

SHADOWS OF GOD'S UNSPEAKABLE GIFT

There are some words of Scripture that little children find it very difficult to understand and some big children as well. The words are these: "It's more blessed to give than to receive." Little children don't understand that. In our early years Christmas means GETTING and the more the merrier. It is only after we hear the Gospel and learn that the one who gave us life and has cared for us all of our days, bankrupted heaven for our sakes though we deserved it not, that we begin to see the import of our Lord's words that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

When we become parents and when we become grandparents this lesson of our Lord is underlined. It is more blessed to give than to receive. Remember, our Lord said that where your treasure is, there your heart is also...our treasure of talent, of time, of opportunity, or money. Whatever we worship, the dollar, a human being, reputation, where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

There are two chapters in the New Testament all about giving. I want you to look at a few verses: II Corinthians, chapter 8. One of the most wonderful verses in the Bible is in this chapter, verse 9: "For you know the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, though he was rich, yet, for your sakes he became poor that ye through his poverty might be rich." You know the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ. The word 'grace' there can be translated 'gift'. You know, the gift of the Lord, Jesus Christ. The Lord of heaven is a gift to all who will

receive him. "Though he was rich," how rich? Well, he owned the universe, yet, for our sakes he became poor. How poor? He didn't even own a loin cloth on the cross. When he approached the cross he owned one thing of great value, a tunic probably woven by a loving mother, without seams, so beautifully prepared by someone who loved him. But that he yielded to his crucifiers. A wonderful symbol of how to us, though we are responsible for his death, he imputes his robe of righteousness. He gave his robe to his crucifiers. So he was poor for our sakes, not even a loin cloth that "Ye through his poverty might be rich." He even gave up life. Many of us are prepared to give up things but giving up life, that is different, but he gave up life that we through his poverty might be rich.

Everything on earth is stamped with the cross of Christ, everything of value. The cross is reflected in every water spring. It is stamped on every loaf of bread. Never one saint or sinner eats his daily bread that he is nourished by the sacrificial flesh and blood of Christ. We own nothing! The greatest sign of Christian maturity is the practice of a comprehensive stewardship, being aware that Christ purchased everything. We own nothing. We have just been entrusted with truth, with talent, with life, with wealth, with opportunities and we are stewards.

Look further in the next chapter please, chapter 9 and there is a great and wonderful verse here, verse 8. Remember these whole two chapters are about giving. It was because there were many poor saints among the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. And everywhere Paul went among the gentiles he said, "now, remember those poor Jewish brethren and to show that we are one great family, Jews and gentiles, send them

some help." These two chapters are about how he is getting money from Greece and Corinth to go back to Jerusalem. But look at this promise in chapter 9:8; it is a wonderful promise. "God is able to make all grace abound toward you that ye always having all sufficiency in all things may abound in every good work." What a comprehensive promise! God is able. We are not able. Every person I meet is my superior in some way because nobody knows it all and nobody can do it all. The things I don't know and the things I cannot do are a trillion times more than the things I do know and the things I can't do. But God is able to make all grace. God does not stint. God is not mean. All abound, not just leak out, not just seep through...abound toward you that you always, not sometimes, not in a crisis, but you always having all sufficiency, not sometimes our coveted ambitions for self-exaltation but always having all sufficiency in all things, might abound in all good works. Then the last verse in this chapter: "Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift."

You know, the words that precede that tell about the "Exceeding grace of God toward you." It was grace that gave us life, grace that has carried us through dangers known and unknown. There have been many times in the lives of most adults when existence did not seem worth it. I've know such times and I am sure most of your have known such times. But God has carried us through those things over and over and over again. So Paul can talk about the exceeding grace of God and then he says, "Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift," of course, meaning Christ, thanks be unto God for Christ.

I want to take an Old Testament story and Roy read some of it this morning that illustrates that God is the great giver, gladly, freely,

willingly, wants to give to the weakest and the worst. Look with me at II Kings 3. Here's a great story. I have been spending a lot of time on Elisha recently and a whole series of wonderful records. Here in chapter 3 of II Kings: "Now Jehoram, the son of Ahab" oh, there are two bad names to start with. Ahab was married to Jezebel and that is not the most flattering of titles and Ahab was a bad man, both were idolaters, both vicious, both murderers and the son is not much better. Jehoram began to reign over Israel in Samaria. He reigned 12 years. You see, God does not work quickly. The mills of God grind slowly but they grind exceedingly fine. Wicked people think they are getting away with their sins and their transgressions but the mills of God grind slowly. This man is a bad man but he reigns 12 years on the throne. He is not grinding at the mill like Samson with his eyes out. He is on the throne. He is in plush purple and he wrought evil in the sight of the Lord. But look at the next bit. He was not like his father or his mother. We often fool ourselves by saying at least I am better than so and so...does not help much. You have all heard the illustration many times that if you are being chased by a bull and you have to jump a great ravine to safety, imagine it is 15 feet, and you jump 14 feet 11-3/4 inches, you are just as done as if you had only jumped 3/4 of an inch. And God requires the whole heart and mind. He wants all there is of us because he did not withhold anything. And it is not enough to say, hey, well I don't do this, and I don't do that, I'm better than so and so. That is not the point. The commandment which will judge us all after the preeminent one of, did you believe in Jesus? Did you accept my gift? The commandment after that is, did you love God with all your heart? All your mind? All your soul? All your strength? The ALL is very damning. So this man was better than his parents but still no good. He put away the image of Baal.

You know, it says that when Herod listened to John the Baptist preach, Herod, the murderous, you have not begun yet, not started. A self indulgent life is a wasted empty life. The only life worth anything is where there is conflict within and you do the will of God however crucifying to your own nature; the self-indulgent person is a lost soul. You cannot be a self-indulgent person and belong to Jesus Christ. Now, he did many things gladly. Now, we would commend him. He did things, he did many things and he did not do them reluctantly. He did them gladly. It wasn't enough. Hell is his destination. God wants us to do all things well. He wants an undivided heart. If I am just worshipping Des Ford, I cannot worship God. If I indulge my own desires as the preeminent rule of life and I refuse discipline, I refuse self-denial (Paul said, "I die daily") that is the sign of whether you are growing in Christ where you have to fight yourself regularly. If you never have to fight yourself you have not begun yet, not started. A self indulgent life is a wasted empty life The only life worth anything is where there is conflict within and you do the will of God however crucifying to your own nature; the self-indulgent person is a lost soul. You cannot be a self-indulgent person and belong to Jesus Christ. Now, I need to add to that, he will never take anything from you that is in your best interest to keep but he will take many things from you if you are willing that you might not want to let go because we are all somewhat deluded about what is best for us.

So, here is this man to whom God is going to give a great gift and he is a rogue, a rascal, he is no good. But God is going to give him a great gift. "He cleaved unto the sins of Jeroboam (verse 3) which made Israel to sin. He departed not there from." And then we read

about a rebel against the kingdom. The Moabites had been subject to Israel so in verse 6 Jehoram went out of Samaria, numbered all Israel for war and then he sent for Jehoshaphat of Judah and said to the kings of Moab who rebelled, will you come with me against him?" and Jehoshaphat said, I am as thou art." Now he should not have said that. Jehoshaphat worshipped God but he made mistake after mistake in the same area. We find at one time he associates with Ahab in a war that he should not have been in. Another time he associated with Ahaziah an idolater, "I am as thou art." He should have said, hey, I am not like you, sorry. If we are just the same as the world we will go where the world goes and the saddest thing in the story of the destruction of the old world was how few accepted the invitation to be saved. The saddest thing in the story of Noah is that though he preached for 120 years he didn't have any converts except his family. When Jesus was asked, "Lord, are there few that will be saved?" He said, "Strive to enter in; wide is the gate that leads to destruction the many go in there at..Straight is the gate and narrow is the way that leads to life and few that findeth." According the new Testament most of the inhabitants of most of the pews of modern Christendom are practical atheists. Read Revelation 3:14-20. They attend church and God says, "I will spew you out of my mouth." This is because they are not wholehearted. You cannot play with God, he's God! You cannot play with electricity. You know a favorite of mine in America is in Florida. Whenever I speak in Orlando, I spend some time between meetings in _____ on the beach but it is the lightening center of the world. People delight in telling me that a man sitting just outside this spot where I stay, was reading a newspaper and zap! Playing with electricity is nothing compared with playing with God. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. The God who

is love hates evil. He hates our sins and if I cling to them I will go where they go. You are going to get rid of them one day. If I cling to them I will go where they go. It is false to preach a Gospel that pictures God as a saccharin father Christmas. God is holy, more loving than anyone than we have ever known but he is also holy and hates evil. And while he hates sin and loves the sinner, if the sinner clings to the sin the same will happen to the sinner as to the sin. It will be no more. Jehoshaphat has made a mistake here but he does believe in God and they decide in verse 8 to go a villainous route to try and creep up on the king of Moab and to pick up the king of Edom on the way and the king of Edom makes no profession whatever. He is very, very bad man. Then at the end of verse 9 it says after 7 days' journey there is not water for the host and for the cattle that followed them. The Bible often plays tricks in a way it will sketch the grandeur, the might or a person or persons or a group and then suddenly pulls the rug out from under them. I like reading about king Ahasuerus in the book of Esther who ruled all these 120 provinces and could have a party lasting 6 months but he cannot command one hour of sleep. He is an insomniac. We are very weak really. Think how dependent we are on air.

One of the things I fear most is drowning because I have been nearly drowned more than once. The sea to me is both cruel and beautiful. I was brought up by the sea. You could go swimming every day. There were Portuguese Men of War that could sting you to death and there were crocodiles and sharks but in North Queensland every boy went swimming as often as possible. I have been nearly drowned more than once and I am afraid of that. We are so dependent on air. We are so dependent on the providences of God. There are a thousand gates to

death. A spider's web is much stronger than your life or mine apart from the providence of God.

So here are these kings, might and army, but no water. You can have everything but if you have one thing needful missing, what is the use of it? There are plenty of multimillionaires that do not have health. They sold their health to get their wealth. Now many of them engage in getting rid of their wealth trying to get back their health. No, no, that is a hard road to hoe. The one thing needful is to be right with God. So, they lacked water. This story pictures everyone of us. Some time or other in life we come to an end of our tether. Some time or another in life we suddenly realize, hey, I am not sufficient. I cannot hack it on my own. I need help. This is one of the reason for troubles in life, to bring us to the spot where we say, "Lord, I need help." You remember Lewis' famous statement that God whispers in our pleasures but he shouts in our pains. Most people never listen to God until they are in pain. So this is my story. Every one of us in our life's pilgrimage comes to a place where we need help and we know it; it may be because of pain, it may be because suddenly we have had the revelation of our own heart that we never suspected. Just as it is true that God is better than we have ever hoped, it is also true that we are worse than we ever thought and sometimes we come to the end of our tether when something happens that reveals us to ourselves because we are all strangers to ourselves and the passage of the years does not seem to make a great deal of difference. So, here's everyone in the pilgrimage of life, great need.

Verse 10, the king of Israel does not say, well, it's my own fault; he says, "The Lord did it." God is a convenient horse to saddle with our

follies. He says, "The Lord brought these three kings together," blaming God for his own mistakes.

Verse 11, Jehoshaphat, he is a believer and says, "Look can't we find a prophet of God?" Isn't it marvelous that in verse 11 we are told that Elisha is there. Well what is he doing there, he's not the chaplain. What's he doing with these armies? He is a symbol of the ever present Christ. Even when I am in trouble because of my own fault and most of my troubles have been my own fault, even when we are in trouble because of our own folly, Christ is there. That is very important to know. You and I against the world don't stack up very well. Most microscopic bacteria can fall the strongest man. Mohammed Ali may have done all right in the ring years ago in his heyday but the smallest of bacteria could have felled him. We need help and this presence of Elisha is to say we are never alone. God is the great giver. He gives to the worst. He gives to the weakest provided they acknowledge their need and turn to him with the whole heart. There is a condition. God can provide an atmosphere but I have to breathe it in. God can give the sunshine but I can hide from it if I wish. God has provided salvation. I must appropriate it and it is a direct act of will accompanied with surrender of heart, mind and body. You know, you can over simplify the Gospel or you can make it more difficult than it should be. The clearest statement in the Bible about salvation is, "Believe in the Lord, Jesus Christ and thou shall be saved." Listen to what it says, believe on him as Lord, master, owner, I am not my own. Believe on him as Jesus, Savior. I cannot believe on him as Jesus if I still go about my old ways. If selfishness and self-indulgence controls me and if everything I do is self centered, I don't believe my name is Jesus, he will save his

people from their sins. If I choose to hug them, he is not my Savior. Believe on him as Christ, the anointed teacher. If I spend more time with novels and TV than with the truth of God, I don't believe on him as Christ. I may be fooling myself and all of us do a pretty good job of that but we don't believe on him as Christ. The encouraging thing of this story is, these men none of which had anything to boast about, God is willing to help them. God is willing to help them, to give to them. And the presence of Elisha is reminding us that when we are in a mess (because of our own fault and how often that has happened to me) God is there. God wants to help. He is nearer than breathing and closer than hands and feet. We are never alone. The sunshine that shines on the most fetid manure heap as well as the beautiful snows of Kilimanjaro are a symbol of the love of God that surrounds us. However weak we are, however foolish we are the love of God is there for us just as the sunshine is everywhere. So Elisha is here. I think it is just a beautiful touch.

Elijah was different and represented the law and he came and went like lightning. Elisha is not like that. He is always living with the people. He is in every situation where there is trouble because he represents the ever present Gospel, the ever present Christ. When we seem to be alone it is good to remember we are never less alone than then. (?)

So, Elisha is there and he seeks for music to calm his spirit because he is not happy about Jehoram. He is not happy about the King of Edom and he thinks Jehoshaphat has not been doing what he should so that the spirit of the prophet is somewhat disturbed so he asks for music. Before the days of Shakespeare he knew about the music calming the

savage breast and the concord of sweet sounds. He knew about that. Today, in the 20th century, we know that one of the best therapeutic agents is good music, heals the spirit that can often help the healing of the body. Good music has been counterfeited. Most of the music in the world is not good just as most of that which is in print is not good and most of what is on TV is not good and most of the thoughts that come into our mind unbidden are not good. However, he calls for music so that his spirit might be calmed and then he gives his advice from the Lord in verse 16: "Thus says the Lord, 'Make this valley full of ditches' thus says the Lord, 'you will not see wind, neither shall ye see rain, yet, that valley shall be filled with water that ye might drink, both ye and your cattle and your beasts.' That's a small thing for the Lord to do. He will deliver the Moabites also into your hand." Make the valley full of ditches, make what's bad worse? Think of the sweat. They are thirsty. You don't do work like digging ditches when you are dying of thirst, you conserve. No, says the prophet, make things worse. He does not just say, dig a ditch or two ditches. He says make the valley full of ditches. Please notice, it is a valley. Only when God gets me in a low place can he help me. Most of us tend to, in our own mind's eye, go through life on stilts, looking at the hoi polloi around us. What a deception. What stupidity, what vanity, as though whatever talents we might have we invented them. We did not invent them, we got them but we tend to go through life with stilts but the Lord has a way of removing the stilts. He has a thousand ways. The valley represents a low place. God can only help us in times when we become aware of reality which breeds humility. To know reality breeds humility. If know ourselves boasting becomes impossible as we know ourselves to some degree. If you just know yourself a little bit you know there is nothing to boast

about. So the valley represents the place of humility. Bunyan says, in PILGRIMS PROGRESS, "He that is low need fear no fall." However, there is something to do. While, dear friends, I cannot earn salvation, there is nothing ever that I can achieve that merits eternal life. How could you buy that? It's like trying to buy the Taj Mahal with a dime. How could you buy eternal life with anything you do? However, none the less, the Bible says work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. "It is God that worketh in you to will and to do." Dear friends, we are not saved by works but we are not saved without them. You say, what about the penitent thief? Well he didn't do anything worthy of salvation, that's sure but he had his works. He prayed a wonderful prayer and acknowledged Jesus as Lord. He acknowledged his own sinfulness, rebuked a sinner, exercised great faith. Would you ask a criminal being hung for eternal life? So while he did nothing worthy, there were works, "Lord, remember me when thou comest in thy kingdom." Then to his brother thief, "We have this justly but this man did nothing amiss. "He made a great confession of the Savior, a true description of the Savior, "He has done nothing amiss." He gave a true description of himself, "We, ourselves justly deserve what we've got." We are not saved by works. How could you ever buy eternal life with works?. You are not saved without them. The evidence, the sign, the fruit of the root of saving faith is always an energetic pursuance of the will of God. Dear friends, the test is in the things we would like to pass over. I don't know how my wife puts up with me because I am not a home man in any way. I am not interested in some things I should be interested in. I am far more interested in the old garage that has my books than the beautiful garden that God made. If the spirit of God comes to any one of us about things we don't like and says, "Do it" we are to do it. "He that

is faithful in that which is least, is faithful also in much." If the will of God becomes clear to me--you don't have to be like everybody else but if the will of God becomes clear to you as what he wants you to do, you must do it (if you pretend to belong to him). Godly talk without a godly walk is a terrible, terrible sin. To make much profession of Christ and not to live Christ is a terrible, terrible sin. Ministers will be more judged by how they behave in the kitchen, in the dining room and bedroom than how they behave in the pulpit. There are many reasons for preaching besides trying to help people. Godly talk just brings condemnation unless accompanied by a godly walk.

So these men are given something to do, make the valley full of ditches, make things worse. How crazy--sometimes the things God tells us to do--crazy. Giving looks crazy. All our lives seem to be an effort to try and gather and get. God says give...where your treasure is....die daily, he that would save his life will lose it. That does not seem to make sense. It transcends sense. However, there is the admonition, "Make the valley full of ditches. Neither shall ye see rain or wind but that valley will be filled with water." So, it rained somewhere that night but not where they could see it or the Moabites could see it and early in the morning with the dawn there is a rivulet of water coming down and filling all those ditches where the red earth is. Edom means red and there in the boundaries of Edom where there is red earth and when the sun shines on it the water looks like blood. The Moabites looking from afar say, "Those kings have had a disagreement, they fought each other. The valley is filled with the blood of the armies that came to take us." What a situation. Notice, the Lord says the miracle was a light thing and the Lord goes beyond their immediate needs, verse 18: "He will deliver the Moabites also

into your hand." Dear friends, God is not just interested in saving our miserable souls alone. No one will go into the kingdom on his own. Most of us were born alone, most of us will die alone. None of us will go into the kingdom of heaven alone. He does not just save us for ourselves. Every saved person is a missionary. If we are living a self-serving life, cafeteria style, self-service, we are done for. We know that but we quickly forget it. Service is the rent we owe for the space we occupy and everyone of us is behind with the rent and we need help to come up with it, every one of us.

So, the Lord says, you are going to go out and conquer those heathen out there and God gives it to us to overcome the world, the flesh and the devil. We are to go forward conquering and to conquer, singing, thanks be unto God that causes us to triumph. This is the victory that overcometh the world. And so they make advances but I want to draw your attention to the last couple of verses: "When the King of Moab saw the battle was too sore for him, he took with him 700 men who drew swords to break through even to the king of Edom," wanted to get them to escape but they failed. Then he took his eldest son who should have reigned in his stead and offered him as a burnt offering upon the wall and there was great indignation against Israel and they departed from him and returned to their own land. What a way to finish the story, what a let down, what a shocker! Doing away with his own son before his enemies and his own people. This is a ghastly counterfeit of the great secret of the universe. It may be that the king of Moab had said to his wise men, the Jews tell this story, how is it that these Israelite people can have such success? Look at what they have done. They have taken over our property. They got this far, how is it? According to the Jewish tradition, the king was told,

well the first Israelite was told to offer his only son as a pledge that one day God would give his only son to die for the world. "Oh," said the king of Moab, "I have a son," and he takes him up on top of the broad wall and puts him to death in the sight of the besieging armies, in the sight of his own people, a ghastly counterfeit. You remember in John, chapter 11, Caiaphas said, "It is expedient that one man should die for the people and the whole nation perish not." There is the view of the heathen. Let us placate God. No, that is not the biblical idea of sacrifice. The Bible never ever says that God is angry and by sacrificing it will put away his anger. The Bible says, "God so loved the world that he gave..." The sacrifice God made because he loved and neither should you make the mistake of thinking, hey, here is God up there on his throne, it is just his son that suffers. No, no, you distinguish them as a trinity but you never separate them. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. Christ offered himself through the eternal spirit. The whole Godhead was there suffering on the cross in the person of the son. So here is a ghastly counterfeit of the greatest secret of the universe but in the war against sin God would triumph by making himself a spectacle of sacrifice before the universe and that would end the war, ultimately. And the practical question for me, of course, is has my awareness of the reality of the true sacrifice conquered me? And the evidence is how a person lives, not how a person preaches, writes, sings, builds, but how a person lives. Do they live as those that know that God, being the great giver, and that I am only a steward of those gifts? Do I live like that? Do I live in the valley, low down in self esteem, in the right sense. We can esteem ourselves highly because God loves us. Humility is not thinking you are stupid or a pretty girl thinking she is ugly. That is not humility. Humility is

saying, hey, whatever I have God gave it. I did not advise it; I didn't invent it and it is only lent to me. So the test of whether the sacrifice of God has been efficacious for me is revealed in how I live from day to day. Am I prepared to dig ditches? Will I get rid of the dirt? Most of our lives have too much dirt, dirt of worldliness, the dirt of mammon, of greed, hate, pride, lechery. Most of our lives are too full of dirt. We have to get rid of the dirt. The deeper the ditches, the more the blessing. Yes, I am to believe on the Lord, Jesus Christ and he will work miracles for the worst and the weakest. What hope would any of us have if that were not true? He will work miracles for the worst and the weakest. I must do what he says. He must, by his sacrifice, end the war in my heart. In a sense, I will say when any temptation comes, I would rather have Jesus than that. When you would rather have Jesus than anything the world has to offer, anything that sloth offers, money offers, property offers--when you would rather have Jesus than anything else, the war is over in your heart.

Prayer: Thank you Lord that you are willing to give to the weakest and the worst, when we come to see our need and seek thee with a surrendered will as we consider the great sacrifice made on the wall of the universe to end the war. May it end the war in our hearts of a divided will and divided heart that we may be altogether yours, that we may crown Jesus Lord of all. Amen.