

THE HOLY TRINITY

An Address by
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by DR. H. A. IRONSIDE

I ASK your attention to that tremendous theme, the Holy Trinity, and I am going to read, not exactly as a text but as a starting point, the most frequently quoted text in the Bible. I do not think there can be any question as to what that text is. In tens of thousands of churches in this and other lands all over the world, two or three or more times every Lord's Day and uncounted thousands of times at week-night services this text is quoted. It is the last verse of the 13th chapter of the second epistle to the Corinthians. "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all. Amen" (2 Cor. 13:14).

Surely I am correct in saying there is no other verse in the Bible that is quoted and has been quoted throughout all the Christian centuries more frequently than this one, and it sets before us in a very definite way the unity of the Godhead and yet the three persons in the Holy Trinity. The truth of the Holy Trinity forms one of the great revelations of grace. I do not mean by that that we never find the Trinity in the Old Testament. We do, but not so definitely as in the New Testament.

The very first verse of our Bible does more than suggest a trinity in the Godhead. It positively affirms it. We read in Gen. 1:1, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." It is a well-known fact that the Hebrew word for God here is Elohim, and the "im" at the end of a Hebrew noun is the plural form. In Hebrew, as in some other languages, there are three numbers, singular, dual and plural. The singular, of course, is one; the dual is two and the plural signifies that the noun refers to three or more. The singular for God is El, or Eloah, the plural Elohim. There is no dual in this instance. So we read here, "In the beginning Elohim (the Triune God) created the heavens and the earth." It has often been pointed out by scholars that while the word "God" is in the plural, the word "created" is singular, so this in itself suggests the wonderful mystery of the Trinity acting in unity; three persons in one God, acting together, in the creation of the universe. It is perfectly right to say we believe in God the Father, Creator of the heavens and the earth; also correct to say God by His Spirit made the heavens and the earth; also correct to say that the Son was the Creator. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made."

In the book of the Prophet Isaiah there are two very prominent scriptures that bring the three persons of the Godhead clearly before us. In chapter 48, verse 16, we hear Messiah speaking. Throughout this section of the book the Spirit of God brings before us the coming and rejection of our Lord Jesus Christ, Israel's Messiah, and in verse 16 Messiah, speaking through the prophet, says this, "Come ye near unto me, hear ye this; I have not spoken in secret from the beginning; from the time that it was, there am I: and now the Lord God, and his Spirit, hath sent me." We know that these words refer to the Lord Jesus Christ for we read in God's Word that He declared "In secret have I said nothing" (John 18:20), and this is the passage to which He referred. So here we are listening to the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ, Israel's Messiah, the eternal holy Son of God who was to be manifested in the flesh. "I have not spoken in secret from the beginning; from the time that it was, there am I: and now (looking on to the Incarnation) the Lord God, and his Spirit (that is, the Holy Spirit), hath sent me (that is, the Son)." So there you have the Trinity in the book of the Prophet Isaiah. It is often said the Old Testament doesn't tell us anything about the Trinity of the Godhead and some of our Jewish friends consider the doctrine of the Trinity as solely a Christian idea, but there is no question but that here in Isaiah you have the three persons definitely indicated—Messiah (the Lord Jesus Christ), God the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Then in a later chapter of this same book (chapter 61) we have the three persons definitely indicated. It is the passage that our Lord Jesus Christ Himself read in the synagogue at Nazareth and applied to Himself, saying, "This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears" (Luke 4:21). Now notice how the three persons come before us there. "The Spirit (the Holy Spirit) of the Lord is upon me (that is, the Son); because the Lord (that is, God the Father) hath anointed me to preach (the gospel) good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Isa. 61:1), and you will remember when God the Son, our Saviour, had read that far, He closed the book. When you look at the text, there is a comma following—He hadn't finished the sentence. Why didn't He go on to the end of the sentence? Because the time of fulfillment hadn't come yet for "the day of vengeance of our God;" so our Lord Jesus put this whole era of grace into that comma. The day of vengeance will not come until the day of preaching the Gospel ends.

Now as we link New Testament passages with these we shall see how completely they fulfill what we have set forth here prophetically in the Old Testament. Matt. 3:16 reads, "And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him,

and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: and lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Notice what we have here. The Son, in manhood, comes up from the waters of baptism where He had declared it became Him to fulfill all righteousness. That is, in His baptism, He pledged Himself to die on behalf of poor sinners who had failed so completely, and now as He comes up from the river the heavens are opened above Him, a visible manifestation of the Spirit descends and abides upon Him. God anoints Him, Jesus of Nazareth, with the Holy Ghost. It is the Trinity: God the Father anointed Jesus (God the Son) with the Holy Spirit, (the divine, eternal Spirit of God). And then the Father's voice is heard saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I have found all my delight." And when at last our Lord Jesus goes to the cross you will notice how Father and Son and Holy Spirit all have their part in the work of the cross. In John 10:17, 18, the Lord Jesus says, "I lay down my life, that I might take it again. 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." We are told the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world and the propitiation for our sin. We also read it was "in the power of the eternal Spirit that he offered himself without spot unto God." Here again in redemption the entire Trinity is involved.

This is also true in connection with the Incarnation. The Father gave the Son to become Man, the Son in grace stooped to be born of a virgin, that virgin conceived by the Holy Spirit.

When we come to what Scripture reveals as to His resurrection we read that He was brought again from the dead by God the Father (Heb. 13:20), and yet there is another sense in which He raised Himself from the dead. He said to His enemies, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). "He spoke of the temple of His body." Elsewhere, referring to the laying down of His life, He said, "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 10:18). We are told in the eighth chapter of the epistle to the Romans verse 11, "But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you." Father and Son and Holy Spirit all concerned in creation; Father and Son and Holy Spirit all concerned in the Incarnation; Father and Son and Holy Spirit all concerned in our Lord's anointing as He goes forth to preach the Word; Father and Son and Holy Spirit all concerned in His death; Father and Son and Holy Spirit all concerned in His resurrection. And then when our Lord Jesus commissions His disciples to go into all the world, He reveals clearly the truth as to the Trinity and He bids them to minister in that name. "And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is

given unto me in heaven and in earth (Think of any mere man saying that—no matter how great the man—all authority is given unto me in heaven and in earth!) Go ye therefore, and teach all nations (make disciples of all nations), baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.” Notice what the Lord is telling them here. He says, “Go ye and teach all nations.” In what name? “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” I was a little bit amused the other day when one of my many correspondents wrote in, “My dear brother, I don’t believe in prayer in the name of the Trinity, instead of the name of the Lord Jesus.” I don’t either—I pray in the name of the Lord Jesus, but when I preach I invoke the Trinity as I am to teach and baptize in that name. “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” I am to stand before men as the representative, as the mouthpiece, of the Holy Trinity. For it is written, if any man speak let him speak as the oracles of God. If I can’t come before men as a representative of the eternal Trinity, I have no right to attempt to address them at all. I am not to come to men in my own name or the authority of any church, but the distinct command was to go and teach them, baptizing them, and all this was to be done in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

I want you to notice those connectives “in the name of the Father, AND of the Son, AND of the Holy Ghost.” The Word of God is wonderfully perfect. Ordinarily when we hear people attempt to quote this, they say “in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost.” It is not that. It is in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Why are those *ands* put in? In order that we may see that while there is only one God, yet that one God exists eternally in three persons—Father and Son and Holy Ghost. We have the connectives used that way in connection with man himself. People say sometimes, “I can’t understand the doctrine of the Trinity.” Nobody asked you to understand it. Are you surprised you can’t understand God? You can’t understand yourself! Think of the thousands of books of psychology in which scientists attempt to explain man. Yet not one fully explains our tri-partite nature. But we read in 1 Thess. 5:23, “And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Now here is another scripture where men ordinarily drop out one of those connectives. They generally say, spirit, soul and body, or, more frequently, body, soul and spirit; but the Holy Ghost was very careful to put in those conjunctions. “I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the

coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” I know I am one personality and yet I know from this scripture I am tri-partite, and I realize it from my own experience but I can’t explain it. As I go to the Word of God I find the body is the seat of all merely physical appetites of every kind. I know from the Word of God the soul is the seat of my personality and seat of all natural emotions other than physical. It is my connection even with the lower creation. Animals themselves are said to have souls. In Genesis you have “every creature wherein is a living soul.”

The soul is the seat of the emotions. Animals have an emotional nature but the difference between the soul of the animal and the soul of man is that when the body of the animal dies, the soul dies. “Natural brute beasts, made to be taken and destroyed.” But Jesus said, “Be not afraid of them that kill the body but cannot kill the soul” (Luke 12: 4, 5). With man, existence continues after the body dies.

Spirit is the highest part of man, that part of man which gives him God-consciousness, thus distinguishing him from all lower creation. Animals with careful training have been taught to do many great and remarkable things in which they simply imitate man. But they have no sense of God. There is one thing the lower animals cannot do, they cannot understand the meaning of prayer. They have no sense of responsibility to God. Why? Because the lower creature doesn’t have a spirit. “The spirit of man,” we are told, “is the candle of the Lord searching the inmost part of his being.” Paul said he served God in his spirit. “The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God” (Rom. 8:16).

So then, man is spirit and soul and body. I not only have Scripture for it but I know from practical experience that I am tri-partite. I have often used this illustration. Suppose it is prayer meeting night and I am just getting ready to go to prayer meeting. You see, I am a Christian, and if you are a Christian you wouldn’t think of staying away from prayer meeting, would you? You say, God’s people are going to pray tonight and I must be there. We will say it is a hot summer night. Suddenly my phone rings. A voice says “Can’t you come over? It’s such a warm evening. We have ice cream, some ice cold melons, a nice little repast. Won’t you come and enjoy it with us?” Then there is a knock at my door or a ring at my bell. Another voice says, “Look here, won’t you come over to our place. We have a wonderful musician with us and we are going to spend a delightful musical evening.” I might never have known before that I am spirit and soul and body. I know it now! I understand at once that I am tri-partite. My body says, “Go get the ice cream,” my soul says, “Go and enjoy the music,” my spirit says, “Go to prayer meeting.” And if I am the Christian I ought to be, I say, “Thank you very much, but I am going to prayer meeting. Give me a rain check for some time in the future. But this

evening I have an appointment with the Lord.” And what is the result? As I spend a season there in the presence of the Lord, my body is rested, my soul refreshed and my spirit built up in Christ. I am tripartite. I can’t explain it, but it is true. Just so we can’t explain the Trinity of the Godhead but God has declared it and I believe what He tells me.

In the passage with which we began we have the three persons carefully distinguished and yet one in essence, one in nature, one in purpose and all interested in our blessing.

In the tenth chapter of Hebrews there is a striking passage that brings before us the three persons and their work in connection with our redemption. It shows our Lord Jesus Christ as the great high priest. “But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down on the right hand of God.” There is God the Father and the Incarnate, resurrected Son. Then see verse 15, “Whereof the Holy Ghost also is a witness to us.” There you have the three persons.

The doctrine of the Trinity is denied by various groups, from different standpoints. Some have insisted from olden days that God is simply a Trinity in manifestation. In the Old Testament they say it was the manifestation of God as the Father; when Christ was here it was the manifestation of God as the Son and now it is the manifestation of God as the Holy Spirit. But that is absolutely contrary to the Word itself. It was the Lord Jesus Christ who came to reveal the Father, and while here on earth spoke of coming from My Father and going to My Father and He speaks of sending the Holy Spirit, and it was the Holy Spirit who witnessed to the glorified, finished work of Christ the Son. Scripture is very careful in the use of pronouns.

Then there is a religious system widely spread which says God is impersonal, that He is simply principle—divine principle. This is an absolute denial of the truth also. Scripture reveals Him as a pitying Father. Principle doesn’t pity anybody, but God our Father pitieth His people (Joel 2:18), and He has the love of a mother’s heart. We read, “As one whom his mother comforteth so will I comfort you” (Isa. 66:13).

Believers say “Our Father” and He is called Father by our Lord Jesus Christ. God the Father is a person, God the Son is a definite person distinct from the Father, and yet one with Him in essence. “My Father and your Father,” “My God and your God” (John 20:17). He spoke of the glory He had with the Father before the world was (John 17:5). Christ died for sins and we read that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world. And on the last night Jesus said He knew He must depart out of this world unto the Father (John 13: 1). It is nonsense to say that the Father and the Son are the same persons—that He prayed to Himself, that He left Himself when He left the Father, that He went back to Himself.

The Holy Spirit is also shown to be a distinct person. Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself uses personal pronouns in connection with the Spirit,—He, His, Him. He says, “I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that *he* may abide with you for ever; even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth *him* not, neither knoweth *him*: but ye know *him*; for *he* dwelleth with you, and shall be in you” (John 14:16, 17). There again you have the Holy Trinity. And then it is said of the Comforter, in John 16:8, “And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.” He is said to take of the things of Christ and show unto you (John 16:15). The Lord Jesus Christ said the Holy Spirit proceedeth from the Father (John 15:26). “But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me.” And so throughout we see the three persons of the Eternal Trinity concerned in our salvation and sanctification.