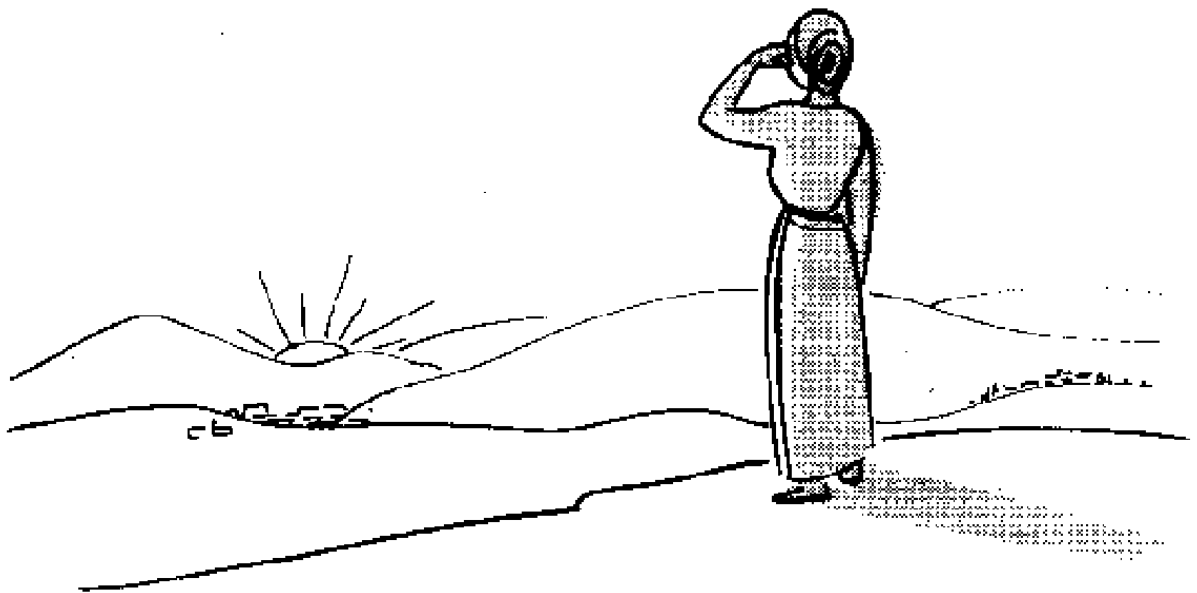
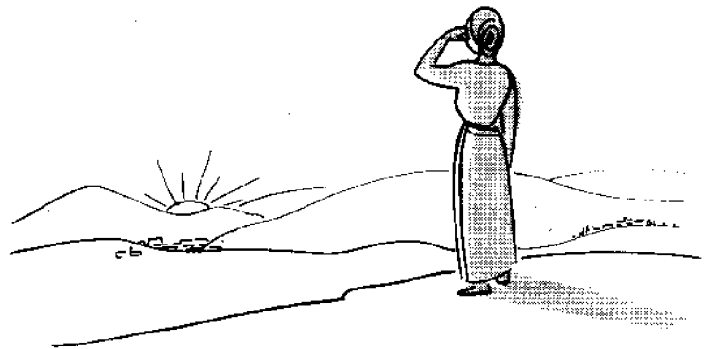


'Toward Evening'



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by Brian Johnston



I. Judgement past

The title of this booklet - 'Toward Evening' - is a phrase that occurs three times in some versions of the Bible. The first of them is found in Genesis chapter 8 when the great Flood in the days of Noah was coming to an end. We remind ourselves that God had sent the flood because of the wickedness that was throughout the earth in those days. Only Noah and his family, together with a selection of all types of animals, were saved from God's judgement by being safely protected in the ark which God had commanded Noah to build. And so after many months have passed, we read there that:

God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark; and God caused a wind to pass over the earth, and the water subsided. Also the fountains of the deep and the floodgates of the sky were closed, and the rain from the sky was restrained; and the water receded steadily from the earth, and at the end of one hundred and fifty days the water decreased.

In the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark rested upon the mountains of Ararat. The water decreased steadily until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains became visible. Then it came about at the end of forty days, that Noah opened the window of the ark which he had made; and he sent out a raven, and it flew here and there until the water was dried up from the earth.

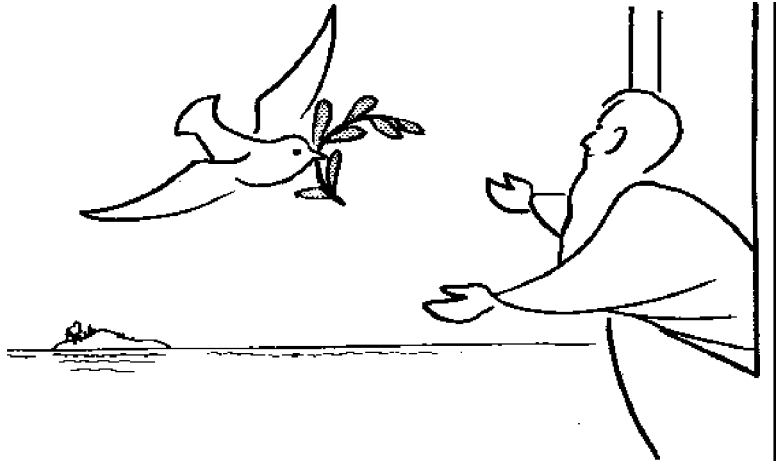
Then he sent out a dove from him, to see if the water was abated from the face of the land; but the dove found no resting place for the sole of her foot, so she returned to him into the ark, for the water was on the surface of all the earth. Then he put out his hand and took her, and brought her into the ark to himself.

So he waited yet another seven days; and again he sent out the dove from the ark. The dove came to him toward evening, and behold, in her beak was a freshly picked olive leaf. So Noah knew that the water was abated from the earth. (Genesis 8:1-11)

That day when the dove came back with the olive leaf in its beak was surely one of great excitement for the occupants of the ark. They could now anticipate that they would soon be able to step out onto dry land again for the first time for almost a year. And we notice the timing: it was 'toward evening'

when the dove returned to the ark with the exciting evidence of the olive leaf. It was evidence that the judgement was past.

It's interesting that both doves and olive trees are associated with God's Holy Spirit in the Bible. We read near the beginning of Matthew's Gospel that:



After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased." (Matthew 3:16,17)

So it was in appearance as a dove that the Holy Spirit descended upon the Lord Jesus at the beginning of his public ministry. While in the book of the Old Testament prophet Zechariah, we find God asking the prophet:

"What do you see?" And I said, "I see, and behold, a lampstand all of gold with its bowl on the top of it, and its seven lamps on it with seven spouts belonging to each of the lamps which are on the top of it; also two olive trees by it, one on the right side of the bowl and the other on its left side."

Then I said to the angel who was speaking with me saying, "What are these, my lord?"

So the angel who was speaking with me answered and said to me, "Do you not know what these are?" And I said, "No, my lord."

Then he said to me, "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel saying, 'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the LORD of hosts. (Zechariah 4:2-6)

Zechariah was curious to know the significance of the olive trees in the vision the Lord had shown him. Although he didn't answer the prophet's question directly, the Lord did (in terms of the message) make a definite connection between the olive trees and the Holy Spirit.

So, in the story of the ending of the flood in Genesis chapter 8 it would not be unnatural for both the dove and the olive leaf to remind us of the person of the

Holy Spirit. As the dove entered the ark, so the Holy Spirit has entered into our hearts and lives if we have taken Jesus Christ, God's Son, as our personal saviour. The Spirit enters into our hearts as an assurance from God that his judgement (for the Christian believer) is past and gone, having been borne for us by Jesus on the cross. God's Spirit has entered our hearts as an assurance that we'll not come into judgement, but have passed out of death into life (see John 5:24). God the Judge has now become God, our Father, as Galatians chapter 4 makes very clear when it says:

Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"(v.6)

As Noah and his family emerged from the ark, a brand new life in a brand new world awaited them; even as we are raised to walk in newness of life. This is what we acknowledge in our water baptism after we have become believers on the Lord Jesus Christ. Baptism was on the apostle Peter's mind as he thought about how God had immersed the world with the flood at the time of Noah, and he remarked on how ... *the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water. Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you - not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience - through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.* (1 Peter 3:20,21)

The Ark in which Noah and his family were protected illustrates for us the fact that, in Christ, our souls are saved from judgment that's past, having passed from us when we received Christ by faith. But Peter tells us that the further action of God in bringing Noah safely through the floodwater corresponds to believer's baptism in our experience. It's through the water of baptism that our life of potential service for the Lord is preserved for God's glory as we live in its newness. Peter talks of baptism being an appeal to God for a good conscience. When faced with tempting choices, we can ask ourselves: "Should I do such a thing now that I'm a baptized follower of the Lord Jesus Christ?"

Our study in this chapter was stimulated by the Bible phrase: toward evening, and it has led us to think of how, at the end of the ages, God sent his son, Jesus, not only to deliver us from judgment, but that we should follow him through baptism and live for him - and that all the more as we see that the 'day of grace' is already far spent.

2. Journey's progress

We now come to the second time we find the phrase 'toward evening' in our Bibles. The second occurrence is also found in the book of Genesis, but this time in chapter 24. We find Abraham, now an old man, anxious to see his son Isaac married to a suitable partner.

Now Abraham was old, advanced in age; and the LORD had blessed Abraham in every way. Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his household, who had charge of all that he owned, "Please place your hand under my thigh, and I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, but you will go to my country and to my relatives, and take a wife for my son Isaac." (Genesis 24:1-4)

As was the custom then, Abraham, the father, took the initiative in finding a partner for his son Isaac. In some parts of the world today it's still the custom to have 'arranged' marriages. The parents, or guardians, who arrange these marriages, being older and more mature, look for a partner whose lifestyle and expectations from marriage would be similar to those of their own son or daughter. They might well point out that marriages based entirely on feelings, although they may cross the barriers of wealth and upbringing, can often come to grief over lack of finance, loss of status in society, or lack of ambition from one of the partners. That is merely an aside on arranged marriages like this one ...



But we've interrupted the Bible story. Let's rejoin it at the point when Abraham's servant believes he has known God's help in directing him to a suitable bride for his master's son. Her name is Rebekah and, as we rejoin the story, it's decision time for Rebekah. She has heard all about the servant's mission, her father has given the proposed marriage his blessing, but is Rebekah prepared to leave her

home without further delay and at such short notice? As the chapter in Genesis continues, we get our answer:

Then Rebekah arose with her maids, and they mounted the camels and followed the man. So the servant took Rebekah and departed. Now Isaac had come from going to Beer-lahai-roi; for he was living in the Negev. Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening; and he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, camels were coming. Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac she dismounted from the camel. She said to the servant, "Who is that man walking in the field to meet us?" And the servant said, "He is my master." Then she took her veil and covered herself. The servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and he took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her; thus Isaac was comforted after his mother's death. (Genesis 24:61-67)

I wonder if Rebekah was lost in thought on the journey? Was there time for her to become homesick or was she filled with anticipation at the exciting prospect of a new kind of life ahead of her? Was she nervous? She probably was. Did she talk much to the servant? It's my guess that she did, and that on the journey the servant was keen to tell lots more things about his master's son. And, surely, Rebekah had all sorts of questions to ask: she would naturally want to know as much as she could about the man who was to become her husband!

As the servant talks respectfully and lovingly of him, and as the journey progresses, we can imagine Rebekah's love growing for the one she had never seen.

As we think about the fact that Rebekah had never met her bridegroom-to-be even as she travelled to her new home to spend the rest of her life with him, I would like to draw a parallel for us. It is the apostle Peter in the Bible who describes the Lord Jesus to Christian believers as the *one whom not having seen we love*. What's more, God has sent his Holy Spirit into our hearts to accompany us as we head homewards to heaven and our meeting with him.

In John 16 we read Jesus' words: *"But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you."*

So the Spirit testifies to us of the character of Christ. It's his delight to share with us the excellencies and loveliness of Christ, as he takes of the things of Christ and discloses them to us.

But now to make the parallel complete, there's just one more link. In Matthew chapter 16, Jesus tells us that all who profess faith in Jesus as the Son of God are built by him into his Church - that's the Church which the Bible describes as his Body, of which we read in the letter to the Ephesians, chapter 5:

For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. (v.23)

It seems clear from that analogy, that Christ's Church - which includes all true born-again believers - is biblically to be regarded as being Christ's bride. So let's put it all together: if we have received Jesus Christ as our personal saviour then we belong to this Church which Christ spoke of in the Bible (the Church which is viewed as his Bride) We are even now journeying to meet the Lord Jesus as our heavenly Bridegroom, being the one 'whom not having seen we love'. As we travel we are able to learn more about the loving character of our Lord through the gracious service of the Spirit whom God sent to be with us and to accompany us on our homeward journey.

So it all parallels the picture from Genesis chapter 24, the picture of Rebekah travelling in the company of Abraham's servant who was leading her in her journey to meet her bridegroom-to-be whom she had never yet seen. Back now with that story, let's remind ourselves of the actual meeting.

Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening; and he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, camels were coming. Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac she dismounted from the camel. She said to the servant, "Who is that man walking in the field to meet us?" And the servant said, "He is my master." (vv.63-65)

It was 'toward evening' as now at last the bride neared home. She lifted up her eyes (as he did his) and caught her first glimpse of her future life-partner.

What will it be like for us to catch our first glimpse of Christ? When at last our eyes shall see him – face to face . These are questions which have inspired many hymns. 'How shall I meet those eyes?' one hymn-writer asks. Another answers: when I look on his thorn-shadowed face, I'll wish I had given him more.

Just to wonder about this is to quicken our spiritual pulse. Rebekah asked: "Who is that man walking in the field to meet us?" One day soon, our Lord is coming to meet us. God's day of grace is nearly over - it is 'toward evening', and soon we will be lifting up our eyes to gaze upon the one *whom not having seen we love*.

3. Jesus' presence

A friend of mine recently died of cancer. I had only known him for a couple of years. On my final visit to him in the hospice, as the sun could be seen to be setting through the window of his room - for it was 'toward evening', I reminded him of the evening hymn:

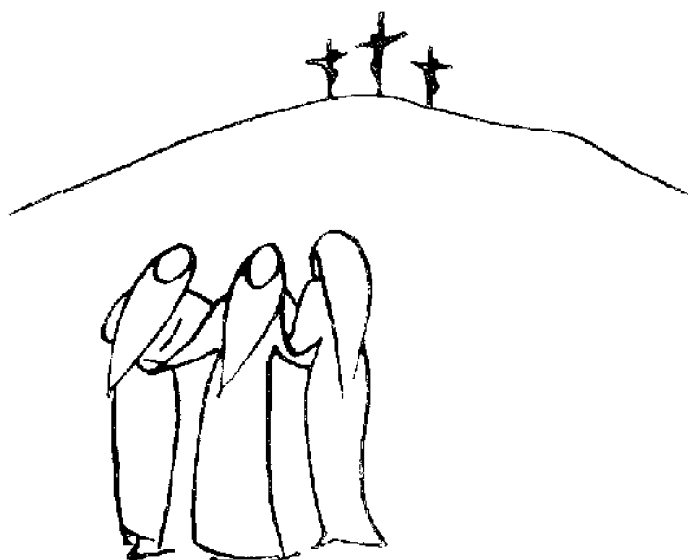
Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens, Lord, with me abide.
When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me!

We talked of an evening time recorded by Luke in his gospel when two disciples of Jesus invited a stranger – a companion in travel - to stay or 'abide' with them. The date was resurrection Sunday. Those two disciples had been in Jerusalem and no doubt they had witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. They were also with the group of disciples when they had received the news from the women that the tomb of Jesus was empty and that angels had appeared to the women saying Jesus was alive. When we're first introduced to these two disciples they're walking together on to road to Emmaus which is a little over 6 miles from Jerusalem - they are obviously very sad as they're talking to each other. The Gospel by Luke records it like this in chapter 24:

... two of them were going that very day to a village named Emmaus, which was about seven miles from Jerusalem. And they were talking with each other about all these things which had taken place. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus Himself approached and began traveling with them. But their eyes were prevented from recognizing Him.

And He said to them, "What are these words that you are exchanging with one another as you are walking?"

And they stood still, looking sad. One of them, named Cleopas, answered and said to Him, "Are You the only one visiting Jerusalem and unaware of the things which



have happened here in these days?"

And He said to them, "What things?"

And they said to Him, "The things about Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word in the sight of God and all the people, and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him to the sentence of death, and crucified Him. But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, it is the third day since these things happened. But also some women among us amazed us. When they were at the tomb early in the morning, and did not find His body, they came, saying that they had also seen a vision of angels who said that He was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just exactly as the women also had said; but Him they did not see."

And He said to them, "O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?" Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.

And they approached the village where they were going, and He acted as though He were going farther. But they urged Him, saying, "Stay with us, for it is getting toward evening, and the day is now nearly over." So He went in to stay with them.

When He had reclined at the table with them, He took the bread and blessed it, and breaking it, He began giving it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized Him; and He vanished from their sight. They said to one another, "Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?" And they got up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem, and found gathered together the eleven and those who were with them ... (Luke 24:13-33)

These two disciples were still loyal to Christ, but they felt disappointed in their hopes and expectations. They had lost their passion and enthusiasm. It's interesting to see how Jesus deals with them by taking them back to God's Word, and not by immediately and physically proving his identity to them. To give them this Bible study he joined them on their walk, though they didn't know it was Jesus. It would seem that Jesus spent most of the afternoon with these two very ordinary disciples. With Jesus, there aren't any 'ordinary' people: we're all important to him. He had already made a brief appearance to Mary Magdalene and he'd spoken with Peter, but most of the day was spent

with these two men about whom we know so very little.

So Jesus joined them on their walk. "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who doesn't know about the things that happened there in the last few days?" they asked him. "What things?" Jesus asks. At his invitation, they began to share their view of him. In this way Jesus encouraged them to reveal their hearts - as he longs for us to tell him our hearts, even though he already knows them.

So what did these men know about Jesus? They knew his name and where he was from; that he was a Prophet; mighty in deeds and in words. They knew he'd been crucified after showing promise as a deliverer; and they knew others had said he'd risen from the dead. These disciples had a hope that they felt had turned to disappointment. But in reality, their hope would be fulfilled in a greater way than they could ever have dreamed!

You see, they only believed part of the prophecies concerning the Messiah - that part which spoke of his glorious reign over an earth no longer plagued with wars and sicknesses.

But there was so much more spoken concerning the Messiah. Jesus began to teach them what was surely one of the greatest Bible studies. Can we seriously doubt that he explained to them that he, as Messiah, was the Seed of the Woman; and the blessing of Abraham to all nations, even the sacrifice later to be seen in the mount of the Lord; he was the High Priest after the order of Melchizedek; he was the one whose once-for-all sacrifice was foreshadowed by all of the sacrifices in Leviticus; he was the Man who wrestled with Jacob; he was the Lion of the Tribe of Judah; his was the voice from the burning bush; he was the Passover Lamb; and the Prophet greater than Moses; he was the captain of the Lord's army to Joshua; he was the ultimate Kinsman-Redeemer mentioned in Ruth; he was the son of David who was a King greater than David; he was the suffering Saviour of Psalm 22, and the Good Shepherd of Psalm 23, despite being the Stone that was despised by the builders. He was the wisdom of Proverbs as well as the Saviour of the prophets and the suffering Servant of Isaiah, who would give his back to the smiters (ch.50), whose face would be rendered humanly unrecognizable (ch.52), who would be numbered with, and wounded for, the transgressors (ch.53). He was Messiah, the Prince of Daniel who would establish a kingdom that would never end, although he would also be 'cut off' (9:26), for Zechariah had said they would look on him whom they pierced (12:10).

What those disciples should have believed had already been revealed to them by the prophets: that the Messiah would suffer first and then be received in glory. Now, the scriptures he had shared with them finally sank in, for he had revealed the scriptures to them, and the scriptures had revealed him to them. "Did not our hearts burn within us as He talked with us along the way, and as He opened the scriptures to us?"

Let me ask you: "How long has it been since you felt your heart warmed by the word of God, in your own private time with him when he began to open up his word to you?" Perhaps with some of us the fire has gone out. The passion we once had for the Lord has waned. He longs to visit and spend time with us today. Get into his Word, let him expound it to you. Have you never had a burning heart as you read the Word of God? Has it never kindled a fire in your heart?

When at first we met the two disciples in Luke chapter 24 they were trudging into the rays of the setting sun, for Emmaus was west of Jerusalem and it was toward evening. But after their encounter with the risen Lord Jesus they walked joyfully beyond the sunset to face the risen Son of God at Jerusalem. When as disciples we walk with him we, too, can walk beyond the sunset of our lives to abide with him where it will never be night. By the time the sun comes to set on your life, I trust you, too, will be found walking towards it - towards evening - enjoying the company of Jesus.

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