were doing. In one sense they were going forth like sheep in a pack of wolves. Moreover, some people would accept them joyfully and others would despise them. Having warned them of all these things, He gave them certain great powers so that they could heal the sick, cast out demons and raise the dead.

The time passed. They returned. And we read, "They returned with joy and said, 'Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.'" Within that context, Jesus gives a series of answers which develop for us some perspectives on ministry, culminating with what almost seems a rebuke: "Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

I.

Let us look at the fourfold answer of Jesus. The ministry is a very easy thing to distort; and the ministry of the Master will guard us against such distortion. THE MINISTRY OF JESUS' DISCIPLES IS THE MEANS OF BRINGING THE DEFEAT OF SATAN AND OF EXTENDING GOD'S SAVING REIGN. Jesus' first answer when the disciples came back was this: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." Now from one point of view this was not a particularly wonderful mission. Palestine is a small place. Although Josephus tells us there were two hundred and four walled towns and many countless villages in Galilee alone, yet, in fact, it is a small piece of land. The disciples were not gone very long. They could not have preached that many sermons and undoubtedly, although there were some miracles done, it was nothing that shattered the Roman Empire, nothing that introduced marvellous revival. It was not Nineveh being called to repentance. It was small-time mendicant preaching. That is what it was. But Jesus saw it somewhat differently. He did not assess it quite as the world might assess it. He saw it as the principal defeat of Satan. The text reminds us of Jesus' teaching that when one person is brought to Jesus Christ, the angels in heaven rejoice. The world does not care too much. Toronto ticks over as it has always ticked over; the streetcars come, the streetcars go; the buses make their rounds; the cars go round and round, exhaust fumes everywhere. Nobody cares.

But the angels rejoice in heaven. There is an entirely different perspective when you look at things from the vantage point of the throne room of heaven. What is more important — that the Toronto Stock Exchange opens or that a person is born again of the Spirit of God? Fifty billion trillion years into eternity what will be more important? What is more important

— that the same saving reign of God which brought Jesus from the dead takes a person and makes him hunger for holiness, fills him afresh with the Spirit of God, makes him homesick for heaven, or simply that you got a promotion at work? In a sense, therefore, Jesus is encouraging their joy. They come back and they are delighted to discover that they had authority to cast out demons in Jesus' Name. Jesus encourages them to recognize that what they were doing was in fact effecting the defeat of Satan himself. We must understand, therefore, that when we are in the ministry, in a major pulpit or a minor pulpit, behind a kitchen sink, in an office, wherever we begin to reflect the glory and truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ by our lives and our witness in the power of the Spirit, where hatred is transformed, where sins are forgiven, where men and women are born anew, where people are touched and healed, where there are relationships restored, where people cry out for holiness whereas before they cried out for selfishness, there too Satan is defeated. Of course, from the perspective of the New Testament this is based on the triumphal energies that were released by Christ Himself, by His death and resurrection. By that same power that God used in raising Jesus from the dead, by that same power does He work in and through us. You will recall that Jesus says in Matthew, chapter 12, verse 28: "If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." Even now Jesus insists that all authority is His in heaven and in earth. All of God's authority is mediated through Him as He commissions us — you and me — to preach the gospel and watch Satan's domain be destroyed. The ministry of Jesus' disciples is the means of bringing defeat to Satan and of extending God's saving reign.

II.

JESUS HAS GIVEN US ALL NECESSARY AUTHORITY TO ACCOMPLISH THESE GOALS. He goes on to say in verse 19, "I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions, and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you." That is a remarkably great sweep of authority. But it must not be understood in a mere triumphalist way. After all, Jesus has already finished saying in Luke 10 that when these disciples go out into various places, on occasion they will be despised, on occasion they will be rejected, on occasion they will be cut off. The one person who, in the New Testament, is in fact a victor in a confrontation with a snake, the Apostle Paul himself, faced a number of things which you and I might likely consider defeats. Under pressure to boast in order to authenticate himself, he boasts, instead, of his weakness. In 2 Corinthians 11 he says, "I have worked harder than these false apostles, I have been in prison more frequently, I have been flogged more severely, I have been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, (and that is before the shipwreck in Acts 27!), I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have

known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?" There is an apostle who learned strength in the midst of weakness. The authority that Christ gives may sometimes enable you and me as witnesses to Jesus Christ to do things that are miraculous. But if we follow the crucified and risen Saviour, most frequently we discover God's power most clearly manifest in our weakness.

When you look at the sweeping history of the church, you quickly conclude that North America has been in a remarkably anomalous position for the last century and a half or so. There has been relatively little persecution. True, there has been more in Quebec than the rest of North America put together, but that too is largely changed. But worldwide there have been more martyrs for Jesus Christ in this century than in the previous nineteen. It may well be that in time to come we too will learn afresh that Christ's authority and power in forcing back the frontiers of darkness most manifests itself precisely in our weakness, precisely in our fear.

We may look at this question of strength in weakness, of power that prevents us from being harmed, in yet another way. On occasion, seminary students ask if I think we are anywhere near the verge of revival. What a question! I am not God to turn revival on or off. But if I read history aright, I would say that in North America we are probably, in certain respects, farther from it than in Britain or Europe where the situation superficially is much, much darker — for one simple reason: we are not hungry enough. There is a sort of North American "can do" mentality that somehow feels that if you do the right things the right way that somehow you can force a blessing from God. There is no notion of weakness, of poverty, that poverty of spirit which brings entrance to the kingdom of heaven. Lest you think that I am departing from the text, Jesus goes on shortly to rebuke any notion of triumphalism. His power is great but it is not triumphalistic. Jesus has given us all necessary authority to accomplish these goals; and it may issue in a man like T. T. Shields who preached from this pulpit with extreme unction for many years. But it may issue in a Samuel Zwemer who worked amongst Arabs for forty years, translated the Scriptures into Arabic, saw one convert and that convert was killed by his family. Jesus gives us the necessary authority to accomplish His goals, and within that framework nothing harms us.

III.

THE EXERCISE OF THAT AUTHORITY GENERATES JOY AMONGST JESUS' DISCIPLES. After all, that is the way this small section of Scripture begins. "They returned **with joy** and said, 'Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.'" Now that is a healthy reaction. In many respects it is a noble reaction. Jesus' first response to them is not criticism on this point. The Apostle John himself, in 2nd John and 3rd John, insists that he has no greater joy than to see that his children walk according to the truth. It is possible for those who exercise ministry in a pastoral capacity, or in some other capacity, to find their greatest joy in other things — who won the football game, a new dress, the exercise of power, intellectual skills. But the Apostle John finds

. . . continued on page 26

GRADUATION ADDRESS from page 7

his greatest joy in discovering that his children walk according to the truth.

Ten years ago, while studying in England, a chap knocked at my door one night and said, "You know, I have been coming to church a few times and I have watched you. I want you to tell me about Jesus." That does not happen every day; but I gladly told him about Jesus. I discovered that he had attempted suicide twice, had been on alcohol and drugs, and was about to be divorced from his wife. He walked out without saying too much. The next Sunday he was at church and he said, "When I left your place I went home and, utterly crushed, I cried to the Lord to forgive me, even me. And I do not know what has happened. I cannot quite cope with it yet, but I do not love the things I used to love. I have come to love Jesus Christ." Two years ago I went back to England. That same brother has become one of the finest lay evangelists in the city of Cambridge I have ever seen — a burning, bright witness. I assure you I am still a young man; I can see converts in this place and that place; I can see men and women who have been transformed by the grace of God as a result of ministry here or there. But I am still young. I have not seen too much. But I have no greater joy than to go back and see a chap like Lou Hammond, so transformed by the grace of God, so utterly turned around by the power of the Spirit of God in his life that he is simply not the same Lou Hammond. He is a new creature, a new creation.

In the province of Quebec, as you know, for many years missionaries worked there and saw very little fruit. Today you can go to some congregations where two or three hundred people gather on a Sunday morning where for years there were no more than twenty people. In Hull, where my father still lives and works, in 1972 you were fortunate to find fifteen French Canadians in the bilingual half of the church on a Sunday morning. That one church now has a hundred but has started five other branch works with two hundred, one hundred, and two or three groups of seventy-five within the last ten years. It is not revival, but it is not what it was. It is marvelous to go back to Quebec and see how the grace of God has taken hold and transformed men and women — whole congregations of Christians only two years old. It smacks of the early church — an enthusiasm to pray, to give, to train, to read the Scriptures, to love one another and to pour themselves out, to spend and be spent. That generates joy. My parents lived through some of the toughest years in Quebec. I am delighted to see them in their seventies now, in a sense having the time of their life. For in truth, the exercise of God-given authority in the building of God's people generates joy amongst Jesus' disciples.

IV.

Yet, in the fourth place, and this is the chief point, that joy must never usurp the Christian's primary source of joy. JOY IN THE MINISTRY MUST NEVER USURP THE CHRISTIAN'S PRIMARY SOURCE OF JOY. Jesus, after this gentle commendation, this provision of a perspective of the cosmic struggle between God and Satan, now says, "However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." Why make such a point? Why be such a wet blanket when there is so much enthusiasm? Why not instead capture it? Why not use it? The reason

is simple and yet it is profound. The point is that we can make a false god of the ministry the way we can make a false god of anything else.

Have you ever wondered why there are people who study the Scriptures even though they do not believe it is the Word of God? Have you ever struggled with that? Why do people go into the ministry when they believe the Bible is not the Word of God, and when they are going to pick this piece or that piece and believe this piece and not believe another piece, or when their "religion" consists in religion courses at various advanced institutions of higher learning and the publication of learned articles in esoteric journals? Have you ever wondered why they do it? Why bother when you do not believe that in truth the Bible is the Word of God? The reason, of course, is quite simple. You do it for exactly the same reason as you study Shakespeare or biology or nuclear physics. It is fun to learn. You might not believe it when you are handing in your thesis, but, basically, it is fun to learn. And so people make an intellectual game out of it. That is all it is. The Bible is somehow domesticated, professionalized, and instead of being the burning Word of God in the soul of a man, it is something over which I stand. It is as much fun in that sense to study Scripture as it is to study Shakespeare.

But the same thing can happen in the ministry and it can happen, dare I say it, even amongst those who are born again of the Spirit of God and who are committed to an inerrant Word of God. Somehow the actual exercise of ministry, the actual act of preaching, the actual talking to people and organizing of things, the actual planning and plotting becomes more important than the truth proclaimed. And at that moment you have manufactured an idol for yourself. Within this idolatrous framework it is possible to develop a kind of triumphalist stance. Nobody would be quite so gross as to say, "Look at this church that I have built." But deep down you like to compare yourself with this brother who has not done quite so well and you do not like to compare yourself with that brother who has done better. Deep down it is no longer a question of seeing the gospel of Jesus Christ taking the lives of men and transforming them; it is a question, somehow, of manipulation, of how you are perceived, of your authority status. Worse, the wonder of having your own sins forgiven gets swallowed up by its pygmy cousin, the wonder of being liked. A poet put it this way:

I used to love the kingdom's power beyond
The kingdom, or the King Himself; far more
Than my own knowledge of the Master, or
Assurance I am his. My living bond
With Christ, ordained and written down, I pawned
In blackest, surreptitious motive, for
The sin of Simon Magus, magic's lore —
Until I heard the Son of God respond:
"The Kingdom doubtless shackles and destroys
Our bitt'rest enemy. But sins forgiv'n
And God's electing love are deeper joys:
Rejoice because your name is writt'n in heav'n!"
Unbridled love for kingdom power efface —
Clandestine love for self and not for grace.

This past year, thirteen months ago, I was in England when Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones died. He is well known, of course, around the world for the power of his expository preaching. To those of us younger men

who knew him, we saw him also as a kind of father in Christ who was a great encourager. As he became weaker and weaker, one man in particular, Iain Murray, had almost unrestricted access to him for various important family reasons. Iain Murray asked him some very penetrating questions that have now become public. One of these was this question: "Dr. Lloyd-Jones, for almost sixty years you have wielded an almost unprecedented ministry in the English speaking world. These is scarcely a night when you have not preached. You have been one of the few men in England who could preach in any little village and immediately there would be a magnificent crowd. You have seen quite literally thousands of men and women come to know Christ as Saviour and Lord. Moreover you have been influential in establishing the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical research, for revitalizing Inter-Varsity after the great modernist-fundamentalist controversies in Britain. You have been responsible in large part for the Banner of Truth Trust, for the Leicester Ministers' Conference, for the rising generation of Reformed expository preaching in the entire English speaking world and beyond. Your books sell all over the world and men and women are still coming to Christ because of them. And now here you are in an armchair, able to sit up for two or three hours a day, too ill and too weak to write, let alone to preach and study, and then you crawl back into bed and maybe a few hours later you climb out to your chair. How are you coping with that? How are you coping now that you cannot do the important things you used to do, and you are more or less put out to pasture?" Even phrased in kindly fashion, this might well be a brutal question to ask an aged man. Lloyd-Jones said, "Do not rejoice that the spirits are subject to you in my name, but rejoice that your name is written in heaven. I am perfectly content." And he died a few weeks later, perfectly content.

If you and I, whether we are ministers of churches, simply talking to a neighbour over the fence, leading a choir or teaching a Sunday School Class, lose the joy of our salvation, we have bastardized the gospel. If ever we want simply the power of the gospel, but no longer delight in the simple and profound truth that before the heavens were formed our names were written down in the Lamb's book of life; if ever we want the power of the gospel and the unction of the Spirit of God but do not delight that our sins are forgiven, that endless eons into eternity still we will be trusting the Christ who shed His blood on our behalf — not cut off, not condemned, not confined to eternal perdition, but forgiven, transformed, renewed by the love of God in Christ Jesus — then the proclamation of the gospel degenerates to mere game. Indeed, is it not the case that the man who is sold out to the truth he is proclaiming is inevitably the one who knows something of the Spirit's unction?

Do not seek power, seek Christ. Do not seek mere unction by itself; delight your heart firmly in the Lord. Delight that your name is written in heaven. Rejoice that your sins are forgiven. Let your ministry issue from an eternal perspective that is bathed in deepest eternal and spiritually-minded joy. "Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." From this eternal perspective no task can seem too daunting, no pressures too much, no challenge too great, no discouragements too defeating; for we look at all tasks from an eternal perspective and

see our names written from eternity past and glimpse our future as we peer into eternity future, our sins forgiven, our eternal home with Christ, our names written in the Book of Heaven. God grant that this might be your consuming vision as you serve.
