

THIS PRESENT EVIL WORLD

We have come together for edification. That means building up; and that implies that we get into a broken down and dilapidated state, requiring building up again. That is true. There is very much in our daily life at present to pull down the structure of faith reared in our minds by the Word understood and believed. A built-up state of mind is a comfortable state of mind. The opposite state of mind is a tormenting state of mind—the being uncertain or in doubt with regard to anything important to us.

The built-up state is a thing of conditions; that is, it is the result of powerful reasons before our mind. To feel the built-up state strongly, we must see clearly the reasons that produce it. When sight is dim, people put on glasses to improve the sight. This we do in the present case by the reading and rehearsal of the facts connected with the truth of God. But sometimes there is dust on the glasses. In this case the sight may not be much improved—perhaps made weaker. The first thing is to rub off the dust.

The dust takes various shapes. One form of it is connected with our own individual feelings. We are all burdened in mind and body—some in one way, some in another. Each man knows the plague of his own heart, and the distress of his own particular infirmity. In this connection we are liable to make two mistakes. We are liable to suppose that other people are not afflicted as we are, because we do not feel other people's troubles, and because those other people if they are of the truly civilised stamp, act habitually on the commandment to hide our troubles. But the second mistake is the more obscuring kind of dust. And that is the mistake of allowing our troubled feelings make us think the Truth less true when we are comfortable and bright. We must take firm ground against ourselves here. We must say to ourselves "Now, remember, the Truth in no way depends upon you or your feelings. It was true before you were born, and cannot be altered in any way by what you may feel. You may feel depressed, and sometimes as if the Truth were far away, but remember that the Truth is a thing outside of you altogether—a thing independent of you. In a sense you have nothing to do with it." Your feelings belong to those native infirmities of constitution which entitle you to disown them, and say—

"It is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me."

Your dull and tinged feelings are mere dust on the glass, which you must wipe off while you try to look at the great and glorious things of God.

Next, you are liable to have your vision impaired by altogether inaccurate views of the nature of life. The world looms large in your eye, as a bright, active, living, reality and the Bible is apt to seem a very insignificant thing by the side of it. In this, things are not what they seem. You must educate yourself to pierce through misleading appearances. The world is not so real as it seems. What does James say?

"That our life is but as a vapour that appeareth for a very little time, and then vanisheth away."

We know this to be true in the individual case. Follow any man's life long enough, and it bursts and disappears like a bubble in the water at last. There is no exception. Now, if this is true of one life, it is true of the fifteen hundred millions of lives that go to constitute the world, only that it takes a little longer time to see. It is all a picture that is passing. There is no reality in it. It seems real for the moment; it is not real; it will soon have vanished. It is part of intelligence to discern this. It enables us to see the Truth in its own real character.

How much more powerful is this consideration when it comes home upon us in the sudden removal of a brother we loved, as in the case of Brother Smith last week. He was at work on Wednesday week, and now he lies cold and still at home waiting that ceremony of interment which it will be our duty to perform tomorrow. He was not an old man; he was a

young man, only 26, the very last we should have expected to lose in this sudden way. It shows the youngest are never safe, and that, therefore, as regards the rest of us, who may be getting on in life, there is always the possibility of the curtain dropping upon the finished drama of our life any day. That is, the time lying ahead may be very short for us—in any case, in any event. We are watching the signs of the times, but if we go off like Brother Smith, the Lord will hurry upon our vision without another token, and we shall find ourselves before His judgment seat without another opportunity. It will seem so to us if we die, however long in actual time it may be. In such an event, the great and busy world around us will seem to burst into nonentity in a moment like a gigantic bubble. This is no fancy. It is a matter of fact always impending. We are always on the verge of this great change, and we never know when it will descend upon us. How unwise then to act as if the world around us were stable. How wise to act as Brother Smith acted, earnest, active, diligent in the things of God. How unwise to say as some people say, “Wait a little: by and by, I will give my attention to the things that belong to Christ.” By and by? There may never be a “by and by” for us. The Bible word is always “Now.” Who can be sure he will be alive next week? Who can be sure but that the world will have passed away by then for us as it has for Brother Smith?

Thus we rub off the dust that usually prevents the clear perception of the relative proportions of life we now live in the flesh, and the life from which we are never further away than the few days we may have to live. We are thus enabled to look more clearly and with a more earnest attention at the things exhibited in the Scriptures of Truth. Those things are in a very living form. The Bible is not a dreamy speculative book. It is a record of fact and experience throughout, whether in the exodus from Egypt or the work of the apostle Paul. Through such an active living medium God is revealed, and His will and purpose expressed. This morning it is Paul in his epistle to the Galatians. There is no part of the Word more calculated to bring before us the actual stirring nature of the work he had in hand than this, and nothing more calculated to impart to a sense of the actual authorship of Paul in what we have read. There are some parts of the Bible which, by a stretch of the imagination, we might concede might possibly have been written by other than the ostensible writers. But such a supposition is a moral impossibility in this case. A forging writer, sitting down to write a letter professedly by Paul which Paul never had written, could never be imagined to write such a passage as this:

“When Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed, for before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles, but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them that were of the circumcision. And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him, insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with the dissimulation. But when I saw that they walked not according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter,” etc.

A fictitious writer of a fictitious epistle would write his epistle for the sake of supporting the reputation of the Christian faith; whereas here is a finding fault with the leading apostle to whom had been given the keys of the Kingdom of heaven. This is inexplicable except on the principle that it is the actual writing of Paul, who writes for the sake of the Truth alone. All the evidence outside of the epistle tells us it was his, and this kind of internal character is conclusive. It is a picture to the life of the busy living work that went on in the first century—a divine work though in the hands of human frailty. Here you have Paul (Ch. 1:2) speaking of *“all the brethren that are with me, and the ecclesias that are in Galatia.”* It was a work that had been going on for a considerable time, for you have him saying (Ch. 2:1) *“Fourteen years afterwards, I went up again to Jerusalem.”*

What was it that kept so many earnest men actively at work for many years in the first century? He tells us here. It was an affair emanating from God, the very first verse, *“not of*

men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead.” It was a faith which he says (v.23), “*once I destroyed,*” but now preach “*the gospel,*” he says (v.11), “*which is preached by me . . . I neither received it of men, neither was I taught it but by the revelation of Jesus Christ*”—“*not in a corner,*” as he said before Agrippa, but in open day, in the presence of witnesses, in a form that overpowered them all, and left its mark on him in particular in the blinding of his eyes (Acts 26:26, 13; 9:17-18).

There is one expression made use of by Paul in explaining the object of the work of Christ, upon which I desire to fix special attention, as propounding a truth which is not generally received, yet which becomes glaringly true when the eyes are fully open, and the recognition of which is of the utmost help in our passage through the difficult life of probation. I refer to the statement of Galatians 1:4.

“He gave himself for our sins that he might deliver us from this present evil world.”

Paul, by the word of inspiration, here declares the present world to be evil. Most men proceed upon the hypothesis that it is not evil, but “the best of all possible worlds” to use a phrase greatly current among the “wise” of these modern times. We are all liable to share this impression more or less, because we are all such poor judges of what a good world is, and are all so naturally in sympathy with what is in vogue with flesh and blood—like Peter, “*savouring not the things that be of God but those that be of men.*” But even with all our natural bias in its favour, we are bound to discover that the present world is an evil world that cannot be cured by man. Let our experience be long enough, and we shall infallibly come to the days when we shall say,

“I have no pleasure in them.”

That is, we shall find out that the flower of life that looks and smells so beautifully in youth is a withering flower, and even in its unwithered state is not the beautiful thing it seems. There is an amount of weakness and pain and ineffectiveness of all kinds and failures and disappointments that are incompatible with a good state. We find that in ourselves we are not so good as we wish to be, nor have we the wisdom and understanding and clearheadedness and memory which are essential to a state of true wellbeing. Our day is clouded; our plant is blighted; our light is dim; our strength is small; our faculties most limited, while all around us we see the ocean of immeasurable power and wisdom. Neither in ourselves nor our neighbours can we find the satisfaction for which we yearn. Our life is well called the days of our vain life. Only give us long enough, the brightest and strongest at last endorse the verdict of the wisest of men “*all is vanity and vexation of spirit.*”

If such is our experience of individual life—if we find our state an evil state individually, what shall we say of the human race collectively? What shall we say of the world as organised socially and politically? Here it is essentially, radically, manifestly and oppressively an evil world and nothing else. The great mass of mankind are lacking the most elementary conditions of wellbeing. Even the supply of the common necessities of life is pared down to the most demoralising minimum. What marvel that they lack those higher conditions of mental culture and goodness which are only attainable with needful leisure and guidance. The population is not happy. It is not good. It is not intelligent. It is degraded and unkind to an extent little dreamed of by merely natural philanthropists. It is an ungodly, wicked, brutal, evil world, which can be seen only in its true character when compared with the angels to whom the human world originally belongs, and to whom Christ says the world to come will be assimilated.

The work of Christ is to “deliver us from this present evil world.” It is well to accept the fact, once for all, that the world in which we dwell is an evil world, and that we cannot alter it, either individually or collectively. It will save us much futile work and disappointment. It will interpret our own experiences correctly to us, and put us into the right

relation to the drift of things. It will keep us from the attitude of bootlessly looking for good that can never come now. It will lead us to accept cordially and heartily the position to which the gospel invites us as “strangers and pilgrims, passing the time of our sojourning here in fear”—fear of being implicated in the universal corruption—fear of coming short of the divine favour. It will lead us to set that light store on the things which are seen and temporal, which Paul recommends, and which Christ commands.

“Take no thought (i.e. anxious care), saying, What shall we eat? Or, What shall we drink? Or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (for after all these things do the Gentiles seek), for your Heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.”

The glory of the Truth over all systems of human wisdom lies here that while it most frankly and plainly declares the evil nature of the time in which we live, it tells us the reason of the evil in the current departure from God, and it gives us a pledge of another time to come when there shall be no evil—for which time it bids us to labour in submission to God in the way He has made known. Human wisdom has to admit the evil, but offers no explanation of it, and as for the future, can only surmise that it will be what the past has been, or at the best can only utter an indefinite nebulous notion to the effect that there may be a better state in some “Far-off-time” of which we can know nothing, either as to its nature or as to our individual relation thereto. Human wisdom leaves us in utter darkness: divine wisdom brings us into glorious light. And the matter so stands that there can be no question as to which is really wisdom. For while human wisdom is the mere irresponsible maunderings of human ignorance, divine wisdom is the authenticated utterance of eternal power, “*by many infallible proofs*” “*at sundry times and divers manners.*” It is no affair of tradition or opinion of the speculation; it is an affair of accomplished and visible facts and achievements that cannot be blotted from the history of the world.

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Pages 433-438

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