

"IN THOSE DAYS"

"And the word of the Lord was precious in those days" (I Samuel 3:1).

Many people are seriously engaged in killing time. It is their main occupation. They are more interested in killing time than doing anything else.

People of all ages feel the weight of time. Men have fought hard for a particular position in life. Then, when they have achieved their goal and reached that position, they have found that time weighed heavily on their hands. So, it wasn't long until they began to speak of the rat race. Life seems routine, like a race to be run, as something without any meaning.

Many young people don't know what to do with time. They feel alienated, whatever that means, and try to get some kick out of life through liquor, drugs, or just plain laziness. The idea is somehow to escape time.

For many people, both young and old, life is meaningless. In trying to escape despair, they seize the present moment, just for the purpose of making the most of it, and all they get is more despair.

The present moment is a very important part of time, but it is only a part of it. In order to live correctly as human beings in the present moment of time, all of us need to have a strong grasp on the past and a vivid sense of the future. The three go together: past, present, and future. What we are today is determined to a large extent by the past. The way we spend the present is determined to a large extent by our beliefs and our expectations for the future. This is time. Only by seeing it in its entirety does it bring us any meaning.

Multitudes of people want to cut themselves off from the past. Many young people don't like what has come to them from the past. But impatience with history is not the way to find new meaning in life. As Fulton Sheen has said: "The past has been destroyed through rupture of all relatedness to parents, home, tradition, and experience. Youth was meant to live very much like wheat in the field, not to be pulled up until it is ripe. Today a youth, pulled up by the roots, lives its own present life without memory or tradition, and has become like a pendulum outside a clock."

Others cut themselves off from the future, with all its hopes, dreams, and aspirations. The technology of our day is responsible for some of this isolation from the future. In the past a man could use his accumulated knowledge and wisdom to guide him into the future. The change was relatively slow. Today it is different. Some who are listening to me now had kerosene lamps in their homes when they were young. These same people are flying to Europe in five hours, and in the near future will be flying there in two hours. Who can predict what will happen tomorrow or the day after?

To people who cut themselves off from the past and from the future, the present moment is everything. They are occupied with the present only. They settle back and simply react to life. What they feel today becomes all important, and many spend their lives on consuming alcohol, and narcotics. To them there is nothing precious about life. There is no profound sense of meaning in life, and to them only today has any value.

William Hazlitt has said that no young man believes that he will ever die. He knows it intellectually, of course, but he doesn't feel that way. As a result, he just works for today, and doesn't work very hard at that. He endures today, in the hope that tomorrow somehow will be better. He works the next six months waiting for and anticipating his vacation. He endures a long trip in the hope that the visit at the

end of it will be pleasant and worth the effort to get there. He endures the morning at the office in order to enjoy the break for lunch. That is life.

Now the truth of the matter is that is not life, and all of us know it. It isn't life as it was really meant to be. Life is more than that. If there is more to life than just enduring today, where are you going to find it? The facts and the events of the past are put together in the handy guides and summaries called almanacs. The old farmer's almanac even made predictions about the weather for a year in advance. I can make a prediction about the weather too. During the coming year there will be weather, no matter what the weatherman says.

I will make one more prediction: There will be God whether or not you listen to God's Word, there will be God. I am not predicting what He will do, but I know He will be there. I know it because of last year, and the year before that. I know He will be there in the future because I know about some of the great things that He did in the past.

Did you ever notice how the mighty acts of God are pinpointed in the Scriptures? The story about them is introduced frequently with three simple words: "In those days." These words constitute my subject for this message. The three words, "In those days," tell us something about God, and they disclose something of the secret of life.

Concerning the beginning of the Christmas story the Bible says: "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed" (Luke 2:1). This is how God does things. When He comes, this is the way He does it. God acts, and His Son, Jesus Christ, appears on the human scene. First He is a boy, then He is a man. First He lives, and then He dies. Jesus Christ dies, and then rises from the dead. That doesn't happen every day.

In those days, God sent His own Man, His unique and eternal Son, to share life with us and with others, just as it is. He lived as we have to live, except without committing a sin, and He died as we are destined to die.

The Son of God became the Son of Man in order that we, who are the children of men, might become the children of God. That is the way God does things. In those days, Jesus Christ rose from the dead. Everything is now in His control. The future is in His hands. He shares life with us, and we share life with Him. In Christ, life becomes whole again -- past, present, and future. In Christ, there is forgiveness and life. No one has to run away from that. That is the way it is when one goes with God, Who acts.

In Genesis 6:4 we are told: "There were giants in the earth in those days." They were impressed with their own size and ability. The big flood came and ended those days, but God did not end, and neither did His people. Among the few that were left was Noah. Then came Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And God was still there, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

In what seemed like a natural course of events, God's people found themselves in slavery in Egypt. The Book of Exodus tells us that "It came to pass in those days" a certain man named Moses saw an Egyptian beating an Israelite. The rest of the story is history. Moses killed the Egyptian, ran, and hid. God found him, commanded him, and sent him to lead his people to the Promised Land, that is, the land which God promised to them.

Things went from bad to worse for the people of God, with war and bloodshed, murder, and controversy on every side. Judges were appointed "in those days." Some of them turned out to be good men, and others were not so good. But God was always there and time did not come to an end. Every man did what he thought was right, "in those days," and anarchy was the result, without law, order, or justice. Then a young boy came along whose name was Samuel, and he followed God "in those days." Something great happened among all the people: "The Word of the Lord was precious among them in those days, when God's people obeyed Him.

God is always there, but the days become great when people get a vision of, trust, know, and obey Him. It is an acceptable year of the Lord when people quit going their own way of pride, prejudice, and passion, and go God's way -- the way of mercy, peace, and justice.

God has to be known as He is, if He is to be known at all. We cannot create God in our own image. We have His word for it that He is God, and that He will always be there.

We have God's own word for it that He loves us. It is good news because it is true. It is the best news of all time. In some parts of the world, when people for the first time hear the good news that God loves them, they drink it in like cold water on a hot day. They receive Christ as their Saviour without delay. Others have heard this good news many times, and refuse to believe it still. Good news it may be, but they do not consider it to be good news for them. If God really loved us, they say, the world would not be in the mess which it is today.

The prophets came along to tell people about God. Some found it hard to believe that God was really speaking to them, and others refused to believe what He had to say. The prophets often had to tell the people off when they brought them the good news about God.

Jeremiah spoke against every evil deed in the book. He pointed a lot of fingers from his pulpit. He cried bitter tears for his people. But Jeremiah's tears could not wash away the judgments of God. Speaking for the Lord, Jeremiah said: "Nevertheless, in those days, I will not make a full end with you." That is how the good news comes sometimes, at the bottom of a well that is filling with tears of grief and with the rain of God's judgment. "In those days shall Judah be saved, and Jerusalem shall dwell safely: and this is the name wherewith she shall be called, The Lord our righteousness" (Jeremiah 33:16).

Again, in those days, there came a man named John the Baptist. It came about in those days that Jesus Christ was born. In those days when John was in the wilderness, Jesus came and was baptized by John the Baptist. In those days Jesus was tempted by the devil. In those days He went to a mountain all alone and prayed all night. In those days He fed over five thousand with five loaves of bread and a couple of fish. In those days, Peter, James and John saw Him transfigured on the top of a mountain, and said nothing about it at the time. In those days the thing happened which Jeremiah said would happen. God came to save His people, by a man whose name is called, "the Lord our Righteousness."

In Jesus Christ, the past, the present, and the future all become one. In the past, God was there. In the present, God is there. In the future, God will be there. He is there all the way, in Jesus Christ, His Son, "the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever."

In Christ, all of life gets a new meaning. The past is forgiven, the present is ennobled, and the future becomes bright again.

In Christ, life gets to be a thing worth living again. Getting to know Christ, as all of His men always said, is like coming to life again, like rising from the dead. In Christ, time becomes valuable again and life gets a new meaning. Know Christ, and you won't have to worry about killing time. Know Christ, and find out what it is to redeem the time, in spite of the fact that the days are evil.

A well-known atheist in France honestly confessed a deep-seated urge within himself: "I have in myself a great need of permanence, ... a need of believing that there are products not subject to decay and degradation, works on which temporal changes have no influence." A man of God expressed exactly the same human need centuries ago, and found the answer to it in God: "Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God. Establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it" (Psalm 90:1-2, 17).

God loves you, and you can depend upon it. It is true. Christ said it, and He proves it. In those days, Christ came, lived, wrought, died, and rose again. He is God's answer to the human urge for something permanent to hold on to, something to give meaning to all of life, something to make time move instead of standing still. Christ keeps life from falling apart and from winding up in utter futility. He is the heart and center of life. In Him God is there, and He will always be there.

The future belongs to Christ, Who wipes off the past page with His forgiveness; the light of His forgiveness falls upon the present page to give it life and meaning; the pages still to come He will make right. The years are His. Knowing this is true, I, for one, am willing to put the whole thing into His hands. He gives meaning to it all, and I am ready to go with Him.

I certainly don't know what Christ has in mind for me in the years to come. That doesn't bother me. I know what happened "in those days"; how He gave Himself for me, and how God has "given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth: And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11).

It doesn't matter who you are, Christ loves you. His forgiveness is for you; take it and live by faith in Him. Life is for you; take it and live by faith in Him. The future is for you; take it and live by faith in Him.

In those days the Lord Jesus reconciled you to God through His own precious blood. He does not have to do that again. It is done, and it is good for today. He is sufficient for all the days that lie before you. In all His goodness and glory, He will be with you. In all the days that are to come He will be with you.