



**GOSPEL
SERMONS**

ON FAITH,
THE HOLY SPIRIT,
AND
THE COMING
KINGDOM

FOREWORD BY
WILLIAM A. WILLIMON

J O H A N N C H R I S T O P H
BLUMHARDT

Gospel Sermons



Johann Christoph Blumhardt (1805–1880)

The Blumhardt Source Series

Christian T. Collins Winn and Charles E. Moore, editors

Gospel Sermons

*On Faith, the Holy Spirit,
and the Coming Kingdom*

By
JOHANN CHRISTOPH BLUMHARDT

Foreword by
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Translated by
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Dedicated to Johann Christoph Arnold
Faithful shepherd and minister of God's peace
John 14:27

Contents

Series Foreword by Christian T. Collins Winn and Charles E. Moore | xiii
Foreword by William A. Willimon | xv
Acknowledgments | xix
1887 Introduction to the Gospel Sermons by Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt | xxi

PART I: JESUS CHRIST

Section 1: The Redeemer

Sonship with God—Galatians 3:26 | 5
Forgiveness of Sins—Matthew 9:2 (Mark 2:5) | 7
Concerning the Spirit of Sickness—Luke 13:10–17 | 9
The Son’s Love—John 15:9 | 17
Honor the Son!—John 5:23 | 19
The Legacy of the Departing Savior—Luke 24:48–53 | 21
Free from Sins—John 8:24 | 27
The Exalted Jesus—Acts 5:30–31 | 28

Section 2: The Christian Position

Into the Kingdom of Life—Colossians 1:12–14 | 33
Born of God—1 John 5:18 | 34
Conversion—Jeremiah 31:18 | 36
Joy in Zion—Isaiah 35:10 | 38
Live Not for Yourself!—2 Corinthians 5:15 | 43
Eyes Turned to the Lord—Psalm 123:2 | 45

Contents

Section 3: The Comfort of the Gospel

Be Strong in the Lord—Ephesians 6:10 | 49

God's Mercy—Isaiah 57:18 | 51

Do Not Worry!—Psalm 55:22 | 53

God Is My Strength—Psalm 73:26 | 55

Praise Be to God!—2 Corinthians 1:3-4 | 57

The Lord: A God of Judgment—Isaiah 30:18 | 61

God's Goodness—Jeremiah 33:11 | 63

PART II: THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Section 1: The Church

The Great Flood of the Spirit—Isaiah 44:1-5 | 69

Rejoice!—Deuteronomy 32:43 | 73

The People of God's Inheritance—Deuteronomy 4:20 | 74

The Little Flock—Luke 12:32 | 76

The Strength of the Church—Joshua 1:5 | 78

Love for Jesus—John 14:21B | 80

The Saints—The Faithful—Psalm 31:23 | 81

Use Your Gifts for Others—1 Peter 4:10 | 83

May They Be One—John 17:22-23 | 85

God's Own People—1 Peter 2:9-10 | 88

The Bride—Psalm 45:10-11 | 90

Section 2: The Poverty of the Church

Be Sober and Awake!—1 Thessalonians 5:6-8 | 93

Concerning the Pitiful State of the Church—Isaiah 24:16 | 100

When the Lord Comes—Luke 18:8 | 109

God Answers Our Prayers—Mark 11:24 | 111

In God's Time—Psalm 69:13 | 112

Prayer and Supplication—Psalm 116:1-2 | 114

True Churches—Revelation 2:1 | 116

Contents

- God's Power in the Gospel—Luke 5:1–11 | 118
To Those Who Are Fainthearted—Isaiah 35:4 | 123
Blessed Is He Who Comes!—Matthew 23:39 | 125
The Greater Works—John 14:12 | 127
The Coming of Jesus—John 14:18 | 129
Increase Our Faith!—Luke 17:5 | 131

Section 3: The Cry of the Chosen People

- Prepare the Way!—Isaiah 57:14 | 137
Without Ceasing—1 Thessalonians 5:17 | 138
The Lord, Our Father—Isaiah 63:16 | 139
The Lord, Teacher of the Gentiles—Jeremiah 16:21 | 141
The Cry for Help—Psalm 14:7 | 143
Lord, Have Pity!—Psalm 102:13 | 145
The Lord Answers Our Cries for Help—Isaiah 49:8 | 147
The Waiting of the Righteous—Luke 2:22–40 | 149
Vindicate Us from Our Adversary!—Luke 18:1–8 | 155

PART III: THE RETURN OF CHRIST

Section 1: Trust in the Promise

- The Delay in the Coming of the Lord—Matthew 25:14–30 | 167
I Make All Things New—Revelation 21:4–5 | 173
Persevere!—Habakkuk 2:3 | 175
The Lord Is Faithful—Isaiah 62:1 | 176
The Lord Comes!—2 Peter 3:9 | 178
The Blossoming Desert—Isaiah 35:1–4 | 186
Hope—Romans 5:5 | 190
All the Earth Shall Be Filled with Glory—Numbers 14:20–21 | 192
The Right Hand of the Most High—Psalm 77:10 | 196
The Lord Looks Down from Heaven—Psalm 14:2–3 | 198
God's Great Compassion—Micah 7:19 | 200
Advent—Matthew 21:9 | 202

Contents

- The Branch of the Lord—Isaiah 4:2 | 204
Praise to the Coming One—Psalm 118:26 | 206
The Glory of the Lord—Isaiah 60:2 | 208
A Wholesome Shaking-Up!—Haggai 2:6-7 | 210
The Coming, Going, and Return of Jesus—Luke 17:20-25 | 212
The Help of God—Isaiah 55:8-9 | 217
The New Heart—Jeremiah 24:7 | 219
The Outpouring of the Spirit—Joel 2:28 | 221

Section 2: The Expectant Church

- The Wise Men's Star—Matthew 2:1-12 | 225
The Presentation in the Temple—Luke 2:22-40 | 231
The Holy People—Daniel 7:27 | 237
The Salvation—Genesis 49:18 | 239
Hold Firmly To Expectation—Luke 12:36 | 240
Those Who Seek God—Psalm 69:6 | 241
Expect the Impossible—Genesis 18:14 | 243
Come, Lord Jesus!—Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21 | 244
Watch! The Lord Will Come Soon!—Mark 13:33-37 | 249
When Will the Kingdom of God Come?—Luke 17:20-25 | 254
Jesus Before the Door—Revelation 3:20 | 262
The Lord Comes—Luke 12:37 | 265
The Promise of the Spirit—Acts 2:33 | 267
Thy Kingdom Come!—Matthew 6:10 | 269
The Changed Body—Philippians 3:20-21 | 271
The Fight for the Kingdom—Matthew 6:13 | 273
The Peoples' Feast and Its Effect—Isaiah 25:6-9 | 275
Johann Christoph Blumhardt's Last Devotional Meeting, Held
on February 21, 1880—Psalm 94:18 and Matthew 26:29 | 280

General Index | 283
Scripture Index | 287

Series Foreword

The Blumhardt Source Series seeks to make available for the first time in English the extensive oeuvre of Johann Christoph Blumhardt (1805–1880) and his son Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt (1842–1919), two influential religious figures of the latter half of the nineteenth century who are not well known outside their native Germany. Their influence can be detected in a number of important developments in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Protestantism: the recovery of the eschatological dimension of Christianity and the kingdom of God; the recovery of an emphasis on holistic notions of spirituality and salvation; the rise of faith healing and later, Pentecostalism; the convergence of socialism and the Christian faith; and the development of personalist models of pastoral counseling.

Their collected works make available their vast body of work to scholars, pastors, and laypeople alike with the aim of giving the Blumhardts a full hearing in the English language for the first time. Given the extent of their influence during the theological and religious ferment of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we believe that these sources will be of great interest to scholars of that period across various disciplines. It is also true, however, that there is much spiritual and theological value in the witness of the Blumhardts. We hope that by making their witness more widely known in the English-speaking world the church at large will benefit.

The project outline is flexible, allowing for volumes that aim either in a scholarly direction or towards the thoughtful lay reader. The emphasis will be to reproduce, with only slight modifications, the various German editions of the Blumhardts' works that have appeared since the late nineteenth century. A modest scholarly apparatus will provide contextual and theologically helpful comments and commentary through introductions, footnotes, and appendices.

Series Foreword

During their long ministries, the elder and younger Blumhardt found themselves called to serve as pastors, counselors, biblical interpreters, theologians, and even politicians. No matter the vocational context, however, both understood themselves as witnesses to the kingdom of God that was both already present in the world, and also breaking into the current structures of the world. Together they represent one of the most powerful instances of the convergence of spirituality and social witness in the history of the Christian church. As series editors, it is our conviction that their witness continues to be relevant for the church and society today. We hope that the current series will give the Blumhardts a broader hearing in the English-speaking world.

Christian T. Collins Winn and Charles E. Moore

Foreword

Karl Barth ends his magisterial *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, his survey of Germany's greatest theologians of the age, with, surprisingly, a concluding chapter on Johann Christoph Blumhardt.* While he admits that Blumhardt had little interest in theologizing, Barth credits Blumhardt with demolishing nineteenth-century theology's specious reasoning and intellectual dead ends, much like Blumhardt's contemporary, Schweitzer.

Barth reports the miraculous healing of a young woman as the intellectual "breakthrough" whereby Blumhardt moved from pietism's contest between "Jesus and the unconverted heart of man" to that war "between Jesus and the real power of darkness, in which man finds himself." That firsthand experience of the miraculous led Blumhardt to be an eschatologically-driven "theologian of hope," who fully expected the immanent triumph of Christ. "On the basis of Scripture he [Blumhardt] expects above all a new *outpouring of the Holy Spirit*" and "a new time of grace on the earth." With an unapologetic restoration of the miraculous, and without explicitly trying, Blumhardt, according to Barth, devastated an accommodated, urbane, bourgeois "academic theology" that had "made things too easy for itself."

Barth (my theological hero) quoted Johann Christoph Blumhardt's last words, "*Veni, creator Spiritus*" [Come, Creator Spirit], in order to explain his own nascent theology. "You have been introduced to my theology if you have heard this sigh."** Reading these sermons by Blumhardt, one can easily see

* Karl Barth, Ch. 28, "Blumhardt," in *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background and History*, trans. Brian Cozens and John Bowden, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 629–39.

** Quoted in Eberhard Busch, *The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth's Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, eds., Darrell L. Guder and Judith J. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 38.

the connection between what Karl Barth learned from the Blumhardts and Barth's explosive *Romans*. Barth acknowledged his indebtedness by exclaiming, "Blumhardt always begins right away with God's presence, might, and purpose: he starts out from God; he does not begin by climbing upwards to him by means of contemplation and deliberation."

These Barthian accolades for Johann Christoph Blumhardt are well deserved. But one of Barth's statements about Blumhardt is challenged by this volume of sermons: "He was more a pastor than a preacher."

I've read many of Barth's sermons, and I can say that the homiletics of my theological hero could have profited from a reading of this remarkable collection of *Gospel Sermons*.

Encounter with these sermons can be an invigorating but also convicting and humbling experience for a contemporary preacher like me. For a church languishing in the mire of moralistic, therapeutic deism, Blumhardt's sermons render an active, dynamic, present God.

Especially when one considers the sorts of flowery, academically turgid sermons that were being preached in established churches in his day, Blumhardt's sermons are disarmingly simple and direct. He expends no energy attempting to analyze the surrounding culture or speculate on the interiority of his listeners. He wastes no time attempting to reconstruct the original historical context of the Scripture, shows no detailed exegesis and makes no belabored, patronizing hermeneutical moves. Blumhardt never explains. He assumes that every text, whether from Old or New Testament, speaks for itself and requires no homiletical explanation or apologetic pleading. The Word of God makes its own way without argument or external support from either the culture or human experience.

Illustrations are few, indicating that this preacher believes that the Christian life does not require support from the experience of others; the people listening to him have, by the power of the Holy Spirit, direct access to God. Blumhardt displays a deep, pervasive faith that God really means to speak through a biblical text. It's up to the Holy Spirit to make a text "work" in the hearts and minds of hearers, and this preacher has tremendous confidence that the Holy Spirit is resourceful, present, and determined to win a hearing. All of this confirms the son Christoph's claim that, "It was this very watchword, 'Jesus lives!' that eventually drew countless people to him."

Blumhardt displays little effort to impress or flatter his congregation, yet every sermon is a palpable demonstration of a pastor caring for his people,

Foreword

believing that what the people most needed is direct confrontation with the biblical word that inevitably brings the presence of the living Christ.

Some of the sermons are disarmingly candid, particularly those under the heading, “The Poverty of the Church.” Christ is not only our comfort but also our judge. Christ not only heals us but also loves us enough to tell us the truth; Christ is not only the way and the life but also the truth. It’s as if every sermon ends in the radical Blumhardt cry, “Thy kingdom come!”

The world to which we preach doesn’t simply need improvement; it needs radical, sweeping, eschatological transformation that only God can bring about. Christianity demands its own distinctive speech, which alone can adequately characterize that world, speech that is given by Scripture. It calls us to talk like the Bible and to speak of matters that the Bible talks about.

Knowing, deeply knowing, that the kingdom of God has come among us from beyond all our means of saving ourselves by ourselves is the liberating word that contemporary preachers need to hear.

In his introduction to his father’s sermons, Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt notes that, “These sermons and reflections are as plain and unvarnished as they were spoken.” Preached without artifice or cant, devoid of cliché, the sermons produced in me an uncanny sense of being spoken to directly by a preacher who not only believes what he says but also is intent on ministering to my deepest need. The years between me and Blumhardt disappeared.

Serious matters are engaged with a simplicity and directness that is captivating, mysteriously intense, and inescapable. Though Blumhardt’s spirit is too charitable to mock fellow preachers, I found these sermons to be a judgment upon the humbug and blather, the bathos and triviality that characterizes much contemporary preaching, which is more concerned with congregational reception than the truth of Jesus Christ.

Blumhardt’s sermons confirm in me the conviction that faithful preaching begins with God, with a relentlessly revealing, determined-to-have-his-way-in-the-world living God. Preaching ought not trade on pious yearning or human experience or human needs but on the strong, resourceful, active presence of God. We begin not with suppositions about the human condition but rather with prayerful questions: Who is this God we’ve got? Or better, Who is the God who has us? Followed by, What is God doing in our world? Preaching flows not from alleged human religious experience—the infatuation of nineteenth-century theology—but from God’s actual work in the world.

Foreword

I'm confident that you too will enjoy, receive sustenance, and be convicted by these sermons by one of the church's great preachers.

Will Willimon
April 2016

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The editors are indebted to the Bruderhof Historical Archive, Walden, New York, USA, for providing original translated material, and to Miriam Mathis for her painstaking work in copyediting and her ongoing commitment to keeping the witness of the Blumhardts alive. We would also like to thank Hilary Ritchie, Sara Misgen, and Rolando Rodriguez for their assistance at different stages of the editorial process.

1887 Introduction to the Gospel Sermons

By Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt

As we make these sermons from my father available to the general public, we offer a caution. My father would never have published these sermons in their present form. Although he did edit and publish several sermons, he did so only after revising them extensively so as to protect himself against all possible objections. The sermons here are not so polished. Because his sermons were transcribed, he regarded them of insufficient literary quality and therefore not worth printing. To publish them would have made him feel quite embarrassed.

For this reason, I also feel somewhat embarrassed. Yet I am glad that this volume can now be published, for it presents my father just as he was and is characteristic of him as a preacher of God's Word. He would not mind if people got to know him by reading his sermons, because he always found tremendous satisfaction when one of his sermons was a help to someone.

These sermons and reflections are as plain and unvarnished as they were spoken. In several cases, they possess an unusual form. They differ from other sermons by a remarkable freedom in both form and content. What set my father's preaching apart was that he was often the one most deeply affected. Thus, when a sermon turned out particularly well, he would share the elation he felt with those around him as though he had been a listener. He had childlike joy whenever God's Word was directly imparted to him and when he was then able to proclaim it from the pulpit. As a result, thousands of people from many different places—including the unconverted—came away with moved hearts and uplifted spirits after hearing my father speak.

These sermons in printed form cannot do justice to my father or the way in which he delivered the gospel. Nothing can replace actually seeing and hearing the one who proclaims God's message. But we hope that the discourses presented here will at least to a certain extent create an impression akin to the one they made when they were delivered. The advantage of having his sermons in print, however, is that we can read and reread what he said, which allows us to get not only a general impression of his message but a deeper grasp of what he actually expressed.

My father was loath to create quick impressions without any real thoughts. Every word he spoke came from his profound recognition of Jesus—indeed his personal knowledge of him. Some of his thoughts are thus apt to surprise us. I am prepared to hear from readers who may have certain theological misgivings. My father was a thinking preacher, but *not* a theologian. His sermons never failed to grip the listeners' hearts and minds, and experience has shown that where at his urging listeners began to reflect on their faith in a new way, any theological problems awakened in them never created a desire to deviate from the ground of the apostles and prophets. Instead, more often than not they evoked in his listeners a craving for the original gospel itself.

Those who listened to my father often became liberated, especially from Christian words and understandings that they had learned by rote. That freeing was occasioned by the ethical character of my father's sermons. He saw with a prophet's eye the many shortcomings exhibited in the behavior of his fellow Christians. Yet, no matter how precise or even harsh his words might often have sounded, his listeners still came away with the following impression: this truly is the way to live! The gospel came alive for them. This was partially due to the fact that my father lived according to Jesus' words and was firmly committed to what was right before God. He was not just a "preacher." People could recognize in his words the voice of the chief Shepherd who calls us by name.

What was it, though, that enabled my father to become the preacher he was? Already as a small boy he would "preach" to his brothers and sisters—not as one just imitating a pastor, but in earnest and with a sense of the Savior's very presence. When barely able to read, he would pore over the Bible and, as he would often tell later on, in holy simplicity hear God and the Savior speak to him directly from it. He felt that his world was no different from that of the people of Israel, when God by means of signs and miracles endeavored to form his people into one nation, making them a light unto the

nations. As a child, my father believed that the Savior was as alive today as he was at the time of the apostles, when people not only had the Scriptures but also experienced direct manifestations of his power.

Only in later years did he sadly become aware that others knew nothing of what he had sensed. His heart pulsed with the Savior; his thoughts were full of what Jesus could and did do. This is the real reason for his joyful temperament, and wherever he went people naturally responded to him. However, when he “preached,” in the sense of speaking about the Savior, he noticed how many people did not understand his feelings. This pained him deeply. Even as a seminarian he often found himself in opposition to others. Unlike so many in his day, the voice of his conscience would always ask: does this or that action jibe with what the Savior means to us? He could not help but visualize Jesus as always close by and active, and so he felt duty bound to heed him come what may. This also gave his personality a kind of excellence, both as regards the fear of God (which firmly grounded him) and the freedom of a good conscience (which enabled him to face so many of life’s situations with childlike nonchalance).

This is probably why as a young pastor he would inadvertently cause offense by what he said. Truthfulness had become a personal trait of his, and so he was not overly anxious or fussy about how he expressed himself. This once earned him, for example, a reprimand in Basel at the Mission School where he was teaching. He spoke about the Savior in such a way that some pious individuals felt he made Jesus too human—an accusation my father could not understand at the time because he freely regarded the Savior as his brother and as the brother of us all. On the other hand, my father was disturbed by how much nonsense was expressed by others. He often regretted having been in a company of Christians where nothing at all was said about the Savior. Witnessing to Jesus had become second nature to him; “Jesus lives!” was his personal watchword.

It was this very watchword, “Jesus lives!” that eventually drew countless people to him, despite the fact that as a preacher there was nothing special about him. At his first church in Iptingen, where he was the assistant pastor for an extended time, he left a remarkable impression. Under the impact of his preaching, people became free: hearts were deeply struck, sinners turned around, and even the separatists in the village with all their Christian principles gave way and came under his tutelage.

It was only in Möttlingen, however, that my father gained his decisive voice. At the beginning of his ministry there, his preaching proved

ineffective: parishioners would simply go to church and come out again, always remaining the same. Möttingen almost seemed like a haunted place. My father's generally cheerful nature began to turn mournful when after several years no essential changes occurred in the congregation. Despite being a very industrious minister who diligently sought personal contact with every parishioner, he became increasingly dissatisfied. The life that surrounded him refused to become truly Christian.

The story of the spiritual fight and the awakening that followed is well known. I will not recount it here.^{***} Yet, as if lit up by a stroke of lightning, the whole need of his congregation was suddenly revealed to him. He became aware of satanic fetters that had been forged by superstitious, magical practices stemming from idolatry—chains that held souls in bondage. The Christianity around him was but a formal one, a lifeless caricature of the true gospel. Once he realized the source of the darkness, he was compelled to go on the offensive and cry out, “Jesus is victor!” At this battle cry, uttered by a person wholly grounded in Christ, the forces of hell gave way. Like never before, he witnessed the power of Jesus Christ and how it alone was able to free people oppressed by sin and evil. Though the dragon kept writhing in a thousand convolutions, he finally decamped. Through prayer and Christ's direct intervention, the spell of spiritual darkness was broken.

It was a long struggle, stretching over almost two years and replete with instances of anxious faith, of temptations, of inner and outer need, but in the end it made my father into the preacher he later became. There is a difference between knowing who Jesus is and actually experiencing what he can do. Once the hellish powers had given way, my father's heart broke forth with a fresh word—a proclamation that poured forth from a new-born proclaimer of God's Word. A new tongue was given to my father that enabled him to lead his congregation to repentance and renewal. It seemed that shrouds, which had up till then prevented people from turning away from sin, were now stripped off their souls. From then on my father's sermons had something that gripped and shook people; many weighed down by sin and suffering became inwardly freed.

In later years my father's preaching did not have such a striking effect. There were times when it even became somewhat quiet around him. Yet something of Christ, the one who came to destroy the works of the devil,

^{***} See Friedrich Zündel, *Pastor Johann Christoph Blumhardt: An Account of His Life*, edited by Christian T. Collins Winn and Charles E. Moore (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 117–245. For the same story in smaller format, see Friedrich Zündel, *The Awakening: One Man's Battle with Darkness*, (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2015).

could always be felt. It was not natural skill, rhetoric, or eloquence that made my father an effective preacher—it was a strength that came to him from the Savior himself. He did not rely on anything but a simple faith in the Savior. His preaching was steeped in the longing that whatever bound his listeners would be loosened, even if only in a few.

Though his preaching helped countless listeners, there were still many who took offense at some things my father said. This was especially so with regards to his repeated request for a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Most people just assumed that the Holy Spirit was in their midst. They simply couldn't comprehend the yearning my father possessed, especially since it appeared to them that he himself exuded the Spirit's very presence. At times this criticism actually intimidated my father, so much so that he suffered severe pangs of conscience because, as he put it, here and there cowardice had made him refrain from explicitly voicing the hope that the Lord might once again pour out the Holy Spirit.

This hope of a great outpouring of the Spirit is what ultimately marked my father's preaching. Although his expectation of another Pentecost raised all sorts of objections, anyone who knew my father and what he had experienced in Möttlingen had to concede that the kingdom of God can and needs to break in more fully. My father feared that unless additional gifts of the Holy Spirit were bestowed, the renewal that had begun in the Möttlingen congregation would be just a passing phenomenon. It would also never extend beyond to larger circles.

So in a very childlike way, my father asked again and again for more of the Holy Spirit. He knew full well how many souls were still bound by demonic powers and how unable he was to set them free. He saw firsthand how even though many streams of sinners, warped characters, would accept the gospel, they remained unchanged. He saw too how many sinister illnesses continued to oppress good Christian people, despite the fact that in the church this sort of thing should be done away with. He saw the dissensions between churches and sects—what an unending misery unless the Holy Spirit were to open up a way to reconciliation. All this created in him a deep longing, an almost unquenchable thirst for a new outpouring of the Spirit, who alone could illuminate the Word of God for those bound by sin and the confines of tradition. Again and again one would hear from his lips, "We need the Holy Spirit," even as the evidence of this or that need would pile up higher and higher.

Despite the need around him, my father was a man of hope. Along with his sighing and yearning, he simply took it at face value that what we pray for can and will come to be. He felt that if we are in dead earnest, the Holy Spirit will come. His hope would at times break forth with such unusual power that his listeners were struck to the core. This was especially so in the last decade of his life. He almost took it for granted that a new time was in store for Christianity, a time illumined by the glory of God's rulership here on earth. Confidence streamed forth from his heart with such force that you would think he was already experiencing a foretaste of God's reign.

In the end, was all my father's praying and waiting in vain? No! We believe that this present volume will bring readers to the conviction that what my father proclaimed was truly the gospel of the kingdom. My father's fervent prayer for a direct manifestation of the Lord Jesus not only kept him away from false paths others have been lured into by various trends, it also kept him free of anything unreal, fleeting, and transient. His yearning and believing did in fact hasten the kingdom. We know, as many others have known, how much of an extra measure of Christ's power was given to him. The concrete work of Christ's Spirit, of healing and new life, constituted the very heart of his preaching. People who heard him couldn't help but see the evils around and in them and in response were led to repentance and a new faith. They caught a glimpse of the living God and in turn confidently began to look forward to the Savior's return, seeking anew the kingdom of God and its righteousness.

As a preacher my father must be accepted for who he was. Moreover, we mustn't sever him from what he experienced. And although he never thought of himself as a particularly gifted orator, the reader will discover for himself that his words still have power to speak to the heart. With this hope and expectancy, it is our prayer that the Lord would graciously preside over and bless the reading of these gospel sermons.

PART I

Jesus Christ

SECTION 1
THE REDEEMER

Sonship with God

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.

—GALATIANS 3:26 (NKJV)

It is striking how often Paul refers to all people when it comes to the matter of faith, when we might think that it might not fit all people. There were all sorts of believers among the Galatians, including those to whom he had to say, “Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?” (Gal 3:3). He also found it necessary to admonish the Galatians not to gratify the desires of their sinful nature but instead to live by the Spirit (Gal 5:16).

God won't let himself be mocked. And although we might shake our heads and think that not everyone is an innocent child of God, Paul yet declares, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.” Why does he say this? To encourage the children of God to repent and to set right what is wrong, guarding against failing in the future. For true faith has real power and significance. Genuine faith is a heartfelt trust in Christ Jesus—in Christ, the Lord who came from God and who, as a man, was anointed by God's Spirit. Jesus, the Savior, has come to save us from all sin. This faith has enormous power, and it is this and this alone that guarantees that we belong to God.

Many so-called Christians actually promote something other than faith in Christ Jesus. They focus their attention exclusively on personal improvement, on becoming free from unholy and impure thoughts and feelings, on some kind of holiness that they think they have to achieve. Yet, they never become free of their sins, and so they never dare to believe that they can become children of God. How much better it would be

PART I: JESUS CHRIST

if they really saw who Christ Jesus is! Jesus needs only to be understood with childlike trust: he can change weak sinners into children of God. He already accepts and treats us as his children and, as with the Galatians, he will not let our fellowship with him be destroyed even if we sin.

Let us hold firmly, therefore, to our Savior, who is here for all us sinners—for such weak, frail people as we are. As long as we don't turn faith into a "cushion," he will, in the end, free us from all our shortcomings. For his life contains too much power for anyone who possesses genuine faith—for anyone who is gripped by real trust and peace of heart. Such a person will not go on sinning. Faith is not an intellectual recognition. No, it comes from knowing that Jesus is with us. Understand this! May we clearly see and accept in faith God's great compassion through Christ Jesus toward each one who commits himself to this completely, surrendering to him wholly.

