

THE SET FACE

"And it came to pass, when the time was come that he should be received up, he stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem." Luke 9:51.

There is no more expressive medium than a human face. To realize how much a face can say, one only needs to observe the face of a little child, beaming with innocent trust, or the face of a thinker, with its air of meditation and insight, or the face of a saint, aglow with holy ardor and faith, or the face of one's own mother, tender with love and bedewed with tears of devotion.

On different occasions the face of Christ portrayed a distinct characteristic.

1. It was sad.

Christ was sad when men were unresponsive to His teaching, ungrateful for His ministries of mercy, and ungodly in their standards, motives and ideals.

2. It was shining.

I am sure that the face of Christ was shining when the blind looked at Him with new-seeing eyes, when the deaf stood and listened to the world of sound He had opened to them, when the dumb talked after He untied the knots in their tongues, when the crippled went away whole, when the lepers went on their way cleansed, and when funeral processions were broken up. His face shone because of the joy He had brought to others. Then when He was transfigured, we are told that, "His face did shine as the sun."

3. It was stained.

When Christ stood at the grave of Lazarus, His blessed face was stained with tears. Then, on that beautiful spring morning, when the birds were singing and the flowers were bursting into bloom and the multitudes were carpeting a path for Him into the city of Jerusalem, the tears of sorrow streamed down His cheeks as He wept over the wretchedness and wickedness of that city with its terrible calamities awaiting it. He exclaimed, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered thy children as a hen gathereth her brood under her wings, and ye would not." Then, too, His face was stained with blood in the shadow of the old olive trees and when He was hanging on the cross.

Our text gives us another picture of the face of Christ without which our view of Him would be vastly incomplete. Listen to these remarkable words: "And it came to pass, when the time was come that he should be received up, he stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem." This is one of the various pictures of Christ which imprint themselves forever on our minds. He

was approaching the end of His work of teaching and healing. He had gathered around Him a little band of disciples whom He would leave behind Him to carry on. He had stood up to the growing hostility of His enemies, knowing all the while that the net of their evil designs was gradually closing about Him.

Christ quickly moved on His way, absorbed in the thought of what was drawing near, gathering together His powers in order to be ready for the struggle, and with His heart full of the love and pity which impelled Him. There has never been one who carried in his heart a purpose so noble and so sublime, and whose heart beat with so fervent a love for men. Love sent Christ to His work. Love took Him through its troubled course. Love nerved Him to finish it magnificently. There is no picture in history more impressive than the figure of Christ pressing up the rocky steep with His face set and flashing with the fire of an invincible purpose.

With His face set toward Jerusalem, Christ saw all that awaited Him there -- the betrayal, the false testimony, the crown of thorns, the cross, the divine desertion and the dark tomb. Facing these awful realities, and with His feet moving toward them, He resolved to walk the last foot of the Calvary road, to suffer the last minute of Calvary pain, and to bleed the last drop of Calvary blood.

If we fix our eyes, then, on this picture, and, as we are warranted in doing, regard it as giving us a glimpse of the very heart of Christ, I think it may well suggest to us considerations that may tend to make more real to us that sacrifice that He made, more deep to us that love by which He was impelled, and make our love more true and our resolves more fixed.

What is there to be seen in the set of Christ's face?

I. Commitment.

"He steadfastly set his face." These words imply that He was settled and fixed firmly once and for all. Some faces betray weakness and instability, while others betoken resolution, firmness and strength of character. The hidden heart of a man finds language in a look. In Christ's steadfast look there was registered the resolve to take the hard road.

Just a little while before this incident in the life of our Lord, Christ had received from the spokesman for His disciples the great confession: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Then Matthew recorded this information, "From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day" (Matthew 16:21). A week later the Transfiguration took place. Immediately following his account of this incident, Matthew wrote: "And while they abode in Galilee, Jesus said unto them, The Son of man shall be betrayed into the hands of men: And they shall kill him, and the third day he shall be raised again. And they were exceeding sorry" (Matthew 17:22-23).

Christ was utterly and unflinchingly committed to the carrying out of the Father's will. The solemn glow of that commitment was on His face.

Christ had come "to seek and to save that which was lost." He knew that such redemption as He had come to offer would come only at high cost to Himself. He knew that it would bear the price of blood. It was as if Christ had said, "The cross is in My path, and on it I shall do the thing which I came from the Father to do." Christ went to Jerusalem of His own free will. He made up His own mind to go. There was no outward compulsion, but He went as a matter of choice. His death was voluntary. He declared emphatically that His life was not wrenched from His grudging fingers. "No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again" (John 11:18). He went to the cross because He was committed to the will of God. His purpose was to do the will of God. He said, "My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work" (John 4:34). "For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me" (John 6:38).

Christ never had the slightest doubt as to the rightness of the will of His Father. Nor was He ever in the slightest degree unwilling to perform it. He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem because He believed that in no other way could He be obedient to the will of God. The commitment was made. He was never more sure of being in the Father's will. Nothing else mattered. He knew full well that a buffeting tempest would beat upon Him when He got there. He foresaw the storm of anger and insult that would break upon Him. He realized full well that He was setting His feet upon the roughest road earth could offer to a traveler, and that, along that road, lay a torturing cross to which His quivering body would be nailed. Nevertheless, He steadfastly set His face to go. To that goal He was committed.

To this day there is something sinister in the physical features of Jerusalem. For one thing, you are never out of sight of grim and forbidding walls. You are constantly reminded by these ancient and battered ramparts of the days when the city was embattled and under a devastating siege. The history of Jerusalem is written in sweat, blood and tears. It has been fought over often and fiercely.

Christ was advised not to go to Jerusalem. When in Caesarea Philippi, He announced that "he must go unto Jerusalem and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day. Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee. But he turned, and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men" (Matthew 16:21-23).

II. Courage.

Some lives look big and sturdy and noble until some huge and costly difficulty bears down upon them. Then they shrink.

Their real stature is revealed. Other lives are quite the opposite. They are grandest under pressure. Persecution polishes them. Opposition expands them. Difficulties add to their dimensions. This was superbly true of Christ. His disregard of consequences, His dauntless determination to take all of the perils of the rough road, His refusal to spare Himself when by that refusal He could be the Saviour of others -- these things were so magnificent in Him that His dearest friends were awed by it. The constant impression that He made upon those who knew Him was that of a man of tremendous courage.

With high resolve Christ was going to Jerusalem. Only a courageous and brave man would have done that under the circumstances. He knew that at Jerusalem He would meet opposition from the bitterest of enemies. He knew that He would face implacable foes who would do anything in their power to destroy Him. What made this opposition the harder to bear was the fact that these foes were the religious leaders of their day. They sought to entrap Him. They endeavored by every means, fair and foul, to discredit and destroy Him.

In going to Jerusalem Christ not only had to meet the opposition of His enemies but also of His friends. He had to grieve and disappoint those who loved Him best. That was harder than facing His foes. He tried to soften the blow for these friends by telling them that it was expedient for them that He go away. But they could not understand. As He was going up to Jerusalem to face the angry, blood-thirsty mob and be crucified, He did not wince for a moment. He pressed forward militantly, even though He knew that He would be put to death. No one ever more fully demonstrated the courage of his convictions than Christ. He was not afraid of the threats of men. He treated such fears with contempt. His was a militant, daring act, backed by purpose, courage and manhood.

III. Calmness.

When we look at the face of Christ we observe not only commitment and courage but calmness also. There was poise in His mind and in His actions. John gave us a vivid picture of the unworried composure which reposed on the countenance of Christ. When He announced to His disciples that He was going back into Judea, they were horrified and panic-stricken. With calm and majestic words Christ told them not to be alarmed. He told them that so long as He was walking in the light of His Father's will, and doing His Father's bidding, no danger or disaster could cut short His life. He let them know that when death did come to Him, it would not be disaster, but deliverance; not prostration, but promotion; not frustration, but fulfillment. Such a faith as that takes all fear out of the heart and puts a calm peace in its place.

Christ set His face to go to Jerusalem because He loved the people there in spite of their rejection of Him. He had great hopes for the city that He refused to surrender. But what has

all this to do with you and me? We are separated from that scene by seas and continents and centuries. The fact that Christ went to Jerusalem in the long ago ought to encourage us as we go to our Jerusalem. For Jerusalem is not merely a spot on the map; it is not just a matter of geography; it is a matter of doing the will of God. We go to our Jerusalem when we cheerfully and courageously accept God's plan and purpose for our lives. But such a course is not always easy. Christianity is not a religion that caters to our weaknesses and cowardice. Rather, it is a religion for heroes.

The lives which miss the highest are the ones which have refused to accept the will of God. A man may gratify a selfish ambition. He may gain wealth. He may win applause. He may seem to occupy a position of influence. He will discover that he has missed the highest and best in life. If he would only scorn his own ease, disregard his own loss, deny his own ambitions and accept the will of God, he would find a singular fitness in the duty and service to which he is led.

When David Livingstone offered himself for the foreign mission field, his heart was set on China. He had studied its problems. He had been allured by the great names of the men who had already given up their lives to the evangelization of the Chinese. He was burning with a true zeal to enter into that noble succession. But the door was shut somewhat abruptly in his face. There came the call to Africa, with its rude savages, unexplored rivers, extensive deserts and unknown privations. Livingstone hesitated, then looked again at Christ, and accepted the somewhat unwelcome will of God and fulfilled the work which He gave him to do. Won't you, like Livingstone, come to realize that the biggest thing in your life is the will of God and surrender completely to the doing of it?