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CLEMENS

THE WORK OF CHRIST:
PAST, PRESENT AND
FUTURE

Arno Gaebelein

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Past, Present and Future**

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Содержание

THE WORK OF CHRIST	5
I.	6
I	6
Manifestations of Jehovah	6
Other Foreshadowings of His Work	6
Direct Prophecies	7
The Inspiration of the Old Testament	7
II.	7
The Incarnation Announced	8
The Foundation of the Gospel	9
The Purpose of the Incarnation	9
What Incarnation could not Accomplish	10
III.	10
Made Sin for Us	10
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	12

Arno Clemens Gaebelein

The Work Of Christ: Past, Present and Future

THE WORK OF CHRIST

THE Word of God reveals, that all things were created by and for the Son of God. “All things were made by Him and without Him was not anything made that was made” (John i:3). “For by Him were all things created that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things were created by Him and for Him” (Col. i:16). When this perfect creation was ruined by the entrance of sin, when man fell and all creation on account of that fall was brought into the bondage of corruption, the work of redemption became a necessity. No creature of God was fitted or fit to do this. Only the Son of God, the Creator Himself, could undertake this mighty work and accomplish it to the Praise and Glory of God. To do this great work, He had to appear on this earth in the form of man.

A Threefold Aspect

This work of the Son of God has a threefold aspect. It is a past work, a present work, and beyond the present, there is His future work. His work and service will terminate when He delivers up the kingdom, so that God will be all in all (1 Cor. xv:24-28). This threefold aspect of His work corresponds to His threefold office as Prophet, Priest and King. It has a special meaning for the church. In Ephesians v:25-27, we read of this. He loved the church and gave Himself for it; this is His past work. Since then He is sanctifying the church by the washing of water by the Word, and in the future He will present it to Himself, a glorious church. In virtue of this threefold work of our Lord, believers are saved, are being saved, and will be saved. This threefold work has also a significance for the people Israel. When He came and went to the cross, “He died for that nation” (John xi:42). During the present age His earthly people are not cast away; their miraculous preservation on earth, their continued, separate existence is due to Himself. In the future when He appears as their Redeemer and claims the purchased possession, He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob. And to this we might also add the relation of His work to creation itself, the nations of the earth, and to Satan and his rule.

These brief remarks show the importance of distinguishing between this threefold aspect of His work. A Christian who is ignorant of it must be confused in his conception of the truth. He is unable to understand the Word of God, and is unsettled, and even miserable in his Christian experience. Such, alas! is the present condition of a large number of professing Christians. Many are ignorant of what the finished work of Christ on the cross means. On account of this ignorance, they are ever trying to do what God has done for them. How many more are at sea about their position in Christ, and know next to nothing of the priestly work of Christ. The confusion is the greatest in respect to His future work as King. Our theme is therefore an important one. But even God’s people, who in a measure have laid hold of these truths, need constantly to be reminded of it and need to have all this through the Spirit’s power, as a greater reality in their lives.

I. HIS PAST WORK

His past work was accomplished by Him when he became incarnate. It was finished when He died on Calvary's cross. We have therefore to consider first of all these fundamentals of our faith.

I. The Work of the Son of God is foreshadowed and predicted in the Old Testament Scriptures.

II. The incarnation of the Son of God.

III. His Work on the cross and what has been accomplished by it.

I

Through the Old Testament Scriptures, God announced beforehand the work of His Son. This is a great theme and one which needs to be emphasized. These foreshadowings and predictions were made in different ways. First we might mention the appearance from time to time on earth of a supernatural Being. This Being was the Son of God. As soon as sin had entered, He appeared on the scene seeking those who were lost. He Himself announced the promise, that the seed of the woman should bruise the serpent's head. He indicated in Genesis iii:15, His incarnation, His redemptive work on the cross and His final victory over the enemy of God. Then He covered the nakedness of His creatures by making them coats of skin. For the first time in the Word of God, it was made known by this act what the blessed fruit of His atoning work would be.

Manifestations of Jehovah

And the same Jehovah appeared in visible form unto Abraham. He came as traveller accompanied by two angels. He ate in the presence of Abraham, who worshipped and addressed Him as Lord. This Being was none other than the Son of God, the same who after His resurrection appeared to the two disciples on their way to Emmaus as a traveller, and who, at another occasion, ate of a honeycomb and a piece of fish. In His presence Abraham interceded. This Lord, who visited Abraham later, made fire and brimstone fall from heaven upon Sodom and Gomorrah; He executed judgment. He appeared unto Jacob and was the mysterious man who wrestled with him at Peniel; later Jacob called Him "The Angel, the Redeemer." Repeatedly we hear of Him as "The Angel of the Lord," not a created angel, but an uncreated Being. Moses saw Him in the burning bush, and heard His voice. And while He is spoken of as the angel of the Lord, He revealed Himself as Jehovah and made this Name known to Moses. He was with Israel in the wilderness and dwelled with them in the Glory cloud. He guided them, supplied their need, protected them, judged them and overthrew their enemies. To Joshua He appeared and manifested Himself as "The captain over the Lord's hosts." Manoah and his wife saw Him, and witnessed His ascension into heaven, in the smoke and fire of the sacrifice. Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel gazed upon His Glory. All these were but foreshadowings and glimpses of the two great manifestations of the Son of God on earth, as they are necessitated by His work, His manifestation in humiliation and His manifestation in power and glory.

Other Foreshadowings of His Work

But there are other foreshadowings of His work. All the divinely given institutions and many of the historical events recorded in the Old Testament foreshadow His work. History, as recorded in the Old Testament, is the preliminary history of the incarnation. The whole sacrificial system of the levitical priesthood told out beforehand, in many ways, what the great redemptive work of the

Lamb of God was to be. Each offering and sacrifice revealed the different phases of His work on the cross, as well as His holy and spotless humanity. The sufferings of Christ and their meaning for lost sinners were thus made known. From Abel's lamb to the last lamb, which died before the true Lamb of God uttered the never to be forgotten words on the cross, "It is finished," the thousands of lambs and bulls and goats, the innumerable herds of animals slain, were all types of the one great sacrifice, brought on Calvary's cross. The tabernacle in all its appointments, down to the minutest details, had I some meaning in connection with the Person of Him who is "Wonderful" and His wonderful work. And what else could we say of the historical events, such as the Passover, the passage through the Red Sea, the brazen serpent hung up in the wilderness. And to this we might add how men in their experiences, like Isaac, Joseph, David and others foreshadowed the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow.

Direct Prophecies

Still more numerous are the direct prophecies announcing the different phases of the work of Christ. That He should appear as man, how and where He should be born, His life, His service, His miracles, all was repeatedly foretold by the Prophets. But the great mass of predictions concern His sufferings as the sin-bearer and His glories as the King. None of the details of His sufferings were omitted. Think, for instance, of the predictions contained in the xxii Psalm. Death by crucifixion was unknown among the Jewish people. No nation in touch with Israel, living at that time, put human beings to death in that way. It was reserved for cruel Rome to invent death; by crucifixion. Yet in this Psalm there is given by divine inspiration a complete picture of that unknown mode of death by crucifixion. We read of His hands and feet pierced, the bones out of joint, the excessive thirst, the tongue cleaving to the jaws. And so we find His resurrection, His presence with God, His coming again and His Kingdom of Righteousness and Glory foretold in the Prophets.

The Inspiration of the Old Testament

We emphasize these facts of divine foreshadowing and prediction, because in these last days thousands of men have arisen throughout Christendom who boldly deny the inspiration of the Old Testament. They would have us believe that all these wonderful predictions are of human origin. They brand nearly everything as legend, and declare that there are no Messianic predictions in the Bible, that God did not speak to the Prophets concerning His Son and His work. Such a denial of the revelation of God in the Old Testament Scriptures is but the vanguard of the denial of the Son of God and His work. "Denying the Master that bought them" (2 Peter ii:1), is the leading phase of apostate Christendom in the last days. It is Anti-christianity. This denial is preceded by a denial of the written Word of God. The higher criticism, so called, is Satan's leaven which leavens the theological institutions of Christendom and is fully preparing an empty Christian profession for the reception of the Man of Sin. To believe that these marvelous, harmonious predictions and fore-shadowings contained in the Old Testament are the productions of clever men, legends put together by evil men, who claimed to have received them from God, is far more difficult than to believe that they are given by divine revelation.

II.

The Incarnation of the Son of God

And now let us turn to the great truth and fact of the Incarnation of the Son of God. When the fulness of time had come, that is the appointed time, the Son of God appeared on earth in the form of man. The Word which was in the beginning, the Word that was with the Father, the Word that

was God, the Word by whom all things were made, that Word was made flesh and dwelt on earth. He who subsisted in the form of God, emptied Himself and took upon Himself the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men.

The incarnation is a deep mystery, the depths of which human reason can never fathom. We must approach it in the spirit of deep reverence. “Take off thy shoes from thy feet for the ground whereon thou standest is holy ground!” In the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke, we have the record of the divine announcement of the incarnation as it was made to the virgin, who had found favor in the sight of God. As she sat in the house, perhaps engaged in holy meditation, the angel Gabriel appeared unto her with the message from the throne of God. Was there ever such a message given to Gabriel before? Great as the revelation was which he was commissioned to carry to praying Daniel, the communication to the Virgin Mary here is far greater.

The Incarnation Announced

We read in Luke i:35: “And the angel of the Lord said unto her, The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee; therefore also that Holy Thing, which shall be born of thee, shall be called the Son of God.” Let us notice the two great statements given about His incarnation. “The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee.” From the Gospel of Matthew we learn the full meaning of this statement. “That which is begotten in her is of the Holy Ghost.” Therefore His human nature was produced in the virgin by the creative action of the Holy Spirit. Because His human nature was thus produced, it was a nature without sin; not only did He not sin, but He could not sin. He was sinless, absolutely holy, because He was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

The second statement is: “And the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee.” This is not a repetition of the same truth as contained in the first statement. If this too would mean the Holy Spirit, we would have to conclude that the Holy Spirit is the Father of Him who became incarnate. We read at once after this second statement, “Therefore that Holy Thing, which shall be born of thee, shall be called the Son of God.” The power of the Highest does not mean the power of the Holy Spirit. It is none other than the Son of God Himself. The eternal Son of God, He who is God, overshadowed her and this overshadowing meant the union of Himself with the human nature created by the Holy Spirit in the Virgin Mary.

He is called “that Holy Thing.” He is something entirely new, a Being which cannot be classified. And then we read again, “That Holy Thing shall be called the Son of God.” It does not say “shall be the Son of God;” such He ever was. Incarnation did not make Him Son of God. He shall be called Son of God; God manifested in the flesh.

Much time could be spent in adding to these remarks, or in reviewing the different attempts which have been made to explain the great mystery. We might also enumerate all the evil teachings and theories which are the results of attempted explanations. But all this would be but waste of time. No human mind can fathom the depths of the incarnation, nor fully grasp the wonderful personality of the God-Man, the Lord Jesus Christ. Far better it is to abide by these simple declarations of the Word of God, than to enter into speculations, which can never solve this great mystery.

A certain American statesman was once asked, “Can you comprehend how Jesus Christ could be both God and Man?” The great thinker replied, “No, sir; I cannot. And I would be ashamed to acknowledge Him as my Saviour if I could, for then He would not be greater than myself.”

This is very true indeed. With joyful and grateful hearts we believe the great revelation given to us in God’s holy Word, that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son and that the Son of God left Heaven’s Glory and came to this earth. He emptied Himself and appeared in the form of the creature. This, however, does not mean what an evil theory, by the name of “Kenosis,” teaches, that He emptied Himself of His Godhead. He emptied Himself of His outward Glory. The child which rested on the bosom of Mary is the One, who ever was in the bosom of the Father. Listen

once more to the language of the xxii Psalm. “I was cast upon thee from the womb; Thou art my God from my mother’s belly. Thou didst make me hope when I was upon my mother’s breasts.” What mere human child could have ever said this truthfully? Nor is this the language of a poet. The child born in Bethlehem alone could speak thus.

The Foundation of the Gospel

The incarnation is the great foundation of the whole Gospel. No incarnation means no Gospel, no Hope and no God. The person who denies this truth has no right whatever to the name of Christian. At no time has the denial of this great foundation truth been so pronounced and widespread as in our times. Men believing themselves wise, in possession of greater knowledge than former generations, turn their backs upon revelation. The miracle, including the incarnation, is denied. And this denial is not from the side of outspoken infidels alone, but those who profess to be teachers of Christianity are the foremost leaders in it. We mention Reginald Campbell and his followers in the so-called “New Theology.” And the hundreds of evangelical preachers, who wished this man Godspeed during his recent visit to America, who passed resolutions of thanks, after listening to his subtle infidelity, are, in the light of 2 John 10, partakers of his sin. And then there is that Anti-Christian system, known by the name of Christian Science. In its so-called philosophical, in reality, satanic utterances, it opposes the revelation of God and denies that Jesus Christ is come into the flesh. That evil book, “Science and Health,” to which we readily accord inspiration, not from above, but from below, teaches “The Virgin Mary conceived the idea of God and gave to her ideal the name of Jesus;” and again “Jesus was the offspring of Mary’s self-communion with God.”

It is a comfort to believers in these evil days to remember, that such a rejection of the doctrine of Christ, His Person and His work, is predicted in the Bible to take place immediately before the Lord comes. The end of the age is upon us. These denials will not decrease, but become more numerous.

The Purpose of the Incarnation

And what was the purpose of the incarnation? By incarnation the invisible God was made known to man. The Lord Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God. No man hath seen God at any time, the only Begotten, who is in the bosom of the Father, hath declared Him. As One with the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ could say, “Whosoever seeth Me, seeth the Father.”

The attributes of God were made known by Him in incarnation. We behold the holiness of God in that holy life, which was lived on earth to glorify the Father. He manifested omniscience. He knew what was in men and knew their thoughts. He manifested the power of God in controlling the forces of nature, commanding the wind and the waves, turning water into wine. He had power over disease, over the demons and over death. He revealed the Love and the compassion of God.

By incarnation the Son of God brought likewise the Word of God to man. “God who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the Fathers by the Prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son” (Hebrews 1:1). He confirmed the Law and the Prophets, therefore all criticism of the Old Testament attacks the authority and infallibility of the Son of God. He also revealed the will of God, made known the Father and the fact of eternal life, and the eternal and conscious punishment of the wicked. He predicted the great future events concerning Himself and His Kingdom, the end of the age and His visible Return.

The incarnation was necessary in anticipation of His work as the Priest of His people. He was to be after His death on the cross and after resurrection, the merciful and faithful High Priest. Such He is now. He took part of flesh and blood, we read in the second chapter of Hebrews, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest. He was tempted in all things as we are, with the exception of sin. He suffered in being tempted so that He might be touched with the feeling of our infirmities and

succour them that are tempted. And all He was to be and is now, the Second Man, the last Adam, the head of the church, the head of the new creation, all and much else necessitated His incarnation.

What Incarnation could not Accomplish

However, the great purpose of the incarnation of the Son of God was His work of redemption. For this great purpose He came into the world. He came that, after a life, which completely glorified the Father and upheld His holy law and vindicated God's rights as the lawgiver, He might accomplish the great work of atonement. John stated this great work the Son of God came to do in a brief sentence, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." Sin, that accursed thing, had to be taken out of the way. Propitiation for sins had to be made. A sacrifice had to be brought which would glorify a holy God and satisfy, as well as exalt, His righteousness. Peace had to be made. The sins of many had to be paid and the full penalty of them to be borne.

Incarnation in itself, the marvelous and ever blessed humiliation of the Son of God by taking on the human form, His holy blessed life, His loving words, words of life and peace, yea, all He did in deeds of love and compassion could never accomplish this. Incarnation brought God to Man, but could never bring man back to a holy God. Incarnation could not make an end of sin, nor make it possible for a righteous God to show mercy to the fallen and the lost, in a righteous way. This great work of redemption could only be accomplished by His death on the cross. For this He had come. He came to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. The Author and Prince of Life came that He might give His Life a ransom for many. The good Shepherd appeared to give His life for the sheep. By His death alone, the great work of redemption could be accomplished.

III.

His work on the Cross and What has been Accomplished by It

And now let us consider His work on the cross and what has been accomplished by it. But who is able to speak worthily of this theme of all themes? Who can fathom the solemn yet blessed fact, the death of the Son of God on the cross? What tongue or pen can describe the sad, yet glorious truth, that the Just One died for the unjust, that Christ died for the ungodly! He who knew no sin was made sin for us! And what human mind can estimate the wonderful results of His work on the cross!

Some Christians speak as if the death on the cross, the work accomplished there, is so fully known to them, that they do not need any more instruction on it. They tell us that they search for deeper things. There can be nothing deeper than the death of God's Son on the cross. Depths are here which are unfathomable. We must ever turn back to the cross. Always we shall learn something new. With unspeakable Glory upon us and greater glory before us in eternal ages to come, the cross of Christ and the Lamb of God which has taken away the sin of the world can never be forgotten. But we shall never know what that death on the cross meant for Him and what it meant to God.

Made Sin for Us

In Hebrews x we read of the sacrifices which were offered by the Jews year after year. These sacrifices could not take away sin. Then He, the Son of God, stepped forward and made His great declaration. Coming into the world He saith, "Sacrifice and offering Thou wouldest not, but a body hast Thou prepared me. In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sins Thou hadst no pleasure" (verses 4-5). The body prepared puts before us again the fact of incarnation. That body was a prepared body, a holy body, an undefiled body, a body in which sin could not dwell and on which death had no claim. But when He took on that body, He likewise said: "Lo? come to do Thy will, O God." In the tenth verse we read, "By the which will (the will of God, which dates back before the foundation of the

world), we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” Through the eternal Spirit He offered Himself without spot to God. The holy Lamb of God, with no spot or blemish upon Him, shed His precious blood on the cross, to procure redemption. But what it all meant for Him who was as truly Man as He is God! Here was a Being perfectly holy, One who had always pleased God and did His will, yea, His meat and drink was to do the will of Him that sent Him. Sin was the horrible defiling thing to Him. He, too, like the holy God, hated and hates sin. And yet such a One was made sin for us. He had to stand in the place of guilty sinners and all the waves and billowy of divine judgment and wrath had to pass over Him. He drank the cup of wrath to the last drop. He suffered in a fourfold way.

1. **In Himself.** Before He ever approached the garden of Gethsemane, He was troubled in His spirit. We hear Him say, “Now my soul is troubled – Father, save me from this hour, but for this cause came I to this hour.” He looked on towards the cross. And why that agony in the garden? Why was His sweat as it were great drops of blood? Why the repeated prayer, “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me?” How many dishonoring explanations have been written of the Gethsemane suffering, as if He was afraid to die or that the devil tried to kill Him there to prevent his death on the cross, and that He feared the devil. But what was it? He suffered in Himself. His holy soul shrank from that which a holy God must hate, that which He hated – SIN. He was about to be made sin and He knew no sin. What suffering this produced in the Holy One of God to take all upon Himself and to stand in the sinner’s place before a holy sin-hating God, our poor finite minds cannot realize.

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