

SUNDAY MORNING NO. 26

Acts 2. —We still live under the dispensation of divine wisdom which was announced on the day of Pentecost, when Peter called upon the Jews to repent and be baptised for the remission of sins, that they might become heirs of the grace or favour, which he told them in another place—(1 Pet. 1:14)—would be “*brought unto them at the revelation of Jesus Christ.*” Though not of the seed of Abraham according to the flesh, we are related to the Pentecostian summons, inasmuch as by the mouth of that same apostle, the salvation which was offered to the Jews, was afterwards extended to the Gentiles, when he went to the house of Cornelius. We can rejoice to know that the Gentiles may become fellow heirs of the same glorious things with the Jews themselves, and look forward with them to those times of refreshing, which shall come from the presence of the Lord, when He shall send Jesus Christ.

It is in connection with this hope that Peter exclaims, “*Be converted;*” that is, be changed from what we are by nature; be changed from grovelling worms, having no hope beyond the present state of things; be changed from children, who follow after the lusts that are in the world, and who recognise no higher law than their own interests and inclinations; be changed from these things, that our sins may be blotted out when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord; as much as to say, that in some sense, our sins will not be blotted out until the Lord comes. Our sins are now forgiven us for Christ’s sake (1 John 2:12), but they cannot be said to be finally blotted out until all their effects cease; until we are delivered from this afflicted state in which sin reigns unto death. Our sins will be in every sense blotted out when weakness and death are no longer experienced by us, and when we rejoice in the immaculate nature of the spirit.

Yet, in another sense, may we look forward to the coming of the Lord for the blotting out of our sins. None of us will know till then how we stand in the regards of Christ. We may know that so far as we are able, we are following the course divinely prescribed. We may understand and believe the truth, and strive to follow out the commands of the spirit, and on the whole, have the answer of a good conscience. At the same time, it is Christ’s thoughts concerning us that will determine our position. Our own thoughts in this matter are not a certain guide. As Paul says:

“*Not he that commendeth himself is approved, but whom the Lord commendeth.*”

Since, then, we know not till the Lord come whether He approve us, and whether He overlook our offences, the coming of the Lord may justly be regarded as the great crisis of the question of the blotting out of our sins. We shall then know the divine estimate of our present career.

The Lord seeth not as man seeth. His thoughts are higher than ours, as heaven is high above the earth. For this reason, we cannot judge ourselves in the sense of forming a reliable estimate of our course. We may judge ourselves in the sense of taking ourselves to task, and inspecting ourselves in the light of the word; but that the conclusions we shall come to will be correct, does not follow. The Lord will settle this. May we be included in the gracious words addressed to Israel:

“*I have blotted out as a cloud thy transgressions, and as a thick cloud thy sins: Return unto Me, for I have redeemed thee.*”—(Isa. 44:22.)

This will be “*refreshing*” to all to whom it belongs. The coming of Jesus Christ will bring refreshing for all who are hungering and thirsting after righteousness. There is little to refresh at the present time. This is the time of absence of all divine interposition; we see not the arm of the Lord outstretched, as in ancient days.

We are surrounded by an evil generation, who have no fear of God before their eyes; who set at nought everything that God has done; and who regard the Jewish history as a polluted thing, and divine operations as a myth. The things upon which we most set our hearts are a scorn to our neighbour. The blessed hope is despised. We are strangers and pilgrims. We have here no continuing city. We seek one to come; and, in a sense, we are on a pilgrimage to it. A pilgrim is one who travels from one place to another, and who traverses in his journey a strange country, in which he is not at home, and which he seeks to get through with all due celerity. This is our case, if we are true men in Christ. We are in the world, but not of it, nor at home in it. Lot's wife set out, but stopped. So with us, some are travelling with an earnest; some are not. They are not all Israel that are of Israel. This was the case among Israel after the flesh, and it certainly is the case with Israel after the spirit, for Paul himself, in the days of his ministration, gave testimony to that effect, speaking of some, even with weeping, who served not the Lord Jesus, but minded earthly things—seeking their own, and not the things that were Christ's.

If this was so in the dispensation of the spirit, we need not wonder at anything in this line we may experience in these days of silence and darkness. The man who is really travelling, is living in the present time for the future. Before him, in his "*inward parts*," is a fixed purpose, not intelligible to carnal contemporaries. Deeply rooted is a principle of action invisible to the eyes of such as know not God. This class, at present outcast in society, will at the appointed time be made to prevail by the compulsion of Omnipotence. At present there is no divine interference at all beyond the secret ways of providence. All men—without and within—are suffered to walk after their own way, till the Lord come, who shall make manifest the hidden things of darkness.

As pilgrims, we have a pilgrim's experience. Going through the desert, he is often subject to privation for want of water. What water he has, he carries in a bottle. There is no spring by the way. That is just our predicament. We sojourn in a dry and thirsty land. We have our bottle, but unlike the ordinary pilgrim's bottle, it is an inexhaustible bottle—the Bible: we can renew our strength continually by reading. We sit down to the Bible, and we hear God speak. What though His words are not audible? They mean the same as if we heard with the ear. With the daily use of this bottle, the pilgrim is enabled to endure the thirst of the wilderness. In the wilderness, also, there are hovering vultures and ravening wolves, ready to devour; skeletons also, of camels lying in the way, and telling the pilgrim of the perils of his path. The pilgrim has to be on the continual look-out. He has to observe a defensiveness that is not compatible with ease. He cannot indulge in much joy, one of the principal conditions of which is repose and security. In these respects, we find a pilgrim's life in the world at the present time. Then the penetrating sand comes blowing about the pilgrim's tent, making every object rough to handle, and even getting into the food. This has its parallel in the disagreeables of intercourse with sinners, unwashed or otherwise, and the discussions and precautions to which sanctified intelligence would not stoop, but for the necessities of an evil situation.

All these things make the pilgrim long for the time of refreshing. It is one comfort to know that the pilgrimage must, in any case, be short; however disagreeable, however bitter, however difficult to endure, it will come to an end. Others before us have had to grapple with the same difficulties, who, pressing towards the same mark of the prize of the high calling, in faith and patience, and perseverance—not being put off by their untoward experience, have worked out for themselves a portion in the glorious age.

Paul is, perhaps, the best illustration of this. His troubles were great. We can read them in his letters to the Corinthians.

He was "*troubled on every side, yet not distressed; perplexed but not in despair; persecuted but not forsaken; cast down but not destroyed.*"

He had many physical dangers to encounter. He was often in peril by land and sea, from his own countrymen, in peril among false brethren, besides having the anxieties incident to the care of all the ecclesias. Then his course was embittered by the uprise of false apostles, who secured the ear of the disaffected and the envious, and many that were not so; succeeding to so great an extent, that “*all Asia*” was at one time turned away from him. This experience caused him to condescend, or to play the fool, in personal vindication. He says to the Corinthians,

“I am become a fool in glorying; ye have compelled me: for I ought to have been commended of you, for in nothing am I behind the very chiefest apostles, though I be nothing.”

His, Paul’s, was a very bitter career, but Paul is now at rest. Long before we appeared on the scene—ages before we had begun to know the existence of evil—1800 years ago, Paul fell asleep, and has been quietly resting in the bosom of God all the time. When he awakes, as he will do shortly, I hope we shall see his face with gladness. He will know nothing of the long dreary interval we are helping to fill up. He will awake as from a deep sleep, tranquil and invigorated.

In a few short years, the times of the Gentiles will have culminated in the glory of the Lord revealed. This very year may witness the Lord’s reappearance on the earth. Hence our pilgrimage can be but of short duration. But apart from that, our course will soon be over. Life at the longest is a short and troubled dream. The austerities of the desert will soon be no more for us. Our groans will cease, and our voices will be hushed in the grave, and that to us will be the instant vision of the lord, for in death there is no knowledge of time. We shall seem to close our eyes, and reopen them instantly in strength, to behold the realised expectation of Job, when the Redeemer shall stand, in the latter days, upon the earth. Our course, then, is to wait; endure with patience the race set before us. The time of refreshing will come from the presence of the Lord, though they tarry. Refreshing will they be, because the Lord will be there, the head and fountain of all authority, His word settling everything; His law going to the end of the earth creating righteousness; and bestowing blessings to the ends of the earth. We shall regale ourselves with refreshment to the full; for the Lord, who will bring the refreshing, will give us a nature capable of drinking it all in, and tiring not.

In the present body of our humiliation, enjoyment is ephemeral. We cannot stand it long; it consumes the brain fibre in which it is generated, and leaves us dull and irresponsive. But when we shall be in spirit nature, we shall be strong and clear, and efficient in all our faculties. We shall feel that readiness, and comfort, and ease of intercourse which it is not permitted us to realise in a high degree at the present time. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. A week’s toil consumes the energies, and incapacitates for even social activity; and brethren are backward and awkward often from sheer lack of physical pith, to act and express the sentiments of their hearts. When these times of refreshing come, this will all be changed. Every one will be full of strength, and, therefore, full of joy.

The main business now is to steer such a course as will ensure our entrance therein. This course must needs be much of a solitary course; that is, we must rely for ourselves on the high calling. We must not depend upon anybody. We must not look leaningly anywhere but on high. The steadfastness of our career must not depend upon other attractions or inducements outside the world; neither must we be impeded by obstructions coming from others. We must continue to the very end, in the love of God and faith of the promises. To this end, we must keep the company of the word in daily reading.

Divine approval is only to be obtained in one way; that is, walking by faith, as in the sight of Him who is invisible. It is this that overcometh the world, even our faith; and faith is the substance of things hoped for. It is a picture in the mind of good things to come, and great things now existing, even the Father and our Lord Jesus. That picture has been drawn on the

tablets of our hearts by the pencil of the spirit—the word of the Lord; and that which puts it there must keep it there; for unlike ordinary pictures, it has to be constantly renewed. The canvas upon which it is drawn is of such a nature as to absorb into itself whatever is placed on its surface. The impression of yesterday is weaker than that of today. Hence, the picture pencilled by the spirit has to be renewed continually with the colours of the spirit; that is to say, we must for ourselves be continual readers of the word. By that process, we get to feel one with those who have gone before; one with that which is coming; and least in unison of all with the present.

Now, this is a matter which, in its essence, is exceedingly simple; but, in our position, may be made exceedingly complex. The case of Abraham—the father of the faithful—illustrates the simplicity of the matter. Faith in God's promises, and obedience to His commandments, are exhibited as the sum of acceptable walk and conversation. By this simple course was Abraham acceptable before God. That which makes the matter apparently less simple to us, is that we live in a day when the truth does not come to us in the direct way in which it got at Abraham. It comes to us in a complication of related circumstances requiring extrication. We have around us an ecclesiastical system of many forms and doctrines, the claims of which have to be put to the test and seen through. This involves mental labour, and effort has to be put forth to deliver ourselves from the bondage of the system.

Then the truth comes to us—not in the language in which it was written, but through a translation; consequently the intent of the original often comes into question, and matters of controversy are propounded which appear to be deep and real to the superficial apprehension, but which, so far as faith towards God is concerned, and the obedience with which He is well pleased, are so much mere encrustation. Critical knowledge, an acquaintance with the classics, and all that sort of thing, is, after all, adventitious to the real matter. A man might spend his whole life over dictionaries and lexicons, &c., and miss the reality in the end. The real thing is the reception, with full assurance of faith, and love of the promises of God and His commandments, which constitute the simplicity that is in Christ. Let us strive after this. It is exceedingly simple. The fear of God, the love of Christ, hope in His word, obedience of His commandments, will enable us to stand in the great day of account, when a knowledge of dialectics, and the understanding of all mysteries, will pale and wither before the brightness of the rising sun.

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Sunday Morning No. 26
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