

SIMPLE TALKS ON THE TABERNACLE

by

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

WHAT THE HOLY SPIRIT CAN MAKE OUT OF THE WOOD OF AN ACACIA TREE

“And thou shalt make boards for the tabernacle of acacia wood standing up . . . And thou shalt overlay the boards with gold, and make their rings (staples) of gold for places for the bars: and thou shalt overlay the bars with gold” (Exodus 26:15, 29).

FORTY boards of acacia wood, eighteen feet high, two feet nine inches in breadth, formed the framework of the tabernacle. The acacia tree was one of the trees found in the desert. It was the proletariat amongst the desert trees. God's choice differs from ours. **“God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, . . . yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: that no flesh should glory in his presence”** (I Corinthians 1:27-29).

If we want to make a good piece of work, we require good material from which to make it. The Holy Spirit can make the most wonderful piece of art in the world: a poor sinner transformed into the image of the Master, out of very poor material. He can transform a Jacob into Israel. He can make use of the acacia tree in the desert to make the framework of the tabernacle, His Church on earth, members of the body of Christ.

Of course, all the forty boards were not taken from one tree. Most probably each tree furnished only one board. Neither were they all hewn down at the same time or at the same place. At the different halting-places they looked out for suitable trees. There is a great variety among the members of the body. It is **“a multitude, which no man can number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people and tongues”** (Revelation 7:9).

Men, women, and children too (praise the Lord); some rich, many poor, simple folks, like the majority of us, but also some of the highest culture, men prominent in science and art; for it is a great mistake to assume that all men of science are unbelievers — God has His chosen ones amongst all nations and in all classes of society.

Different in many ways, yet all alike sprang from native soil and had to be taken out of the desert before they could take their place in the framework of the tabernacle: brought out of darkness into His marvellous light.

The Word of our Lord applied to all and each one: **“Except ye be born again, ye cannot see the kingdom of God . . . Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God”** (John 3:3, 5).

In another way, too, they were all alike. Each board with its two tenets had to rest in the silver socket. **“The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord.” “Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ”** (I Corinthians 3:11).

Very different, too, were the ways by which the different boards found their way into the framework of the tabernacle.

The Holy Spirit has different ways to bring us to Christ. Many find the Lord in their youth, the best and easiest time to make a decision for Christ. The older one gets, the more difficult it may become, but praise the Lord, old people can be saved too. Some are brought to Christ by a deep conviction of sin; to others the heinousness, the awful character of sin becomes clear after their conversion. Some know the exact day and hour of their conversion, others do not. Each board has its own story to tell.

I love testimony meetings. I rejoice to hear that something is happening. It does my heart good when I listen to bright testimonies, especially from young Christians. I am sure they may be a powerful inducement for others to decide for Christ. I wonder why they are not so frequent as they used to be. May it be that they are happening less? I propose to hold a testimony meeting now and ask one of the boards of acacia wood to tell its story.

“At one time,” he says, “I was an acacia tree in the desert. I grew out of it. All my nourishment I got from the earth. God had cursed the earth. As long as I was rooted in the desert I could not possibly have a place in the tabernacle. I had necessarily to be taken out of the desert soil, from which I drew all my nourishment.

“One day a stranger came, his name was Bezaleel. He looked at me and at the other trees near me. Then he came back and smiled. With his knife he made a mark on me. I was the only one in the grove he marked. At the time I did not know what it meant. Afterward I found out he had chosen me for a board in the tabernacle. Why he chose me and not the others I really cannot tell. I feel sure I was not any better than the others.”

The ministry of the Holy Spirit has not the aim of converting the world. The world will never be converted. Our Lord said that instead of getting better, it would grow worse. The Holy Spirit is gathering out of all nations, those whom God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has chosen in Him before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4), **“elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit”** (I Peter 1:2). The Greek word for church is *“Ecclesia,”* the called-out one.

Every child of God is a living proof for' the ministry of the Holy Spirit. We beg the board's pardon for interrupting him. He continues, however:

“Then I must have been a called-out one,” he says, “for there were other trees quite as high and strong as I, but the Master chose me. I can never thank Him enough for that. But then came a day I shall never forget. A man came with a strong axe and put it to my roots. Blow after blow fell. At last I fell and died. I had to be separated entirely from the desert life. That was necessary.

“Do not think I was ready now for a board in the tabernacle. God took a great deal of pains with me. Do you remember what God said about Ephraim? **‘Therefore have I hewed them by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of my mouth’** (Hosea 6:5). He did the same with me. I had to be planed. That was necessary again. I should not have fitted into my place otherwise. I did not always like it. Sometimes I blamed the prophets. I thought somebody had told them some of my secrets. I became angry with them and I forgot that they did their planning at the bidding of their Lord. It had to be, for there was so much of my old nature which would never have fitted in the tabernacle, rough corners which had to be planed away. Sometimes the Master Himself took the plane in His hand. I did not mind that. He always gave me a kind word and filled my heart with hope when He told me of coming glory and what He was going to make from me. It seemed to me He was like the silversmith sitting near the fire, awaiting the moment that His face was reflected in the silver” (Malachi 3:3).

I am sure you have been listening with interest to the testimony of our board. So have I, for my experience has been somewhat similar and I beg his forgiveness when I interrupt him once more. The board was right when it said that God had taken great trouble with him; so He has with me. The Holy Spirit longs to transform us in the glorious image of our Lord (II Corinthians 3:18). He wants to make us Christlike.

Christ in us is the hope of glory, the way to become glorious.

The Holy Spirit employs different means to achieve His purpose. He brings us together with other people or in other surroundings and it seems as if we are turned inside out. We discover hidden failures in our innermost heart which are never suspected to be there. In Egypt the children of Israel found out that the Egyptians were hard taskmasters. In the desert they found out what they themselves were. If Moses had told them in Egypt that the time would come that they would murmur against the Lord God who had led them out of the house of bondage, they would have answered, “Impossible.” When they were led into the desert and no longer could sit by the fleshpots of Egypt, six hundred thousand men failed in the testing and only two men, Joshua and Caleb, passed their examination and profited by God's dealings with them (Numbers 14:24).

The Lord may use worldly people, unholy people, and put the plane in their hands. Jacob was certainly selfish; it may be that he himself was not fully conscious of it. Esau had reason to know it. God wanted to transform Jacob into an Israel. He sent him to Laban. Laban was even more selfish than Jacob. God showed Jacob what selfishness was. I can imagine Jacob coming home to his Rachel in the evening when Laban had been especially trying and saying, “Rachel, dear, I do not want to hurt you, but your father is the most selfish man I ever met — how I hate selfishness.”

God wanted to make out of Jacob an Israel, a prince of God, an overcomer. He was training Jacob all that time with Laban. When Jacob had learned his lesson, God allowed him to return and at Penuel to become a new man with a new name.

Peninnah had children; Hannah had none. Some women can be mean, and Peninnah was. She made Hannah's life hard. Hannah shed many a tear but she did not say, "I cannot stand this life any longer, I must run away. I shall get a divorce." No, she let Peninnah become a blessing to her. She took her trouble to God and God gave her Samuel. She had passed her test. Do you think Hannah could ever have sung that choice idyll, as simple as beautiful, reminding us in its prophetic character of the Magnificat of the virgin, if she had not been trained in the hard school of Peninnah?

It may be that some of my readers are in the school of Laban or Peninnah.

Remember, it is God who brought you together with your Laban. He intends you for a board in the tabernacle. Your Laban is one of the "**all things**" which all work together, each one of them to your supreme good, to become like unto your Lord (Romans 8:28).

Your Father takes so much pains with your training because He wants to make something special out of you. If you feel tempted to be cross at your Laban say: "Laban, you are one of the '**all things.**' God is using you as heavenly plane that I may become a board of acacia overlaid with gold."

May I ask you a question? Have you ever prayed for your Laban? If you do this in harmony with the Spirit, you will begin to love him. One other question. Have you ever really thanked God for your Laban? Do you know that you ought to?

"Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." "Always for all things" (Ephesians 5:20).

Let us listen once more to our board; it does not mind my interruptions.

"You want to know what happened to me then? The Master did put me again in the desert, but this time it was all different. It had all become new. In fact, I have become a new creature. Something has happened inside of me and outside as well. I do not belong any more to the desert. If you look at me, you will see that I am standing in two silver sockets. I like to call them grace and truth. The sockets stand between me and the desert. I am in the world, but not of the world (John 17:14).

"The whole direction of my life has been changed. I have other aims for my life now. Formerly the blackbirds of the air made their nest in me; now I have been transplanted from darkness into light. I stand on quite a different foundation. I am a board in the house of God. I cannot tell you how happy I am now. I need not fear the typhoon of the desert any more. I am rooted and grounded in my Lord. I am not alone any more. There are other boards on either side of me, and we are so closely united together that we form together one solid wall — all one in Christ Jesus."

And after a pause — “Look at me, you see that I am different. Do you know me still? You cannot see my wood at all. I am overlaid with gold. **I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me**” (Galatians 2:20).

A board of acacia wood from the desert and now a place in the framework of the tabernacle. Is this possible? Certainly not, if God had not said: “**Thou shalt overlay them with gold**” (Exodus 26:29). Nothing more is to be seen of the acacia wood; and if the tenons were not covered with gold, they were hidden in the socket of silver.

Can this transformation become a reality in the life of God's children? When the apostle says, “**For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God**” (Colossians 3:3), does he really mean it? Is this experience possible in the life of every child of God?

To answer this question, in fault of better words, I want to employ the words State and Standing.

For many years an English solicitor had been looking for the sole heir of one of the oldest noble families. At last he was successful in discovering him as a poor colonist in Australia. The man was poor, living in wretched circumstances, in winter often being in great need. This was his state. His standing was the heir of a nobleman, having millions at his disposal. For many years he was in complete ignorance of his standing. As soon as he was informed of his good fortune, his state became, of course, also different.

Our standing has to do with our justification, our state with our sanctification, though naturally it is not possible to separate justification and sanctification completely from each other.

Paul in the Epistles often makes use of the expression, “**In Christ.**” Sometimes it refers to our state, sometimes to our standing. When he writes, “**There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus**” (Romans 8:1), he refers to our standing. Our state shows what use we make of our standing, how far we let it become a reality in our lives.

Let us first meditate on our state. To be in Christ, as far as our justification is concerned, the standing of man is either “**in Christ**” or “**in Adam.**” The unrenewed man is “**in Adam.**” Humanity is not a sand-heap in which every grain of sand is alive, but a living organism, a tree consisting of thousands of particles which are, however, all connected. In Adam the whole human race was tested. There was only one testing and Adam failed in it and we in him. It is important that we realize we are lost!

To such lost people the gospel comes. The good news is not that God once more offers us another test. When a tree is cut down with its roots, it is dead. The only way is to graft a branch on a new root. “**Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature**” (II Corinthians 5:17).

He gets a new standing. He is no longer in Adam, but in Christ. It is not a gradual process; it does not mean gradually to grow out of Adam into Christ. It is a definite transplanting done in a definite moment; out of Adam into Christ. You have a new standing.

We learned a chorus:

And the end is not yet, praise the Lord!
Blessings new He is bestowing
And my cup is overflowing
And the end is not yet, praise the Lord!

We have not exhausted the meaning of to be “**in Christ**” when at the new birth our standing has become “**in Christ.**”

Our walk should also be in Christ.

How happy a child is when it is conscious that Father is pleased with him. It is just the same with the relation between us and Christ. When we are conscious that there is nothing between Christ and us that interrupts communion with Him, that His power can flow through us, and that we can do all things through Christ, who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13), then our walk is also in Christ; that we are “**in Christ**” not only for our justification, but also for our sanctification.

When your walk is in Christ, He can communicate His life to you. His life was a life of obedience. He never turned back (Isaiah 50:5). He came to do His Father's will.

When your life is hidden in Christ, when the board of acacia wood is overlaid with gold, you will also be in harmony with the will of Father. Whatever Father bids you do, your response will also be “**I delight to do thy will.**”

Christ was obedient until death. When your walk is in Christ, you have been crucified with Him. You cannot make the Christ-life in you fuller and more active than it is. You need not do it either. In Him is the fullness of the Godhead bodily, but you can every day and every hour reckon your own life, with its wishes and plans, dead.

After having done this, this should be your constant walk. The more your own life is given to die, the more His life will become powerful in you, and His resurrection life and power will be manifested to you. Acacia wood, you are overlaid with fine gold!

Do I not need the Lord's power any more now? I need Him more than ever.

The power is not in me, but in Him. He is the power-house. Only as long as I abide in Him can His power flow through me. In our Lord we find all we need, but you only get it if you are in touch with Him. You can never be independent of Him.

In times past when there was neither gas nor electricity in a country house, a number of candlesticks were placed in the hall.

You could light one candle from the other and then you needed it no more. The relation between Christ and us is different. The train does not move until it is connected with the engine.

“Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me (apart from me) ye can do nothing” (John 15:4-5).

In the prayer of intercession which our Lord prayed in Gethsemane He prayed: **“Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; that they all may be one”** (John 17:20-21). **“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! For there commanded the Lord blessing, even life for ever more”** (Psalm. 133:1, 3). **“All one in Christ Jesus”** — the bond that unites the members of the one body of Christ is far closer, far more precious than that which unites us with unconverted relatives or with our fellow countrymen. This alliance is not made by man; neither need be made with men. It was made on the cross of Golgotha.

Five bars of acacia wood overlaid with gold, fastened in staples of gold, held the twenty boards on each side closely and firmly together. The two at the top and at the foot came half way and met in the middle; the middle bar reached from end to end. These bars together with the silver sockets helped to bear the boards up and keep them from falling down.

I. The lowest bar joining God's children together reminds us that God's children all over the world have all the word of God as food for their souls.

There is far more that unites God's children than what separates them. Where the heart is full of Jesus, where He is the subject of our conversations, we come close together. It has been my privilege many years to come to the Conference at Keswick. More than five thousand of God's children meet there from many countries, all with the longing desire to come closer to the Lord. Speakers and hearers come from many denominations, but the question is not asked: to which denomination do you belong? The Keswick motto is: “All one in Christ Jesus.”

II. The second bar tells us that united prayer joins God's children together. I thank the Lord for the week of universal prayer.

What rivers of blessing have issued from those meetings at the beginning of the year; when you have been together on your knees you cannot very well get up to combat each other.

III. The third bar tells us that there is one bread we break, one table spread for us.

I have been told that when General Washington with his army was encamped before Morristown, he heard that the next Sunday there was Holy Communion in the village church. He paid a visit to the pastor and said to him, “You are a Presbyterian; I do not know whether your church allows Christians from other churches to join you in the holy meal.” The pastor gave the excellent answer, “General, the table is not the table of the Presbyterians, but the Lord's table.” May the Lord's Supper, which should bind all members of His body together, never be the cause of separation amongst them.

IV. The next bar tells us there is still another bond that joins God's children together.

“And above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfectness. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body” (Colossians 3:14-15).

The more Christ is formed in us, the more we approach and love the brethren. The opposite holds also: if we are standing in a circle and our blessed Lord is in the midst, the nearer we get to each other, the nearer we get to Him.

When two mountaineers climb a mountain from opposite sides, the higher they ascend, the nearer they get to each other. When both have reached the summit they are together.

V. The fifth bar joins the boards from the inside and goes through the midst of the wood.

When one goes to different churches one often hears the complaint that there is so little brotherly love. We need not be surprised at it; the middle bar is lacking. If we want more love, we must be filled with the Holy Ghost. That is the bond that unites us closer together. The love of God is poured out in our hearts through the Holy Ghost (Romans 5:5). Where the Holy Spirit presides there is unity amongst God's children.

Happy board of acacia wood, overlaid with gold. Blessed is the day when Bezaleel marked you, the day when you were cut down and planed to fill a place in the tabernacle of God.

Acacia wood overlaid with gold.

I trust Dr. Ironside will forgive me if I tell a story he told us fifteen years ago at a Bible conference at Ocean City.

A friend of his, a medical missionary in Central Africa, was one day visiting some outlying stations. As he was riding through the woods, his horse became restless and pricked up its ears. He heard groaning and sobbing. He dismounted, bound his horse to a tree and began to search the woods.

He found a young woman covered with sores and ulcers. Her relatives had laid her there in the woods to die.

The doctor fetched fresh water and began to wash the ulcers and alleviate her pains. He tore his shirt in strips and bound her wounds. Then he took her tenderly in his arms and held her on his horse as he trudged by her side the ten miles to his hospital. The nurses put her in a bath, washed the wounds, and put her in a soft, clean bed.

All prayed that the Lord might do a miracle and spare that young life. The Lord heard their prayers and gradually she recovered and regained her strength. But they wanted more. They wanted her soul to be healed, and told her the glad news of a Saviour who had come from heaven to die for her.

They prayed that she might go back to her native village with the love of the Saviour in her heart. He loved her so much, they urged her to love Him too. At that moment the doctor opened the door and just looked in. Her whole face lit up, "Nurse, is He like my doctor? Then I'll love Him too. Is he like my doctor?"

I think that medical missionary was an acacia tree overlaid with gold.

THE HIS POEM (Ephesians 2:10)

"Then saw I how, before a master wise
A shapeless stone was set;
He said, 'Therein a form of beauty lies,
Though none behold it yet.'

"When all beside it shall be hewn away
That glorious shape shall stand
In beauty of the everlasting day
Of the unsullied land!

"When hewn and shaped till self no more is found,
Self ended at the cross;
The precious freed from all the vile around,
No gain, but blessed loss.

"Thus Christ alone remains — the former things
Forever passed away,
And unto Him the heart in gladness sings
All through the weary day."

— H. Suso

~ end of chapter 13 ~

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