

SUNDAY MORNING NO. 9

1 Cor. 2—We should make a great mistake were we to do what some do with regard to this chapter, and that is, to read it as applicable to the state of things existing at the present time in the world. By making that mistake, individuals both acquire a false idea of the relationship of God to us, and fail to perceive what Paul actually means in this part of his writing. To avoid that mistake, we must take several things into account. Paul is here writing to the Corinthians, the inhabitants of a city of Greece, among whom he had planted the gospel, by going to them and preaching it; and showing wonderful works by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 15:19), in attestation of what he taught.

Before he went to them, they were under the guidance of mere philosophy. Greece was the great country of philosophers. It produced a class of men—vigorous-minded in their way—who elaborated out of their own brain a system of wisdom. These men were in no way divinely guided. They simply looked up into the heavens—abroad upon the earth—observed human action turned in upon the operations of their own minds, and putting all things together, they came to certain conclusions. These conclusions they argued, and founded schools to propagate them; and by and by they came to constitute the wisdom of the day—the wisdom of the world: a thing to be spoken of in beautiful words; for the writings of these men to this day, are books of reference in all our great scholastic institutions—models of oratory—standards of writing and storehouses of wisdom.

Keeping this in view, that the Corinthians, before Paul came to them, had been familiar with a system of wisdom of human devising, and that he came to them with a system of truth of divine communication—we shall be able to understand what is here written. Another thing we must remember in order properly to understand it, is that Grecian philosophy taught, like the philosophy of men in every age, that if men were only virtuous, they would be saved—that all men, good and evil, would be disembodied, and sent to a state, good or bad, with reference purely and entirely to their individual peculiarities.

Paul's teaching was the opposite of this. Paul taught that all men were under sentence of death, and that there was only one name given under heaven whereby they could be saved, and that that name had been developed by the death of Jesus Christ, who was crucified by the Romans, and rose again. Keeping in mind these antagonistic views and the difference between them, we shall be able to understand this chapter; but keeping out of view these circumstances which were before Paul's mind, we shall fail to understand what he means, and construct out of what he says, a false theory, an impracticable system, and one that we shall find to mislead us. The conclusions generally brought out of this chapter are, that it is of no use trying to understand the scriptures; that we cannot penetrate their meaning unless we are the subjects of divine illumination, by the spirit; that the Bible is valueless as a teacher, unless we have a light within superadded to our natural faculties.

How utterly unjustified these conclusions are by the chapter, and how utterly mischievous they are in their effect, will be apparent.

“And I, brethren, when I came to you—came, not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God; for I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ and him crucified.”

It was the custom for teachers among the Grecians to come with excellency of speech and wisdom; that is with polished oratory, and high philosophical orthodoxy, according to the standard recognised among the wise of that time. Paul says in effect, “I didn't come with the excellency of speech to which you are accustomed. I did not come with the moral philosophy which teaches that men will be saved by good works—I came to you in a blunt, earnest way, preaching the death of Christ as the means of the world's salvation.” Some people think that

because the gospel of the kingdom is not mentioned here, it was therefore excluded from Paul's preaching; but if they will but keep in view what Paul had in view, they will perceive that it would have been entirely out of place to have been brought in here; yet though not mentioned by name, it is set forth in substance.

You cannot believe in "*Jesus Christ and him crucified*," without first believing in Jesus Christ; and you cannot believe in Jesus Christ without believing in the kingdom; because the fact concerning Jesus Christ is that he is the son of David, appointed to restore again the kingdom to Israel; to establish the dominion of God throughout the whole earth. It is further to be observed that it is impossible to believe in "*Jesus Christ and him crucified*," otherwise than by comprehending the doctrines signified by that phrase. The name of Jesus is a doctrinal name. It is not like our names, bestowed merely for the sake of distinction. It means "I shall save by an anointed one;" and unless we understand who is to save, and who is to be saved, and from what, and by what instrumentality we cannot believe in the name of Jesus Christ; and therefore we cannot scripturally believe in his crucifixion. We may believe in the crucifixion of a person called Jesus Christ; but without understanding, we shall fail to believe in what Paul says he set forth among the Corinthians. We shall fail to understand salvation by the death of Jesus Christ, as opposed to the doctrine of Grecian philosophy—that virtue would bring deification to every man when he died.

Paul "*determined not to know anything*" of the Grecian nonsense which he elsewhere styles "*foolishness*," and guards us against it in these words:

"Beware, lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit."

He would only know or recognise and proclaim, the fact that all men are mortal, and that Jesus Christ and him crucified, are the only foundations of hope. He would only maintain that—

"Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead;"
and that "*this Jesus Christ whom I preach unto you, is the man by whom has come the resurrection of the dead.*"

He says "*I was with you in weakness, and fear and much trembling*;" because this preaching of his brought down upon him the hostility of all classes, and exposed him to many privations. Both the parties of which society was then composed, were his enemies—the philosophical party and the Jewish party; both of whom he equally offended by his teaching. The Grecians sought salvation by wisdom, the Jews by the law. Hence, Jesus, as preached by Paul, was foolishness to the one, and to the other a stumbling block. A crucified Christ was a stumbling block to the Jews, who looked only for a glorified Christ; and to the Greeks it was mere foolishness to say that our salvation depended upon what another man had done. We have both these parties in our own days; but the Grecian party is by far the more numerous, which is no great wonder, considering that the Grecian works are the standard works in all places of learning. Against both we have to place the doctrine of Jesus Christ and him crucified; and the doing of this leads to precisely the same antagonism that manifested itself in the days of Paul; though it cannot take the same shape.

Strength is on the side of the enemy—fashion, money, wealth, and numbers: it always has been so. Truth has always been in the corner. Jesus himself, who was the truth, is a good illustration. He lacked the commonest sustenance; he was in poverty and unpopularity. Faithful women ministered to him of their substance; of himself he had not where to lay his head. This is the fate of truth today, "*with weakness and fear and much trembling*," accompanying its operations. It is not so to the same extent now; because the antagonism of the enemy is no longer, in the providence of God, backed up by the military power of the state—legal authority. In Paul's day, the enemy could beat, imprison and kill. Paul himself was almost killed more than once. We must be thankful to God that things are a little changed in this respect. The fact that there is a change marks the expiry of the Little Horn period of

Daniel, during which the saints were to be given into the hands of the persecuting power, and trodden under foot. We have reached the time when in the providence of God, we can serve the truth under the protection of the law, and no man can dare to lift a finger against our person or property. We must be thankful that we are not living under circumstances when the authorities might burst in upon us at any moment, and hurry us off to prison.

“And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man’s wisdom; but in demonstration of the spirit and power.”

Paul did not come as the Grecian philosophers did, with flowery speech and philosophical argumentation; he came with divine dogmatism to tell them what was right and true, and to demonstrate by and *“through mighty signs and wonders by the power of the spirit of God”*—(Rom. 15:19); that what he told them was of God; *“from his body were brought unto the sick handkerchiefs and aprons, and the diseases departed from them, and the evil spirits went out of them.”*—(Acts 19:12) Not only did he himself exhibit this power of the spirit of God, but those who believed also received the spirit, and there and then spoke with tongues they had never known before. The spirit thus demonstrated the truth of what Paul said, and enabled those who heard him to lay hold of it with confidence. However finely spun an argument may be, listeners may be misled; but here was a *“demonstration of the spirit and of power, that their faith should stand not in the wisdom of man, but in the power of God.”*

Now we in this age do not stand on an equal footing of advantage with the Corinthian believers; there is no demonstration of the spirit and of power now. Still we can imitate them in this result, that our faith shall not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the wisdom of God. That is the only extent to which we can imitate them. Our faith cannot stand in the power of God, because it has not been induced in us by ocular demonstration as theirs was; but it can stand in the word of God. We can take the word as our guide; and the word being the mind of the spirit, we may lay hold of the spirit in this sense, that we may become spiritually-minded by the study of it. We hear a great deal about the pouring out of the spirit in religious assemblies, which is but an exciting development of the spirit that is in us; and that is the spirit of the flesh. There is a spirit in the flesh that can be evoked by excitation; and that is the spirit which becomes excited by modern preachers—a spirit that simply amounts to, and is most active where there is most ignorance, but which in all cases subsides and evaporates in quiet life. The “outpouring” at a revival meeting is but an outpouring of the flesh-spirit from the preacher; and only those who reciprocate the sentiments of the preacher, are stirred by the spirit.

It was not so in ancient days; the spirit was visibly manifested; nobody could mistake it. It evinced itself with irresistible power in gifts of tongues, and impelled the apostles to speak in agreement with those things that God had already spoken by the holy men of old. Both characteristics are entirely wanting in the so-called outpourings of the spirit in our day. There are no gifts; no miracles; no demonstrations; and the men who boast most of possessing the spirit, and who make the most display of invoking the spirit of God, are the men most guilty of giving the lie direct to what God has already spoken by His spirit, in prophets and apostles. So, trying the spirits, whether they be of God or whether they be of men, we can see that they preach not the gospel of God, nor the truth concerning Jesus Christ and him crucified. All their revival excitements, demonstrations, prayer meetings, worshippings, crowded conferences, &c., are nothing more than the spirit of the flesh in superstitious manifestation, in the action of all our religious faculties, without the enlightenment of what God has revealed to us by His spirit.

We must be thankful to God, that though the spirit is not in manifestation, we have an opportunity of standing as we do stand, not in the wisdom of man, but in the wisdom of God. The word of God might have been lost in the revolutions of time, in the agitations that have convulsed all nations since it was written; but God’s providence has guarded it, and we hold

it in our hands complete and intact. Therefore, we must take care, as our only security in these days of darkness, to stick fast and close by the word, and to reject everything opposed thereto: thereby our faith may be the same faith that the Corinthians had, though implanted by a different process and standing in us by a different evidence.

“Howbeit, we speak wisdom among them that are perfect, yet not the wisdom of this world.”

He means to say “Although my words do not stand in the wisdom of men, what I say is not nonsense: I am only using the word ‘wisdom’ ironically; I accommodate myself to the ways of talking that are fashionable. When I speak of wisdom I speak of wisdom as currently reputed, and foolishness as currently reputed.” It was the doctrines of the world that were reputed as wisdom, and the doctrines of Paul were reputed as foolishness. Therefore, he said, I came not with that which the world considers wisdom, but with what it considers foolishness; nevertheless, that which I speak is the real wisdom.

“Howbeit we speak wisdom among them that are perfect, yet not the wisdom of this world, nor of the princes of this world, that come to naught.”

When men are dead, their self-named wisdom will be all forgotten like a nightmare; the truth of God alone will shine out in the glory of accomplished facts.

“We speak the wisdom of God in a mystery; even the hidden mystery which God ordained before the world unto our glory, which none of the princes of this world knew; for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, ‘eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God has prepared for them that love him.’”

But, according to the Grecian philosophers, it **had** entered into the heart of man; for they had conceived it out of their own heads. It was their notion that the immortal soul went to the Elysian fields; therefore, that theory, which is the popular theory in our day, had entered into the heart of man. But, Paul says “No. The wisdom of the truth is opposed to the wisdom of the Grecian. It has not entered into the hearts of man to conceive what God’s purpose is, but God hath revealed it unto us by His Spirit.” Now, keep that in mind, and you have a key to the succeeding verse.

Paul acknowledges that apart from the descent of the Spirit of God—the means by which God chose to reveal himself to his prophets and to him—he was himself in the same position as the Grecian. Of his own natural self, he did not know the truth. Like Daniel, he doubtless would have been willing to say,

“This secret is not revealed unto me for any wisdom that I have more than any living.”—(Dan. 2:30.)

Indeed, he says something very like this:

“I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing.”

Paul of himself was as much a natural man as any of ourselves. He had shown himself the natural man, the ignorant man, but withal the conscientious man, the zealous man, in putting to death the Christians. He thought he was doing God’s service. He was quite as conscientious before he became a Christian as afterwards; he did not become changed in that respect. He was brought up under the law; trained to fear God and do His commandments, and he thought he was doing His commandments in putting to death the Christians. When Jesus appeared to him by the way, he told him he was kicking against the pricks; and Paul said,

“Lord, who art thou?”

“I am Jesus of Nazareth whom thou persecutest.”

The question was “what wilt thou have me to do?” He told him what to do, and Paul went and did it. And after that, Paul showed the same enterprise, the same conscientiousness, the

same energy, the same self-sacrificing devotion to what he considered right as before, only he had got the ideas of the spirit introduced into his mind, and the spirit itself came upon him. So he could say—

“God hath revealed them unto us by His spirit.”

Not unto us, in the present day, has the spirit come; for then we should be like Paul and the other apostles; we should be able to speak with tongues, to show the gifts of the spirit; we should be inspired. But men pretend to have the spirit, and yet not to be inspired. Great anomaly! If they had the spirit, they would be inspired. No devout man would speak lightly on the subject if there was the smallest element of reality in the loud professions of the present day. As the prophet of old said, so would every devout man say, *“would God, that all the Lord’s people were prophets,”* but what is the use of professing to have the spirit when we have it not? Why play at it like children? Yet though we are not permitted to have the spirit, we may have the benefit of what the spirit did when given; what God revealed to men of old by His spirit, they wrote, and they are thus the instruments through which the spirit can shine into our minds. Mentally, we get into the same position as they did; only we differ as to the mode in which we arrive at it. They got their ideas direct by the spirit of divine enlightenment, which they could not resist or oppose. But in our case, it comes by the slow process of reading and believing. Yet by this process we may become enlightened and saved; for salvation comes by believing the truth.

“He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved.”

“Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”

There could not have been a hearing of the gospel in the first instance, if the spirit had not come. The Jews would have been no more than the Grecians. But the word of God coming, they spoke, and that has given us an opportunity of hearing. Although they are not alive to speak; the giving attention to what is written is equivalent to listening to what the writers might have spoken. By this hearing, faith is formed in the heart, and faith purifies.

“For the spirit searcheth all things: yea, the deep things of God.”

The meaning of this is illustrated thus:

“For what man knoweth the things of man, save the spirit of man, which is in him? Even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the spirit of God.”

To see the point of this, we must take the illustration in the connection in which Paul gives it, instead of applying it to the totally different circumstances of our day. He says the natural man, without the inspiration of the spirit of God knows nothing of the things of God. We could have known nothing of eternal truth, if God had not revealed it. The contrast is—as applicable to our day—between the natural man without the Bible **versus** the natural man with the Bible; whereas the teachers of the present day construe Paul’s words into a comparison between the natural man with the Bible in his hands, and the **spiritual** man with the Bible in his hands. This is not Paul’s comparison at all. His point is that man, by his own knowledge, cannot know the things of God; he can only know his own things. Nations, without revelation, are everywhere the proof of this. The Spirit of God alone knows the things that are of God, and only by that spirit can we be made acquainted with them. That spirit came upon men in ancient times and revealed these things. Through them we can get to know them; but, as natural men, we never could have known them, had we not read them in the holy oracles. We see what a perverse and mischievous use is made of this part of God’s word. That use is a use of destruction. Under the idea that it is no use to seek to understand God’s word, they put it under the table. Instead of looking into the bible, they look into their own empty hearts. They look to the spirit of the flesh which dwells within them, instead of coming reverentially into the presence of the spirit of God, as embodied in the scriptures. We must be on our guard. The devil as an angel of light, makes assault against this beacon of life, and we must resist him. The whole chapter is very intelligible from Paul’s point of view, but

bring into it orthodox thoughts, and use it with regard to orthodox circumstances, and it becomes utterly unintelligible and pernicious. May we be wise enough to know the precious treasure we have in God's word, and to use it bountifully in the enlightenment of ourselves and others.

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