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Jesus Only!

A Sermon by the late REV. J. GRESHAM MACHEN, D.D., Litt.D.

And the mother of the child said, As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee . . . (II Kings 4:30).

THE doctrine of the plenary inspiration of the Bible does not mean that all parts of the Bible are equally important or equally beautiful. It only means that all parts of the Bible are equally true.

Even the least considered parts of the Bible have indeed their place. No part could be missing without loss; and as it has been said that the true lovers of Shakespeare's poetry love the level lines of Shakespeare, so the true lovers of Holy Writ love the level chapters of the Word of God. They love those chapters of the Bible where we seem to be walking through the plain, between one great mountain peak of revelation and another.

But in the midst of the level chapters of the Bible, we come ever again to

marvelous gems of narrative, where it seems as though God in the exuberance of His grace had couched His revelation to men in such matchless beauty as inevitably to arrest their gaze.

Such a gem of narrative is the story of the Shunammite woman, told in the fourth chapter of II Kings. What a divine book the Bible is, and also what a human book! As we read that story of a mother's grief, the long intervening centuries seem to be rolled away like a disappearing curtain. There is nothing that seems strange to us as we read. It might all have happened yesterday. We are brought as close to that family of long ago as though they were living here with us today. How wonderfully natural the story is, how marvelously simple, and yet how profound!

In comparison with the insight into the depths of



Dr. J. Gresham Machen

the human heart which that simple story brings, I think the best efforts of uninspired writers seem but puny and thin.

At the centre of the story stands one of the unforgettable portraits which the Bible contains. It is the portrait of the Shunammite woman. In what few and simple strokes is the wonderful picture drawn! The great dramatists of the world might have put into that woman's mouth pages of soliloquy; Greek choruses might all have done their part in glorious verse: and still we should not have one-tenth of the knowledge of that woman's soul or have our heart-strings one-tenth as much stirred as is done by the few and simple words, and by the strange and eloquent restraint, of this matchless story.

At Shunem there was a great woman. She does not seem to have been a woman of many words; like Mary the mother of our Lord she kept things and pondered them in her heart. No vulgar talk, but only simple deeds coming from a strong and plain soul.

The thing that stands out in the character of that woman is her power of concentration upon one central resolve. One only, she determined, could help her in her hour of need. To seek that one she put all other considerations aside, and when she had found him no persuasions could send her away.

It was indeed an hour of dire need in which she sought the prophet's help.

She was a great woman, as the Bible says. I suppose that means she was a woman of some wealth and position. But she had a secret, gnawing sorrow, the sorrow that she had no son. That was always a tragedy to a Jewish woman. To her it was a tragedy too great for words.

In the course of time Elisha the man of God chanced by. She constrained him to eat bread; then she made for him a little chamber on the wall, and set for him there a bed and a table and a candlestick, and he came in and lodged there.

That prophet was a mighty man of God, but he was not above noticing the simple kindness that the woman had shown. "Call this Shunammite", he said. Gehazi called her and she

stood before the prophet. "What shall I do for you?" he asked. "Shall I speak for you to the king or to the captain of the host?" And she answered, "I dwell among mine own people".

But Gehazi had observed some things. He was not a very lovely character, but apparently he kept his eyes open, and he rather wanted to do this woman a good turn. "Verily she hath no child", he said, "and her husband is old". So the woman was called again. She came and stood in the door. "About this season", said the prophet, "according to the time of life, thou shalt embrace a son".

Ah, there was that old sore opened up again; there was that deep sorrow of the heart, so carefully covered up, brought out into the cruel light of day! It was more than could be borne. "Nay, my lord, thou man of God, do not lie unto thine handmaid".

Yet the prophet's words came true. The woman conceived and bore a son. We can well understand with what love and devotion the mother followed the life of that only child. Her whole soul was wrapped up in that boy whom God had given her to take away the agony of her soul.

The boy went out one day to his father with the reapers. Then, as now, boys seemed to have loved to watch their fathers as they worked. I do not know that humanity has changed as much as we are sometimes tempted to suppose.

But tragedy and sorrow lurked in the sunshine of that summer's day.

The boy said to his father, "My head, my head", and the father said, "Carry him to his mother". They carried him to his mother, he sat on her knees till noon, and then died.

What a world of pity is conveyed to us by the simple words! How infinitely tender is this majestic Book of God! There the mother was with her dead child in her arms.

Does the Bible proceed then to describe her tears or report her agonizing cries? No, it does not at all. I think there were no tears and no agonizing cries. She took her dead child up—that was all—and laid him in that little chamber on the wall and shut the door.

One thought held exclusive possession of her soul. She must get to that man of God. Nothing must intervene. There was no time for sympathy, no time for explanations. "Why are you going to the man of God today?" her husband said. "It shall be well", said she. No time even to tell the father about his child lying there in that chamber.

Gehazi came to meet her. "Is it well with thee?" he said. "Is it well with thy husband? Is it well with the child?" And she answered, "It is well". There was one only to whom she would tell the sorrow of her heart. Let others think what they would. Words exchanged with them were nothing but a waste of time.

At last she came to the man of God. She caught him by the feet. There was no time for politeness; there was no time for pleasant words. Her words were wrung from her as by a bitterness beyond all control. "Did I desire a son of my lord?" she said. "Did I not say, Do not deceive me?" She was right. She had not asked the prophet for a son; she had asked nothing from the prophet, and she had said to him when he promised her one, "Do not deceive me".

It was a bitter reproach indeed. Well, what did the prophet do with that bitter reproach; what did God do with it—the God for whom the prophet spoke?

Sometimes God rebukes the reproaches of men. He rebuked and punished the Israelites who murmured against Him in the wilderness. But there is a difference between such

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an opportunity to be at home, had obtained a week's leave of absence to spend Christmas with his family, and he and Elizabeth's mother planned to arrive at Sunset Hill on Christmas Eve.

* * *

At last the day before Christmas arrived. It was planned to hold the Sunday school program early in the afternoon, so that the Glen children could reach their homes afterward before darkness fell, and also that the Gordons might return to Sunset Hill in plenty of time to meet Captain and Mrs. Andrews, Elizabeth's parents, when they arrived on the evening train.

The fields and hills lay still and white under their blanket of snow, and overhead the gray clouds hung low with promise of more snow.

"It looks so Christmasy, doesn't it?" commented Elizabeth as they drove through this wintry scene to the school-house. But once within, winter seemed to vanish. How lovely the room looked! The Gordons and Miss Spring had been there the day before to trim a Christmas tree and decorate the school-room with evergreen boughs, holly branches, silver stars and scarlet bells. And one of the older boys from the Glen had come early in the day to build fires in the stoves and keep them going, so that the whole place was now aglow with beauty, light and warmth.

The audience gathered promptly and scarcely a member of any of the five Pine Tree Glen families was missing. The coats and caps of those who came in last were powdered with snowflakes but, amid the snug brightness within, little thought was given to the weather outside.

Immediately at two o'clock the program began. How they all enjoyed it—the singing of the Christmas carols, special music and the recitation of Scripture by the children! The Christmas message delivered by Mr. Gordon was beautifully illustrated by Christmas pictures thrown upon a white sheet on the wall.

Following the program came the presentation of gifts. It was at this point that the audience began to be more and more conscious of the storm outside. For some time there had been an increasing moaning of the wind and the sound of driven snow swishing against the windowpanes. And now—suddenly—there was a roar like

the sound of an approaching express train and a blast of wind struck the building with a force that made the windows rattle and the walls shake. Again and again came these gusts of wind, each seeming more violent than the last. Looking toward the windows, they saw the driving snow so thick that it looked as though a white sheet were hung outside the glass.

Suddenly, with a terrific blast of wind, there was a sharp report like that of a gun and a rending, tearing sound, as a heavy dark shape swiftly flashed by all the windows on the east side of the room. "The big, pine tree! It's blown down!" cried several at once. Men and women cringed in their seats with pale faces and the little children began to cry.

(To Be Concluded
in the Next GUARDIAN)

Jesus Only!

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murmuring and the cry of the agonized soul that seeks God's help. God knows the difference between the two. The prophet, God's spokesman, did not rebuke that woman for her reproach. "Go, Gehazi", he said, "and lay my staff upon the face of the child".

But the woman had not come for Gehazi; she had come for that man of God. No other would satisfy her. Let Gehazi do what he would. She would stay with the one from whom alone help was to be obtained. "As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth", she said, "I will not leave thee". And he arose and followed her.

Little help could Gehazi bring. He laid the staff upon the face of the child; but there was neither voice nor hearing, and he reported, "The child is not awaked".

Then Elisha came into the house. He went into the room where the dead child was, and shut the door upon them twain, and prayed unto the Lord. And he went up and stretched himself upon the child, and the flesh of the child waxed warm. Then he returned and walked in the house to and fro; and went up, and stretched himself upon him; and the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes.

But the mother, where was she? What a chance for a dramatic scene

when the mother first saw her son alive! What a theme for glorious words! Well, it is a dramatic scene. One of the most dramatic in all the world's literature. But how does the Bible depict it? Not in the swelling words of men's wisdom, but in words of one syllable. Here is the way the Bible ends this matchless story: "And when she was come in unto him, he said, Take up thy son. Then she went in, and fell at his feet, and bowed herself to the ground, and took up her son, and went out".

That is all. The commonest words in our language or in any language—no adjectives, no descriptions, and yet our heart melts within us when we read.

The Bible is like that, my friends. Such a sweet simple book, and yet how sublime!

The question arises, however, why God has put this beautiful little narrative in His holy Word. Is it just to arouse within us tender emotions as we sympathize with that mother and

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her child? Is it just to melt our stony hearts and weld together in a common human sympathy the different ages and the different generations of mankind?

Well, I will not say that that is not a part of God's purpose in including this matchless narrative in His Word. But I think we can detect another purpose too. I think there is something that we can take from the example of that woman of so long ago and apply to our lives today.

That woman had recourse to one and one only in her soul's dire need. Husband and friends for the moment were forgotten; sympathy for the moment was cast aside. Even the servant of the prophet, though with definite commands from his master, would not do. No, all that the woman thought of was her child lying there dead, and the one who alone could give her aid. "As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth", she said, "I will not leave thee". We think of Jacob wrestling with the angel through the night; we think of the Psalmist refusing to let God go till the blessing was obtained. What intensity and exclusiveness of devotion was there!

But what sort of devotion was that? Was it merely a touching instance of the way in which a strong character will impose itself upon those who are in its environment? Was it merely an example of the way in which a strong and good man arouses the confidence of those who are in need?

No, my friends, I think it was something more than that. I believe it was at bottom the cry of the human soul for the living God. That prophet, according to the Bible, was the spokesman of Jehovah; he was one who, by his words and by his mighty deeds, said, "Thus saith the Lord!" The woman felt that, I think. I do not mean that she necessarily put it into words. But I think that she felt in her soul of souls that there was in that strange man of God for whom she had made that little chamber on the wall something that called forth supreme devotion and supreme confidence in the hour of need. The prophet was God's messenger to her, and in seeking his help, and refusing to be satisfied with that of any other, she was saying really with the Psalmist, "My soul thirsteth for God". Her faith was a faith that was full of agony. It was a faith like that of the one in the Gospels who cried, "Lord,

I believe, help thou mine unbelief". But like that faith, it was accepted by the One who knows the heart. The woman bowed herself to the ground, and took up her son, and went out.

Is there anyone to whom we in our day can come as that woman came to the man of God? Is there anyone to whom we can have an absolutely exclusive recourse in the hour of our soul's need? Is there anyone for whom all other resources may safely on occasion be cast aside? Is there anyone whom to reach we can refuse to greet any other by the way and whom to reach we can if necessary hate father and mother and wife and sister and brother and child?

Yes, my friends, there is One. There is only One. Christ Jesus, it is He!

Many have offered themselves as healers of our hurt, as comforters of our sorrows, as lifegivers to our souls dead in trespasses and sins. Many are the physicians of mankind. But, ah, my friends, when we face the real tragedy of our lives, when we know that we are sinners, when we see ourselves as God sees us, when we face the judgment throne, then we know that all the soul-physicians are quite powerless to heal our deadly hurt or to make dead souls to live. Then we refuse to greet any by the way, then we put our fingers in our ears, then we turn aside from the well-meant sympathy of family and friends, then we forget our well-turned phrases and our fears of being thought naïve, then we say in the words of the old hymn:

"Foul I to the fountain fly,
Wash me, Saviour, or I die".

Ah, my friends, it is Jesus only for us, when we face the fact of sin.

Yes, my friends, it is Jesus only to the Christian—Jesus only in whom we trust, Jesus only whom we must absolutely obey. We have many teachers and many leaders and even many masters according to the flesh, but only one Saviour, only one Lord.

Notice how very clear that was made at the beginning of the gospel. What an exclusive devotion Jesus demanded of His disciples! "Let the dead bury their dead", He said to the man who wanted just to bury his own father before he obeyed the command, "Follow me!" "If any man come to me", He said again, "and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he

cannot be my disciple".

We are almost appalled when we read claims like these. Would they not lead to fanaticism? Would they not lead to men's making an excuse of religion in order to evade homely duties to father or mother or wife or child? Well, yes, they would lead to fanaticism except for one reason—for the reason that the One for whom such exclusive devotion was asked could be trusted not to let the devotion to Him interfere with real family duty or right human affections. Dangerous indeed would it be to listen to such claims coming from any other, but not when they come from Jesus. Trust Him and obey Him, and you never will be led into heartlessness or sin.

But when that is said, it still remains true that the claims of Jesus were stupendous. The relationship to Him took precedence of even the closest of earthly ties. The first disciples accepted those claims of Jesus. They left all when they followed Him.

Then came the cross and the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Ghost and the founding of the Christian church. From the beginning Jesus was the Head of the church. He was the exclusive Saviour and Lord.

The visible church, however, was never altogether without sin, and sin manifested itself especially in one recurrent way—in the attempt to place other things in a position that belonged rightfully to Christ, in the attempt to put other things or other persons between the Christian and his Lord.

The sad process began even in the apostolic age. At Colosse it was the angels that began to encroach upon the prerogatives of Christ. I am not sure whether those false teachers in Colosse really denied the high doctrine of the person of Christ which was proclaimed by Paul. Christ no doubt was highly exalted in their teaching. But they also exalted the angels, and practically, even if not theoretically, that tended to dethrone Christ. The absolutely exclusive place of Christ in the devotion of the church was impaired.

With that encroachment upon the place of Christ in the thoughts and affections of the Christians, there went also an encroachment in the field of conduct. Those false teachers in Colosse had their "mandates"—

"Touch not, taste not, handle not"—which went beyond the commands of Christ. Already in those early days there were those who put the word of man or the word of angels above the Word of God.

Then, after the angels, among the usurpers, came the saints. What a very natural, what a very innocent, thought seems to lie at the basis of the doctrine of the intercession of the saints! Just think for a moment of the pious dead. Their souls have departed from their bodies. But they are not dead, are they? Well then, if they are not dead, they must surely be able to do at least the things that they did upon this earth. When they were here they prayed to God for us, and how we valued their intercessory prayer! Well, then, are they less able to pray now than they were able then, and ought we to value their present prayers any less? When they were on earth, we asked them to pray for us. Why should we not continue to do so, now that they have entered into their reward?

It seems innocent, does it not? But in reality it is not innocent at all. Do you not see that in attributing to the departed saints a sort of ubiquity that enables them to hear you when you cry to them, you are giving them something that belongs only to your divine Lord? Christ is being crowded out from His rightful place.

No, danger that way lies. When you enter into your closet, pray to your heavenly Father, and pray to God the Son, and pray to God the Holy Ghost, but do not pray to any other in heaven or on earth.

With the saints there came the virgin Mary. How beautiful is the picture of Mary in the first two chapters of the Gospel According to Luke! Shall we refuse to her the fulfilment of her prophecy in her beautiful song of praise: "Behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed"? Surely not! We shall gladly call her blessed who was chosen of God to be the mother of our Lord and who said in the simplicity of her soul: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word". Well, then, why may we not ask her to intercede for us before the throne of her Son? If the prayers of such an one could be heard while she was on earth, why not also now when she is in heaven? Ah, it sounds so plausible, and yet what a depth of tragedy lurks

in those plausible words! "Pray for us, Mary", countless burdened human beings have said. "You are a woman such as we, you know what it is to yearn over a child, you can give us just the human sympathy that we need". Pathetic, is it not, very natural, very human? I cannot find it in my heart to inveigh against it today. And yet, my friends, it is sin. By that supposed intercession of the virgin Mary, Jesus has been pushed aside. "Mary can sympathize with us", say the millions who bow before her picture in the cathedrals of the world. Ah, but cannot Jesus sympathize? What says the Scripture? "We have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities", it says. I tell you, my friends, Jesus is no far-off God; Jesus can sympathize with all of humanity in a way that no mere man and no mere woman ever can sympathize. His love is far tenderer even than the love of the tenderest mother, and Jesus unlike any mother knows the depths of the human heart. That little modern song is quite right when it says: "Jesus knows all about our troubles". How sad it is, then, when Mary has been put into a place that belongs only to Christ!

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So, in the history of the church, angels, the saints and Mary the Mother of God have—through no fault of their own, but through the vain imaginings of men's hearts—been allowed to stand between the Christian and his Lord. They have through no fault of their own been made to be usurpers of a place that belongs rightfully to Christ alone.

But the greatest usurper has yet to be mentioned. The greatest usurper is the church.

Now the church is a divine ordinance. I mean not merely the church invisible, the great company of the truly redeemed; but I mean also the church visible, the church with its orderly government and its orderly administration of the means of grace. Yes, that too is an ordinance of God. Yet how sadly have God's gifts been perverted! The visible church, given to bring men to Christ and lead them ever anew into His holy presence, has sometimes interposed itself between the Christian and his Lord.

Church history tells the sad story. Gradually the lawful authority of the church was perverted until it became an authority that was unlawful. The church claimed to have the right, as a living organism, to give a supernaturally authoritative interpretation of the Bible; without that supernaturally authoritative interpretation by Mother Church it was held that the Bible was a dangerous book for the rank and file. So gradually salvation was sought through obedience to the

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rules of the church. The Christian no longer had direct access to the Word of God. It was mediated to him by the authoritative interpretation of the church. The church interposed itself between the Christian and Christ.

The Reformation brushed all that aside. The Bible was rediscovered. It was shown to be a plain book which the plain man could read. It needed no authoritative interpretation by the church, but in it God spoke directly to the soul. Ah, what a burst of freedom was that! What a moment it was, to be sure, when the words were first burned upon Luther's soul, "The just shall live by faith"! Then was the barrier removed, then were the shackles stricken off, then did the soul stand again directly in the presence of God. Then did Christ Himself again become Lord.

But time has gone on. The Protes-

tant churches have become great organizations—wheels within wheels, boards upon boards, committees upon committees. Ah, that need not necessarily have dethroned Christ. It was a danger, but the danger might have been met. But, alas, something else was going on. The Bible was being undermined. It was no longer regarded as inerrant. It was said to contain errors like other books. It was treated as inspiring literature, the record of man's search for God.

What happened when the Bible was thus undermined? Ah, men said, it meant emancipation for mankind. That old doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture was a shackle, men said. Thank God, we do not have to defend it any more. We are emancipated! We are free! The religion of the letter has given place to the religion of the living spirit. The inerrant Bible in the old sense is gone, but the living church has taken its place.

So men said. But do you know what really happened when men became emancipated from the Bible? I will tell you, my friends. When they became emancipated from the Bible they became slaves. They had torn up the Magna Charta of human liberty.

Tyranny has been stalking everywhere throughout the world in our day. It has manifested itself in Mussolini and in Hitler. It is threatening our country in a most menacing way.

The great barrier against tyranny was the Bible. Now that the Bible has been given up or is being interpreted

to mean its exact opposite, tyranny has free course.

It has free course in the state. It also has free course in the church. It has triumphed in the church in a thousand places and in a thousand ways. In the church body known as the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., tyranny has triumphed in a particularly outrageous and almost blasphemous form. A mandate now given full force in the church declares that support of the program established officially by the general assembly is as much the duty of every member of the church as is obedience to our Lord's command when He said, "This do in remembrance of me". Support of agencies propagating what is crassly contradictory to the Bible is enforced by ecclesiastical penalties. Christ has been dethroned. Fallible men have tried to push themselves between Him and those for whom He died.

What should be done when the machinery of the church thus pushes itself between the Christian and Christ? I will tell you, my friends. The Christian must seek Christ again at any cost. The Christian must seek His face at any cost, and must obey His commands alone.

We can learn here from the Old Testament narrative with which this sermon began. We can learn from the intensity of that Shunammite woman. If she allowed nothing to stand between her and the prophet—mere temporary mouthpiece of God, sinful like other men—surely far less should we allow anything to stand between us and our blessed, divine Lord—our blessed Lord so sweetly offered to us in the gospel, so sovereignly yet so lovingly commanding us in God's holy Word. No, my friends, we must allow nothing, absolutely nothing to stand between us and Christ—no pope, no ecumenical council, no presbytery, no synod, no general assembly!

People are often being called upon today to make a momentous choice. On one side are fine church buildings, precious human associations, and the favor of the world. On the other side is Jesus Christ, with the print of the nails in His hands. Some men, when faced with that choice, are choosing Christ. When they do that, a wonderful peace and joy steals into their souls. May God lead every one of you to make that choice and have that peace and that joy!

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