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Chapter II

THE BIRTH OF JESUS.

"For unto you is born... a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." — Luke 2:11.

"The firstborn among many brethren." — Romans 8:29.

The birth of Jesus is one of the great signs of His condescension; and, no matter how we view it, is perhaps scarcely less wonderful than His death. If the one manifests His glorious divinity, then the other exalts His wonderful humanity. If Calvary and the Resurrection reveal His power, does not Bethlehem make manifest His love? And did not both the former come out of the latter? The infinite glory which belongs to the cross and the tomb had its rise in the gloom of the stable. If the Babe had not been laid in the manger, then the Man would not have been nailed to the tree, and the lamb that was slain would not have taken His place on the Everlasting Throne.

I claim, therefore, a little more attention to the events which relate to the Saviour's birth, and to the lessons which may be derived from them; and though, perhaps, something of what I have to say will have already occurred to some who will read this paper, I will venture to suggest one or two thoughts as they have been presented to my own mind. Their very simplicity has made them of service to me.

I. He Came.

The nature of the whole work of our redemption is made manifest by the one fact — He really came. His everlasting love, His infinite compassion, His all-embracing purpose were from eternity; but we only got to know of it all because He came. If He had contented Himself with sending messages or highly-placed messengers, or even with making occasional and wonderful excursions of Divine revelation, man would, no doubt, have been greatly attracted, and perhaps even helped somewhat in his tremendous conflict with evil; yet he might never have been subdued in will, he might never have been touched and won back to God; he might never have



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been brought down from his pride to cry out, "My Lord and My God," No, it was His coming to us that wrought conviction of sin, and then conviction of the truth in our hearts.

He came Himself.

There is something very wonderful in this principle of contact as illustrated by the life of Jesus. Just as to save the human race He felt it necessary to come into it, and clothe Himself with its nature and conform Himself to its natural laws, so all the way through His earthly journey he was constantly seeking to come into touch with the people He desired to bless. He touched the sick, He fed the hungry, He placed His fingers on the blind eyes, and put them upon the ears of the deaf, and touched with them the tongue of the dumb. He took the ruler's dead daughter "by the hand, and the maid arose." He lifted the little children up into His arms, and blessed them; He stretched forth his hand to sinking Peter; He stood close by the foul-smelling body of the dead Lazarus; He took the bread, and with His own hands brake it, and gave it to His disciples at that last farewell meal. He even took poor Thomas's trembling hand, and guided it to the prints in His hands and the wounds in His side.

Yes, indeed, it is written large, in every part of His life, that He really came, and that He came very near to lost and suffering men.

Is there not a lesson here for us, my comrade? As He is in the world, so are we. This principle in His life was not by accident or by chance, it was an essential qualification of His nature for the work entrusted to Him. It is a necessary qualification for those who are called to carry on that work.

Is this, then, the impression you are able to give to those among whom you labour: that you have come to them in very truth; that in mind and soul, in hand and heart, you are seeking to come into the closest contact of love and sympathy with them, especially with those who most need you?



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Oh, aim at this! Do not for your own sake, as well as for your Master's, move about amid your own people, or among those to whom God and The Army have given you entrance, as one who has little in common with them, who does not know them, who does not feel with them. Go into their houses, put your hand sometimes to their burdens, take a share in their toils, nurse their sick, weep with them that weep, and rejoice with them that rejoice. Make them feel that it is your own religion, rather than The Army system, that has made you come to them. Let them see by your sympathy and kindness that love is the over-mastering influence in your life, the influence that has brought you to them. Compel them to turn to you as a warm-hearted unselfish example of the truths you preach. Let them feel that you are indeed come from God to take them by the hand, as far as may be, and lead them through this Vale of Tears to the City of Light and Rest.

II.

His Humble Origin.

Everything associated with the advent of Jesus seems to have been specially ordered to mark His humiliation. It is true that Mary, His mother, was of the lineage of King David, but her relationship with the royal house was a very distant one, and the family had fallen upon sad times. The Romans were masters in the land, and a stranger sat upon the throne of Israel. Mary, therefore, was but a poor village maiden; Joseph, her betrothed husband, was a carpenter — an ordinary working man. Bethlehem, the place of the Saviour's birth, was a tiny straggling village, which, though not the least, was certainly one of the least of the villages of Judea. And Nazareth, where He grew from infant to childhood, and from youth to manhood, was another little hamlet among the hilly country to the north of Jerusalem, and was held in low repute by the people of those days.

The occupation chosen for the early life of Jesus was a humble one. He learned the trade of a joiner, and worked with Joseph at the carpenter's bench. His associates and friends were of the village community, and He "whose Name is above every name" passed to and fro and in and out among the cottage homes of the poor — as one of themselves. Probably none but His mother had, in these early years, any true idea of mysterious promise which had been given concerning Him.



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What a contrast it all presents to the years of stress and storm and of victory which were to follow, and to the supreme influence His teaching and example were to exert in the world!

Is there not something here for us? Do not the lowly origin and simple country habits and humble tastes of some of our comrades make them hesitate on the threshold of great efforts, when they ought to leap forward in the strength of their God? Let them remember their Master, and take courage. Let them call to mind the unfashionable, uneducated, uncultivated surroundings of Nazareth. Let them bear in mind the carpenter's shed, the rough country work, the bare equipment of the village home, the humble service of the family life. Let them, above all, remember the plain and gentle mother, and the meek and lowly One Himself, and in this remembrance let them go forward.

To be of lowly origin, or of a mean occupation; to come out of poverty and want; to be looked down upon by the rich or the powerful ones of earth; to be treated as of no consequence by governments and rulers, and yet to go on doing and daring, suffering and conquering for God and right; what is all this but the fulfilment of Paul's words, "And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chose, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: that no flesh should glory in His presence"? Nay, what is it all but to tread in the very steps that the Master trod?

III. His High Nature.

But if, on the human side, our Redeemer's origin and circumstances were of the humblest, and we are thus enabled to see His humanity, as it were face to face, there was united with it the Divine nature; so that as our Doctrines say, "He is truly and properly God, and He is truly and properly man." Many mysteries meet by the side of that manger, some of them to remain mysteries, so far as human understanding can grapple with things, till God Himself reveals them to our stronger vision in the world to come. But, blessed be God, some things that we cannot compass with our mental powers are very grateful to our hearts.



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How Though canst love me as I am,
Yet be the God Thou art,
Is darkness to my intellect,
But sunshine to my heart.

And we to whom the Living Christ has spoken the word of life and liberty, although we may not now fully comprehend this great wonder of all wonders – God, manifest in the flesh – and may not be able effectively to make it plain to others, we cannot for ourselves doubt its central truth — that GOD dwelt with man.

Here was, indeed, a perfect union of two spirits. There was the suffering and obedient spirit of the true man; there was the unchanging and Holy Spirit of the true God. It was a union – it was a unity. It was God in man — it was man in God. A being of infinite might and perfect moral beauty, sent forth from the bosom of the Father; and yet a being of lowly and sensitive tenderness, having roots in our poor human nature, tempted in all points like as we are, and touched with the feeling of all our infirmities.

Is it not to something of the same kind we are called? Is not every true Salvation Army Officer designed by God to be also (not, of course, in the same degree, but still up to the measure of his own capacity and of his Master's will) a dual, or two-fold creature, with associations and roots and attachments in all that is human, and yet with the divine life, the divine spirit, divine love, divine zeal, divine power, divine fire united with him and dwelling in him?

The perfect man would have been a great marvel, a great teacher, a great prophet; but without the God he could never have been the perfect Saviour. The Divine, without the human, would have been an inspiring fact, a spectacle of holiness too great for human eyes; but He could not have been a Saviour! If it were possible for us to conceive the one without the other we should certainly not find a JESUS in either!

And so, your merely human Officer, no matter how pure, how strong, how thoughtful, how clever, how industrious, will fail, and ever fail. And even so the Officer who is lost in visionary seeking



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after the Divine alone, to the neglect of action, of duty, of law, of self-denial, of the common conflicts and contracts of the man, will equally fail, and always fail. It is the man we want. The MAN — but the man born of the SPIRIT. The MAN — but the man full of the HOLY GHOST. The MAN — but the man with PENTECOST blazing in his head and heart and soul.

Comrade, what are you? Are you striving to be a prophet without possessing the spirit of the prophets? Are you trying to be a priest without the priestly baptism? Are you labouring to be a king without the Divine anointing? Beware!

IV.

From Infancy to Manhood.

Birth implies the weakness, the dependence, the ignorance of infancy. But it implies, also, the promise of growth, of increase, of advance from infancy to manhood. Thus it is with man generally. So it was with the Son of Man. First, He was "wrapped in swaddling clothes, and laid in a manger." Presently He goes forth in His mother's arms into Egypt, and back to Nazareth. By and by it is written that "the Child grew and waxed strong in spirit, and the grace of God was upon Him." Then He is found in the Temple, asking that wonderful question about His Father's business, and at last we find Him "increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man."

We know, also, that He was found in fashion as a servant, and was obedient unto death; that He was tempted of the Devil, and that "He learned obedience by the things that He suffered."

In fact, a very slight acquaintance with the history of His life reveals the truth that in some wonderful way He steadily grew in wisdom and grace; in the power to love and to serve, and in strength to grapple with sin and death all the while He journeyed from the cradle to the grave and the victory beyond.

His life was a discipline, in the very highest sense of the word. Many of the hopes He might rightly entertain about the success of His work were dashed. Much of His love for those around



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Him was disappointed, and His trust betrayed. He was despised where He should have been honoured: rejected where He should have been received. "He came unto His own, and His own received Him not." "Not this man," they cried, "but Barabbas." But out of it all He came forth perfect and entire, lacking nothing — the chiefest among ten thousand, the altogether lovely. It may be a mystery, but it is a fact all the same, that the more the precious and wondrous and eternal jewel was cut and cut again, the more the light and glory of the Day-spring from on High was made manifest to men.

And here also I find a word of help and courage and cheer for you and me, my precious comrade. I am not sure that you could receive any more valuable Christmas gift than the full realisation of this truth that your advance from the infancy to the manhood of your life in God will not be hindered and delayed, but rather will be helped and quickened by the storms and trials, the conflicts and sufferings, which will overtake you.

It was so with the man Christ Jesus; it has been so with thousands of His chosen. As He, our dear Lord, was made perfect through suffering, so are His saints. We are "chosen in the furnace of affliction, and often cast into it, too! And yet He who chooses all our changes, might have spared us every trial and conflict, and taken us to victory without a battle, and to rest without a toil. But He knows better what will make us men, and it is men He wants to glorify Him — men, not babes.

The dark valleys of bitterness and loneliness are often better for us than the land of Beulah. A certain queen, once sitting for her portrait, commanded that it should be painted without shadows. "Without shadows!" said the astonished artist. "I fear your Majesty is not acquainted with the laws of light and beauty. There can be no good portrait without shading." No more can there be a good Salvationist without trial and sorrow and storm. There might, perhaps, remain a stunted and unfruitful infant life — but a man in Christ Jesus, a Soldier of the Cross, a leader of God's people, without tribulation there can never be. Patience, experience, faith, hope, love, if they do not actually grow from tribulations, are helped by them in their growth. For what says the Apostle? "Tribulation worketh patience, and patience experience, and experience hope, and hope maketh not ashamed."



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The finest pine-trees grow in the stormiest lands. The tempests make them strong. Surgeons tell us that their greatest triumphs are often those in which the patients have suffered most at their hands — for every stroke of the knife is to heal. The child you most truly love is the one you most anxiously correct, and "whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth." Oh, do believe that by every blow of disappointment and sorrow He permits to fall upon you, He is striving to bring you to the measure of the stature of a man in Christ Jesus. Do work with Him in the full knowledge that He will not forsake you. He, the Man who has penetrated to the heart of every form of sorrow, and left a blessing there; He who has watched in silence by every kind of earthly grief, and found its antidote: the Man who trod the wine-press alone — He will be with you.

And, since He is with you, see to it you acquit yourself well in His presence. It is related of an old Highland chief that when advancing to give battle he fell at the head of his clan, pierced by two balls from the foe. His men saw him fall, and began to waver.

But their wounded captain instantly raised himself on his elbow, and, with blood streaming from his wounds, exclaimed, "Children, I am not dead; I am looking to see if you do your duty!"

My comrade, this is the path of progress, the way of advance from the littleness and weakness of infancy to the battles and victories of manhood. It is the way of duty, and your Captain, with the wounds in His hands and His side, is looking on.