

SUNDAY MORNING NO. 161

A great many are, in various parts of the earth, engaged as we are engaged this morning; and from week to week for centuries past, have men been found assembling themselves thus, around this spread table, to eat bread and drink wine, and to speak one to another. Suppose a stranger, unacquainted with the meaning and origin of this exercise were to walk into our midst, he would be at a loss to comprehend our object. He would naturally enquire, Why do you do this? What good do you get in coming together in this quiet way and going through such a very tame performance? We should be pleased, doubtless, to be asked such a question. It would be a real pleasure to answer it.

Our answer would take us a long way back, and lead us to speak of the things we have expressly come together to call to mind this morning. We should have to tell him, we do this because Christ has said—

“Do this in remembrance of me.”

If he asked who was Christ that he should be thus remembered, we should have to tell him that he was a man begotten of the power of God in the family of David in Judea, 1800 years ago, in fulfilment of a promise God had made long before—that He would raise unto David a Righteous Branch, —a King who should reign and prosper in the earth. If he asked, Did he reign and prosper in the earth, we should have to answer, No, he was despised and rejected of men—a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief. If he asked, What became of him, we should have to sorrowfully confess that he was taken by the authorities and executed as a public criminal. If he said, Why do you call such a man to mind, we should have to say, “God raised him from the dead, and took him away from the earth to die no more.” If he asked, Of what advantage is that to you, we should have to inform him that though gone to heaven, he was coming again to deliver from death and evil all who believed in him and obeyed him; and that because of this he had commanded his friends to—

“Do this until he come.”

If he was further inquisitive and asked, Why did God allow His own Son to be prevailed against by wicked men, instead of defending him against them all, and establishing him as king triumphant, we should have to explain to him that that was God’s providential way of bringing about what He had appointed—viz., that Christ should be made an offering for sin, suffering rejection and death before entering into his glory; further, that there was a need for this in the necessity there was that God’s authority and love should be established in the sight of men as the foundation of God’s goodwill to men. We should have to explain to him that in the death of Christ (at the hands of men who, with wicked hands, had him crucified and slain), sin was publicly condemned in its own flesh, and the righteousness of God declared, with the result of establishing a propitiatory or meeting point between God and man, and enabling God to be “*just and the justifier of him that believes in Jesus*” so crucified and raised.

We could not expect him to understand these things at one rehearsal. We should at all events edify and strengthen our own minds in such an exhibition of the unseen realities represented by this table which has been the meeting point of the friends of Christ for ages past. Often have the saints been so edified in their generations; and much do they stand in need of it. Apart from this renewal of their faith, they are liable to grow “*weary and faint in their minds.*” They have the misfortune, for the time being, of appearing to nurse phantoms and chimeras, while the world all outside appear to be securing the substance. The fact is contrary to the appearance. The things of Christ are the only enduring realities: the affairs of the present evil world are but the appearance of a moment. You see this if you consider how completely vanished from the face of the earth are the men and the affairs of three or four generations ago. Time has taken them all away: and the same time that took them is bearing us also along on its broad and rapid-flowing current, and will shortly fling us over the same precipice into the same abyss of oblivion. The time that is thus against all human things as they now are, is on the side of the things that belong to Christ. It is hurrying the world on to the time for those things to be manifest upon the earth; and when those things come, they will remain: they will endure for ever.

God has appointed that in the attitude of waiting for them, His people should be comforted. For this reason the breaking of bread has been appointed. For this reason His word has been given.

We have been reading portions of His word this morning. Every time we read it we experience the truth of Paul's declaration, that it is able to thoroughly furnish the man of God to every good work. That is, it so strengthens him in his convictions and enlightens him in his perceptions, that he feels himself equipped for the energetic performance of the part that belongs to him as a stranger and a pilgrim, having here no continuing city. We shall glance, with this object, at a leading feature or two of what has come under our notice.

We have had the interesting story of Naaman, who was cured of his leprosy by Elisha. Naaman heard that Elisha could do this thing; so he came to the outside of Elisha's house with a great equipage, expecting Elisha to come out and attend to him with the ceremonial deference due to his rank. Elisha did not come out, but sent a message to him downstairs. At this, the great man was greatly affronted, and went away in a rage. Just what the great people of our day would do under similar circumstances. But wasn't it rude on the part of Elisha? No; the favour asked was a favour from God; and the rich people may have God's favours if they will humble themselves as little children, but not if they elevate themselves on a pedestal of foolish pride. This requires sometimes to be put to the test. In Naaman's case an apparent want of civility in the mode of conveying the desired information furnished all the test that was needed. Naaman found it severe enough, and was likely to fail under it. A little common sense expostulation from his servants, however, rallied his reason, and brought him to the wise decision to comply with the prophet's directions. The truth may come to a man in this way—without personal blandishment or customary deferences. The question from a rich man, "*What must I do to be saved?*" may receive its answer in a way calculated to test the question whether he is a self-worshipper or a worshipper of God. It may hurt his dignity, but prove his faith. If he is a wise man, he will not look at manners, but matters. If in the weakness of human nature, his first impulse be to "*go away in a rage,*" his feelings on reflection will subside, and give way to the suggestion of reason that perhaps it is the answer of health that comes to him in a manner so little soothing to his personal complacency.

Elisha's direction to Naaman was, that he was to dip himself seven times in the river Jordan. He rebelled against the absurdity of such a remedy. Were not the rivers of Syria as good as Jordan—ay, better? No doubt, as regarded natural power to cure leprosy, one water was as good as another, and that was, no good at all. The waters of Jordan were as innocent of healing power as all the waters of Syria. Why, then, was Jordan prescribed?

"That God in all things may be glorified."

This is the solution of much that is enigmatical in the Scriptures to the natural man. Jordan was the river of the land of the God of Israel, and to have Naaman cured there, instead of in the river of Abana, was to illustrate and proclaim that there was no God in all the earth but the God of Israel, whom Israel themselves were forsaking for the stupidities of Baal.

Naaman went: he undressed and dipped. At the first dip, there was no result. He dipped again: still no result. So with the third, fourth, and fifth. At the sixth, he was still uncured. The curing power was not in the water. It was in God, who made the receiving of the cure conditional on compliance with His appointment. At the seventh time, his diseased flesh was healed in a moment, and became as the flesh of a little child, because God, by the prophet, had told him to dip seven times. When obedience was complete, the blessing came. Is it not so with regard to the institutions of the gospel? We are commanded to believe, to be baptised, and to patiently observe the commandments of Christ as the rule of our life during our probation in this mortal state: and on these conditions, we are assured that God will cure us of the disease of death from which we are suffering. We believe, but we are as before. We are baptised, but still salvation waits. We patiently continue in well-doing, and still we remain frail, mortal, dying men. Shall we be discouraged? Suppose Naaman had got out of the water at the sixth immersion because he found no change, would he not have acted the part of folly and forfeited the blessing? It is not in belief to save us; nor in baptism, nor in obedience. It is in God alone, but He has appointed these as the conditions which He requires at our hand. They are, therefore, all-important to us. We must fulfil them to the full. We must continue in them. We must finish our course; and in due time, we shall experience the sweet result in the cure of our mortal flesh, of which Naaman's was but a type. Our flesh will come again as a child's—as an angel's—to remain such without change. This mortal putting on immortality will secure for us the fresh life and joy of youth for ever. It will be the work of God because of our compliance with His appointments in Christ. These appointments are such on the face of them as to appear foolish in the eyes of men, because they

are such in themselves as are incapable of yielding the results proposed. There is an object in this which Paul has explained.

"The weak things of this world and things despised, yea and things that are not hath God chosen, to bring to nought the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His sight, according as it is written, Let him that glorieth glory in the Lord."

The succeeding incidents in the case—Naaman's proffered but refused recompense—Gehazi's deceitful acceptance—his discovery, &c., would be also interesting to consider: but we must hasten on with the hasting time. We look at the chapter read from Jeremiah's Lamentations. It is a piercing wail that comes pealing down the corridors of time. It is one that must evoke a sympathetic response in every heart that is truly in love with the hope of Israel. It is, of course, naturally not possible for us to feel so intensely as Jeremiah did, the grief that harrowed his soul, and to which he here gives such fervid expression. We have not seen what he saw. We have not known the blessedness of living in a system of things wholly divine. Jeremiah lived in a land and among a people who, however far from a true submission to God's will, were under the unfurled banner of divine law and wisdom. Israel was a people—holiness to the Lord. Their laws and institutions were divine and unalterable, and beautiful as divine. Jerusalem was the visible enthronement of Yahweh's name and majesty, to the presence of which, three times in the year, the people were required to come for a fortnight's holiday, to worship and feast, and to rejoice before the Lord.

We have known nothing of this. We are accustomed to the dreariness of human law in every country. We have become grimly inured to the desolation of Yahweh's land, the dispersion of his people, the nullity of his laws and institutions. But when Jeremiah wrote, this was (to him) a new experience. The glory and the comfort of Jerusalem had all been just engulfed in ruin and desolation. We can understand with what poignant feelings Jeremiah would write these words:

"How doth the city sit solitary that was full of people! How is she become as a widow! She that was great among the nations and princes among the provinces, how is she become tributary. . . . The ways of Zion do mourn, because none come to the solemn feasts: all her gates are desolate: her priests sigh: her virgins are afflicted, and she is in bitterness. Her adversaries are the chief: her enemies prosper: for the Lord hath afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions: her children are gone into captivity before the enemy. . . . She came down wonderfully: she had no comforter! O Lord, behold my affliction: for the enemy hath magnified himself. . . . The law is no more: her prophets also find no vision from the Lord. The elders of the daughter of Zion sit upon the ground and keep silence. . . . For these things, I weep; mine eye runneth down with water."

Well, if we cannot join in the demonstrative ardour of Jeremiah's grief, we certainly mourn with him in a larger form of the same sorrow. We mourn for Jerusalem in a sense not known to those who consider the matter from a merely picturesque point of view. We lament the downtreading of divine law in the earth, because divine law is precious to us both for God's sake and man's sake. We mourn the ascendancy of a gentile system of law and government in all countries, because such a system necessarily engenders poverty and godlessness and debasement among the people brought up under it. We dwell wearily in a dry and thirsty land where the waters are not flowing that can come from the fountain of the divine personal authority alone. We wait with strong desire, yet with the patience which Israel's God calls for at our hands, the times of the restitution of all things which God hath spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began. With the arrival of those times, Jeremiah, with all the prophets, will have their tears dried and their hearts gladdened with the feast of fat things which the Lord of Hosts will spread for all people in Mount Zion. We are here because we hope to share the gladness of the Lord's redeemed when they shall come with singing unto Zion, with everlasting joy on their heads, sorrow and mourning having fled for ever away. We drink this wine now as the symbol of sorrow *"until the kingdom of God shall come;"* then, we hope to drink it new in the Father's kingdom in token and fulfilment of the joy of God and man.

While so waiting, we need all the strength we can get from the provision God has made for us in the Scriptures of truth. Strength is to be got in very unlikely places within the two boards of the Bible. Our reading from 1 Corinthians 14 is an example. What is there here to build us in the patience of hope? Paul chides the brethren in Corinth for their irregularities, imploring them to be no longer children in understanding. It does not seem as if this would be likely to yield us much comfort. But

look again: what is it he is chiding them about? About the unwise employment of the gifts of the Spirit. A brother who can speak in a foreign tongue, he says, is to keep silence unless there be an interpreter who can impart the ideas to the assembly. A brother speaking in the meeting is to give way to another sitting by, to whom something is suddenly revealed. All are to be at liberty to prophesy, but it is to be, by course—one by one. Speaking with tongues is not to be absolutely interdicted: but speaking to edification is rather to be encouraged, since tongues are a sign to the unbeliever, and not a gift for use among the brethren. Paul could speak with tongues more than any of them, but would prefer to speak five words with a comforting meaning than ten thousand words that would be of no use to any one. The great thing was to promote edification or strengthened conviction; and to avoid confusion.

Now, what does all this prove but that the miraculous gifts of the Spirit were in free and common experience among the brethren in Corinth? It is inconceivable that Paul should write to correct abuses that had no existence. There never was such a thing under the sun as a man having personal and official relations with a body of people writing to them to regulate the doing of things that were never done in their midst. The rector of a university does not recommend the professors to adopt a different plan in the teaching of a science that is never taught within the walls of the institution. Paul never could, in the nature of things, have written to the Corinthian brethren advising a wise way of using the miraculous gifts of the Spirit if those gifts were not the realities of experience in their midst.

This chapter proves the presence of the gifts: and what then? The gifts prove the descent of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. And what then? The descent of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost proves the resurrection and glorification of Christ? And what then? The resurrection of Christ proves his present existence, his coming again, the resurrection of believers at his advent, the bestowal of life eternal, and the setting up of the kingdom of God. Thus our whole hope is established by the reasonable construction of the facts reflected in this unpromising 14th chapter of 1st Corinthians.

Dear brethren and sisters, we stand upon a foundation of truth that cannot be moved. Let us hold fast to the hope set before us in the gospel. Let us not cast away our confidence which hath great recompense of reward. Yet a little while, and he that shall come, will come, and will not tarry. Ye have need of patience, that after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise.

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