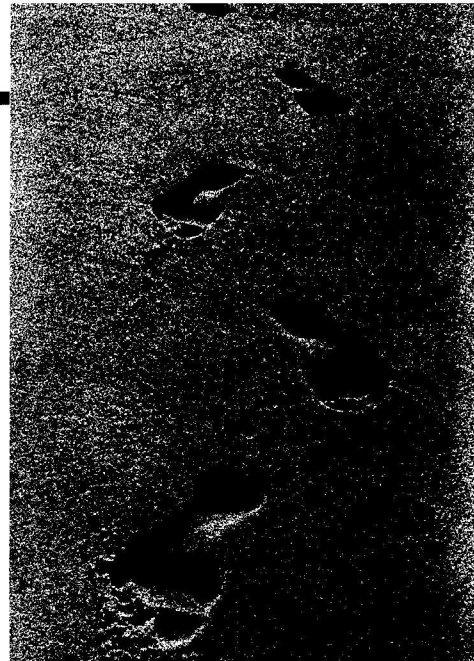

FIRST OF ALL

1 Corinthians 15:3

by Desmond Ford



IN ONE MOVIE version of Dicken's *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge, the old miser, visits his dying friend Joseph Marley. A dignified figure is sitting on the landing. "Are you the doctor?" asks Scrooge. "No, sir, I am an undertaker—ours is a very competitive business."

So is the whole of life. Especially on the first day of the New Year many try to estimate where they are placed in life's race.

New Year's Philosophizing

It's a very natural tendency to philosophize at this time when we are challenged to make new resolutions and set new goals. *What* should be first competes with the more constant inquiry as to *Who* should be first. Many decide the answer is the same. Is it really so?

Because the New Year always carries with it not merely the promise of better things, but also the reminder of mortality, only the fool never rechecks his answers to the old philosophical chestnuts: Whence? Why? Whither? Camus, the modern French philosopher, once said that the main issue is why there is something rather than nothing. Another author, surveying the rushing host of his contemporaries, whispered, "What is it all but the murmur of gnats in the gleam of a million million suns?"

Humanity Is a Riddle of Riddles

One thing is certain. Humanity, that has always asked the riddles, has now become a riddle to itself. Recent history has demonstrated that humanity's

deepest problems lie within. Enslaved by self-centeredness, greed, lust, jealousy and pride, poor humanity splutters about liberty. Perhaps Camus was correct when he wrote: "A single sentence will suffice for modern man: he fornicated and read the papers. After that vigorous definition, the subject will be, if I may say so, exhausted."

It is the rapid passage of New Years which makes our inquiry urgent. "Death makes mankind absurd, unless . . ." and people wonder how to complete that sentence. Nietzsche, confronting the human dilemma, asked, "Is there still an up and down? Are we not wandering aimlessly through an empty void? Does not an empty space breathe upon us? Has it not grown colder?"

Two generations earlier Wordsworth, in his poem "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" [1798] had referred to "the burthen [burden] of the mystery, / . . . the heavy and the weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world." None can confront the challenge of the New Year without trying to deal with such basic concerns.

The World Changed Is Changed by Ideas

Charles Darwin, over a hundred years ago, did most to change our modern world philosophically. He reechoed the materialistic premise that thought is just a secretion of the mind and no more wonderful than gravity. He wrote in one of his notebooks:

Plato says in *Phaedo* that our "imaginary ideas" arise from the

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preexistence of the soul, are not derivable from experience—read monkeys for preexistence.¹ No wonder Karl Marx offered to dedicate volume 2 of *Das Kapital* to Darwin.

Answers to Life's Questions Affect Our Destiny

Groucho Marx always teased audiences with such outrageously obvious questions as "Who's buried in Grant's Tomb?" But that which can seem obvious can be deceptive. It was John Quincy Adams who framed the Monroe Doctrine, not James Monroe. However, our questions this New Year do not belong to the category delighted in by Groucho. Upon our answers our choices depend, as do our happiness and destiny. And not only our own, but also the happiness and destiny of those who live in our shadow.

As suggested, the obvious is not always the correct response. John Ciardi asked:

Who would believe an ant
in theory?
A giraffe in blueprint?
Ten thousand doctors of what's
possible
Could reason half the jungle out
of being.

Clues to the Mystery of Existence

Briefly, we suggest clues to the mystery of existence. One of the best has always been the argument to (not from) design. Consider Darwin's words:

To suppose that the eye, with all its inimitable contrivances for adjusting the focus to different distances, for admitting different amounts of light, and for the correction of spherical and chromatic aberration, could have been formed by natural selection, seems, I confess, absurd in the highest degree.²

We find that confession more impressive than his approximately 800 usages of "We may well suppose" in two of his chief books.

The Clue of the Conscience

But there is another argument which leads to the answer to our first inquiry. Consider these words

of Peter Forsyth about conscience (the "I ought" that dogs all sane people, believers and nonbelievers alike):

Man is more than a consciousness, he is a conscience. He is not only aware of himself, he is critical of himself. Everyone who believes in morality believes in the conscience as the power we have of passing moral judgment upon ourselves.

There is a self we cannot kill. We cannot get rid of this judge. He is not in our power. We cannot unmake him, though he be against ourselves. What a strange thing we are—two, yet one! Two that cannot agree—one that cannot be severed. Neither of us can go out of the other's hearing.

Who is this judge that follows us like our shadow? We did not appoint him. We did not give him his place. He is there in spite of us. He is no fiction of our imagination, else we would not be so afraid of him. The place which we cannot help assigning to conscience is a place given it by another power than ourselves.³

The cross-resurrection event assures us that evil can never have the last word. Though we may seem forsaken by God and without hope, Calvary clearly teaches that God is present even when he seems most absent.

Yes, every sane person's experience is awareness of the centrality of moral reality. That awareness, linked to the knowledge of mortality, calls urgently for a remedy, inasmuch as all find themselves sick when confronted by the moral standard. "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (Heb 9:27). Thus, the best of books unites the cardinal dilemmas of sin and mortality.

Making The Gospel Key First

If, after trying a thousand keys in a very complicated lock, only one is

found to fit, then one might well conclude that the key was manufactured by the same being who made the lock. So it is with the gospel key to life's lock. Humanity's need for meaning, guidance, forgiveness, and moral strength are provided for in the Christian gospel, and nowhere else. Wisely, all should make the gospel first in their thinking and doing. Paul saw this and wrote:

Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, which you received, in which you stand, by which you are saved, if you hold it fast—unless you believed in vain.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures (1 Cor 15:1-4 RSV). Observe the words, "of first importance." Because our chief burden is not even that of mystery but of guilt, the gospel must be first. Human nature could never have invented this key to life's lock. That God should become human, and by himself bear the penalty of the race's guilt both upholds the right and justifies the transgressor—what a glorious solution to the world's fatal disease! Had humanity atoned for itself it would have destroyed itself. God suffering as God alone would have been irrelevant to humanity's sin problem. But God incarnate expiating guilt is self-authenticating in its appropriateness. Read again Romans 5:10,18 RSV:

For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.

Then as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men.

The Glad Word of an Objective Reality

How few, even of professing Christians, understand these words! These verses clearly affirm that the

atonement of Christ restored the whole human race to favor with God. Christ is our peace, having broken down the wall between God and humanity. By his own blood Christ signed the ransom papers for the race. Unlike most of the panaceas offered to humanity this one has to do not with a subjective experience but an objective reality: salvation was accomplished historically, outside of, and independent of ourselves. And the gospel is the glad word of that event.

Calvary is of sin the double cure. It takes away both sin's guilt and power. The revelation of the atoning God breaks the believer's heart, emancipating it from the bondage of self-centered existence. Looking on the cross the believer sees the holiness of God, and repents; sees the love of God and believes; sees the power of God and is born again.

Evil Cannot Have the Final Word over the Gospel

The cross-resurrection event assures us that evil can never have the last word. However bad Friday seems, Sunday (the day of resurrection) is a comin'. Though we may seem forsaken by God and without hope, Calvary clearly teaches that God is present even when he seems most absent. The boy who gazed at a painting of Calvary and cried, "If God had been there he would not have let them do that," had much to learn.

And so have we. For example, there is the second look at the cross-resurrection scene. First, we see what God did *for* us. Secondly, we see that in God's reckoning (and ideally in our own also), we too were crucified and resurrected (see Gal 2:20; Col 3:1).

So what? So now we are able to contend with the conflict of life. Not only the conflict with its mysteries, but with its pain both internal and external. We need a philosophy that will enable us to endure "The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" through each new year. We have that philosophy in the gospel and nowhere else.

Spurgeon's Gospel-Filled Philosophy

No one has summed up that glorious philosophy of living amid trial better than Spurgeon. In his own illnesses

he endured hellish pain. To strengthen you for whatever lies ahead in this New Year we offer you his words of commentary on 1 Corinthians 3:21,22, "For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours:"

If the clouds which threaten us in the future are darker than any we have hitherto experienced, the covenantal rainbow shall span them all.

The leaves of the book of destiny are folded; the volume is sealed with seven seals; thou needest not desire to read a single line, however, for the Lord tells thee that, whatever may be recorded in it, it is all thine; it must all work for thy good; it must all promote thy highest happiness.

As Christians, we dare not, and would not murmur at providential appointments. Life to us has had its sorrows, but goodness and mercy have followed us hitherto, and they shall with equal certainty follow us all the days of our lives. Though this is not our rest, and we are strangers and foreigners, as all our fathers were, yet for all this, "he maketh us to lie down in green pastures, he leadeth us beside still waters." "The lines have fallen unto us in pleasant places, and we have a goodly heritage;" we will not speak ill of God's name who daily loadeth us with benefits, but we will sing, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name. Who satisfieth thy mouth with good things, so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle's." We have reason to expect that in the future our lot will include a fair measure of joy, even as the past has done. Summers will bring their flowers, and autumns their mellow fruits; days shall be bright with sunlight, and nights gorgeous with moon and stars.

In the future, without any foolish forebodings, you may expect troubles. Necessarily and unavoidably, if you and I shall be spared to live to an old age, there are certain trials that must happen to us. Changes in circumstances may arise, poverty may supplant

wealth, and slander injure fame; where barns were filled to bursting, there may arise a famine; and those whose broad acres could scarce be traversed in a day, may come to a scanty plot of ground, or none at all. But if that do not happen to thee, yet at any rate, thy friends must die, if thou do not.

These things must come; to all men are such trials measured out. And there must come temptation, and inward conflicts, and outward afflictions, in all which we shall have need to possess our souls in patience, lest we be overcome of evil. Trials will arise from our own household, even more severe than if our Absalom had been cut off by death. Alas! how often is the living cross far more heavy and galling than if it had been dead; and certainly to us all there must come (unless Christ shall soon appear) the valley of death-shade, the passage of the black river, the clammy sweat, and the mortal anguish of the last dread hour; "for it is appointed unto men once to die."

*"Every wind that rise,
whether soft or fierce, it is
a divine monsoon, hurrying
in the same direction as
your soul's desires..."*

Let our text encourage us, for it declares to us that all these things are ours. There is not in the whole area of our future life a single plot of stony ground which shall not yield us fertile harvests of joy. As Midas of old touched even the most valueless objects and turned them into gold, so does the hand of divine love transmute every trial and affliction into everlasting joy for his people.

No evil can happen to me, and seeming ill is but another form of benediction. If all events shall aid me, what matters in what dress they come, whether of scarlet and fine linen, or sackcloth and ashes. Trial may be very