

STEADFASTNESS IN THE FAITH

“Be ye steadfast, immovable.” Such is one of the leading exhortations of the truth. It would seem as if it ought to be a very easy duty—to be steadfast. In truth, we have a special liability in the contrary direction. Steadfastness sufficiently prolonged goes against the natural grain. The human mind tires of monotony just as the body tires of one position. It is pleasant to have a change for mere change’s sake. Hence new things have an attraction for many people who resemble the ancient Athenians in nothing else. New things may be all right, but they may be much the reverse. They may be a mere appeal to the weakness that tires of one mental attitude. A liking for them, regarded as a system of intellectual superiority, may be due to a mere love of change, such as marks and constitutes the shallow and the fickle mind. The change of fashion from age to age, in every department of human activity, is the result of this. Taste roves and returns in an aimless whirligig of change. God changes not, and His children partake of this characteristic. Enlightened and well-balanced intelligence stably rests in that which is true and eternal. It is the mark of wisdom to be established—to be steadfast—to abide in the same thing from year to year as time rolls. Of course, this presupposes the attainment of truth. Pilate asked what this was. He did not wait for the answer. Those who know the gospel know the Truth, and recognise the wisdom of being *“steadfast, immovable.”* In this connection, change is not progress. In divine things, change is always more likely to be retrogression than progress. The inherent tendency of the natural mind is to indulge in thoughts and fancies in harmony with its own predilections, which are opposed to divine thoughts and ways, and as the process is combined with the pleasing sensation of the relief that comes from variety, it has resulted in past ages of the world’s history, first in the slight declension and then in the complete apostasy from the ways of God—as in the case of Israel in Canaan after the death of Joshua; and 1,500 years afterwards, in the case of the Christian community when the apostles had all gone to their graves.

How are we to foster this invaluable quality of steadfastness, on which our ultimate salvation depends as much as on our reception of the Truth at the first? Study will furnish the answer. Steadfastness, like every other faculty of the mind, grows by use and rusts by neglect. Its power in this respect doubtless depends, in some measure, on native organization. Some have naturally more stability of mental action than others. Still, the ultimate attainments of every man depend in greater measure on the daily play of mental forces, in the direction of which all of us have some voice. The permanence of mental impression in any direction depends upon continuousness of contact with that which makes the impression in the first instance. Take the most familiar example. A man remembers powerfully the place he lives in, the people he moves among, the calling he follows. How is it that he knows and remembers these so well while his mind is a total blank to the house and friends and occupation of a man in the next town? It is because his mind is in contact with the one set of facts and not with the other. But take him away from his own town and his surroundings—transport him to a distant country and plant him down among other scenes and other neighbours, and you would see a change by-and-by. His impressions of his former circumstances will gradually fade, until, if you give him long enough time, they would disappear. Continuousness of impression in divine things—steadfastness in the faith—depends upon habitual contact with the facts and evidences that generated them in our hearts in the first case. In the first century, these of course, would consist of what we had seen and heard at the hands of the apostles. In our age, they consist of the writings that God has caused to be written to this very end—the Scriptures, which are able to make us wise unto salvation.

“He that walketh with wise men shall be wise, but the companions of fools shall fall.”

He that readeth wise books shall be wise. The wise book above all others is God's book—the Bible—wherein alone are exhibited to us those disclosures of the divine thoughts and purposes which, when we make them our property by reading and mental assimilation, gives us steadfastness in a world of caprice and change. How necessary this is, experience will show us. From human books we do not easily get away, because we have a natural affinity for things that men like ourselves discourse of. But with a book of divine authorship it is different. Divine thoughts are fundamentally different from human thoughts. There is not the same natural response to them in our hearts; and we naturally fail to cling close to plans and principles so far above us in favour of those that commend themselves to mere human instincts and preferences and sympathies. So much the more need is there for continuousness of contact with the Book containing them. This contact will overcome natural antipathy, and engender affinity where repulsion originally existed. In the natural state men prefer to contemplate and deal with the works of God without God. They are more interested in the mechanical conditions that govern their being than in any consideration of the ultimate cause of those conditions. There is a powerful natural preference for the study of nature without reference to the origin of nature, and for the discussion of man's affairs, apart from the anterior purpose in the Eternal Mind out of which man sprang. This is the natural bent of the human mind unenlightened with regard to God. It is the source of the universal distaste for Bible things. It is due to a partial and depraved action of the mind. A full and enlightened action would lead a man to penetrate beneath mere aspects of nature to the fundamental power in which it subsists. When the Truth comes, this comes with it. The illusions of the natural mind vanish. A new mental action is set up. Fact displaces appearance, wisdom overrides feeling: the eternal is seen below all phenomena. God becomes the great truth and the governing point of view. Between men with whom God is a reality and men to whom God is a superstition, there can be no sympathy. Every man truly enlightened in the Truth is bound sooner or later to experience in himself what Jesus said of his disciples,

"I have given them Thy Word, and the world hath hated them."

If the Word of God dwell in a man, the world will hate him, because it hates the Word; and it hates the Word because it hates God. This is the cause of the world's hatred of the Bible. The Bible is full of God. You can scarcely put your finger on a part within its pages where He is not on view in some aspect or other. That which repels the world attracts the children of God. They desire to come near God, they share David's thirst for the living water in a land of drought and barrenness. They cry out with him,

"Oh, when shall I come and appear before God!"

With him, they would *"dwell in the house of God for ever."* They love to frequent meetings where He is prominent, and to keep the company of men and women in whom His love is a guest. The meeting on the first day of the week for the breaking of bread, is full of usefulness from all these points of view. Here we have God and God only. God in the emblems partaken—God in the Scriptures read. We do not eat the bread or drink the wine for their own sake. As often as we *"eat this bread and drink this cup"* we *"show the Lord's death until he come."* This takes us back to past events—to the appearing of Christ among men—to *"the wonders and signs which God did by him"*—to that most wonderful sign of all by which God has pledged His purpose to all men—the raising of our Lord Jesus from the dead. The reading of the Scriptures introduces us to the testimony on which our faith in this event is built. Our reading this morning from John, for example;

"That which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and our hands have handled of the Word of Life—(for the life was manifested, and we have seen it and bear witness and show unto you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested unto us) that which we have seen and heard declare we unto you."

This is not testimony at second hand. It is the evidence of one of the original witnesses—one who saw and heard. It is as striking and as strong as evidence can be. All the apostolic evidence is like this.

“We have not followed cunningly devised fables,” says Peter, *“but were eye-witnesses.”*

That these are the very words of John and Peter is as certain as such a matter can be made. They have been in the hands of the Christian public in every age since the first century; and in that century, during the last half of it, they were circulating among believers with the sanction of the apostles themselves. The guarantee is so powerful that we may rest on the words as implicitly as if we heard them come out of the mouths of the apostles themselves. What was it that their eyes had seen and handled? The narratives of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John inform us fully. They saw and heard what Jesus did—what Jesus said—whose dying request brings us together this morning. Consider his works; consider his words; they bring their own witness. Read them and watch their effect on your mind. Do they not bring holiness and truth and light and superiority? And consider the object with which they were written:

“That ye also may have fellowship with us, and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His son Jesus Christ” (1John 1:3).

What words and works were ever written with an object like this? What writer ever proposed such an object as this but men who *“wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit?”* Consider also what they declare as the great message authenticated to men by what they had seen and heard:

“This then is the message which we have heard of him and declare unto you, that God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all.”

Here is the Truth in burning focus. It bears in various directions. It concerns both the nature of God and the character of God. Light is in the universe, but is not the universe, for there is darkness where light is not present in some specific form. And light wherever we see it is derived—even light in the sun is the result of decompositions and combustions that take place in the substance composing it. There must be a power of light behind all light—a power of life behind all life. The profounder class of scientific minds recognises this. An interesting pamphlet has recently been published by Professor du Bois, of Yale College, in which he demonstrates the existence of God is scientific necessity: His argument is intended to be an answer to Herbert Spencer’s theories. And is conducted on purely mathematical principles. He shows that there are logical gaps in the theory of spontaneous evolution which scientifically demand to be filled, and which can only be filled by the recognition of eternal wisdom and power. In the presence of Bible facts, we need not trouble ourselves about science. Still, living in a scientific age, and breathing more or less of a scientific atmosphere, which for many years has tended to the negation of God, it is somewhat of a help and comfort to see God scientifically recognised. It helps us to set a right estimation on Bible revelation. We cannot know God by science, which only faintly whispers that He is. We may know Him by what He has been pleased to tell us; and He has revealed much by Moses, the prophets and the apostles. What He has revealed, it is our wisdom implicitly to receive. It is absurd to sit in judgment on it. As created and finite beings, we can have no capacity to conceive of the Deity, who is Self-existent. Our part is simply to ascertain facts and receive them. The facts in this case consist of what is revealed. From this alone we are safe in drawing our conceptions of God. The conceptions we may form by our own thoughts on such a topic must be held in abeyance, for we who are made can know nothing correctly of the Power that is not made. The conception revealed must be the right one, however difficult of reception by some. The conception revealed is a simple one. One Father dwelling in light, personally located in heaven. Yet inter-penetrating and upholding all creation by His Spirit effluent from

His person, which effluent Spirit nevertheless constitutes a unity with His person in the way that the light of a flame is a unity with the flame. The Bible reveals this; and one great offence connected with the Christadelphian name arises from the fact of our believing it. It is not the first time that the belief of the Truth should cause offence. We must bear it. The time will come when it will be a glory and not a shame, that we have believed in the God of Israel. Another thing revealed is that the glorious God thus filling heaven and earth, observes certain rules of action in His relations with His creatures He has made, by which sin against Him makes our continuance in the universe with Him impossible. Where He is disobeyed alienation takes place, and death must ensue. We are taught (and our own experience tells us) that this is the position of the whole human race; that sin has entered and has prevailed, establishing the reign of death; that, being sinners, we cannot return to God except by the mediation of an acceptable mediator; that this mediator is Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ alone, beside whom, there is none other. We are assembled this morning because we accept this teaching of the Bible. We are condemned by our neighbours for holding such “narrow” doctrine. Well, we shouldn’t invent it. It is here in the Bible; we but accept what is taught here. If it is censurable, the censure lies against the Bible; but what censure can lie against the Bible? The Bible is a revelation from God. The evidence of this is overwhelming. Our only course, therefore, is to put up with the disagreeable thoughts and speeches of opponents, waiting patiently for the day of manifestation when all men will see the truth that is now hid from their eyes.

That God is light in character as well as in nature, John proceeds to illustrate.

“If we say that we have fellowship with him and walk in darkness, we lie and do not speak the truth. But if we walk in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His son cleanseth us from all sin.”

Light in this use evidently stands for truth, wisdom, righteousness. It completes the picture of the glory of God when we have to think of Him not only as a being of physical brightness and power, but of One whose character corresponds with the physical light and purity of His nature. We are told to rejoice in God. We can do so when we think of His goodness, His holiness, His wisdom, and truth. It is something to be glad about that the power of the universe is in the hands of a Being true and merciful. Fellowship with Him requires that we imitate Him in these attributes, *“Be like unto your Father.”* This is Christ’s complete summary of all exhortation. To be the reverse of God—to be unkind—unholy—unjust—and false—is to walk in darkness; and for us to profess fellowship with Him while we are in such a condition is, as John says, to act a lie. The only sense in which we can have fellowship with Him now is to be like Him now and to receive His approbation. The time will come when men who have acceptably passed through this time of trial will have fellowship with Him in the highest sense. They will not only resemble Him in their moral attributes and enjoy His favour, but they will possess His nature, and be sons of light and power. Meanwhile they must walk in the light of His moral excellence. They must obey His commandments and imitate His character during the days of their mortal weakness. If they do so, the sacrifice of Christ, brought to bear in the priesthood of Christ, will avail for the forgiveness of their shortcomings and sins, which otherwise would be fatal to their prospects of eternal life.

“If we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.”

No man with an adequate sense of human imperfection and the holiness of God could entertain the thought that we are without sin. Our very best attainments are but poor, blemished work. *“All our righteousness is as filthy rags,”* by comparison with the perfection of God. But John gives us this consolation, that *“if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”* At the same time, John links this obligation with our privilege:

“I write unto you that ye sin not.”

To sin not is to disobey not. Hence the keeping of the commandments is the criterion of an acceptable course.

“Hereby we do know that we know him if we keep his commandments. He that saith I know him and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar and the Truth is not in him.”

“He that saith he abideth in him ought himself to walk even as he walked.”

Here is a simple principle of easy application by which we may judge ourselves before we come to the judgment seat. We need not attempt to judge others. We cannot: for we do not know all the facts. We must not: for we are forbidden. To judge ourselves, we may and must, for we are commanded. There is this encouraging fact about it, that *“if we judge ourselves, we shall not be judged.”* The man who deals hardly with his own faults is likely to receive mercy even at a human tribunal: how much more at the tribunal at which *“mercy rejoiceth against judgment.”*

Obedience as the law of righteousness, John styles *“an old commandment which ye had from the beginning.”* He might well so describe it, for the enunciation and operation of that law are co-extensive with the history of God’s dealings with man. Both Eden and Sinai exemplified its work. But he proceeds to speak of another element of the *“light”* in which the Truth calls us to walk—of *“a new commandment”*—to which Jesus also made the same reference:

“He that saith he is in the light and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now. He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him. But he that hateth his brother is in darkness and walketh in darkness and knoweth not whither he goeth because that darkness hath blinded his eyes.”

There is much in John’s epistles about love. Probably this is owing to the fact that they were written when the ecclesias had been in existence some fifty years, and when, through the strifes and frictions inseparable from the intercourse of a mixed community, alienations and hatreds had begun to show themselves to a serious extent. Whatever the cause, John found it necessary to make love prominent in his letters. He has from this been called “the loving disciple,” and popular pictures of him give the idea of a languishing, sentimental woman without backbone enough to say “No.” There is an evident misapprehension of John’s character here, for though his letters speak of love, they speak of it in a way that shows the “loving disciple” as a man of energy and outspoken fidelity to principle. How frequently does he say that in such and such a case a man is a liar; and how decisively does he recommend the test of every professed form of truth, and the uncompromising rejection of that which is found to be error. Nevertheless, he has much and strong things to say about love. He does not hesitate to declare that a man destitute of love is out of his place in the family of God. God Himself he proclaims to be love: *“he that loveth not is not of God.”* This is reasonable, and calls for the urgent attention of all that aspire to the adoption of the sons of God. How sterile and unattractive is mere intelligence without love. How terrible and overpowering would God be to our poor mortal minds if He were only power, and holiness, and wisdom. How encouraged and soothed, and drawn to Him we are by the declaration that—

“He is gracious and long-suffering, slow to anger, and plenteous in goodness and truth.”

How the Psalms delight to exclaim:

“His mercy endureth for ever.”

We can understand David saying, when asked to choose between the enmity of man and the displeasure of God, *“let me now fall into the hands of the Lord: let me not fall into the hands of man.”* The lesson we easily draw is that the brethren of Christ must be men of kindness and mercy. Though easy to learn the lesson from the Scriptures, it is hard to carry it out in the

circumstances prevailing on the earth at the present time. The earth is full of unrighteousness and cruelty. Our attempts at acting a God-like part come back upon ourselves oftentimes with great discouragement. Let us persevere. Yet a little while, and the wicked shall not be. The meek shall inherit the earth, and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace. The day will come when none but the children of love will be alive upon the earth, and when the comfort of love will be blended with the beauty of wisdom, and the delightsomeness of holiness, and the power and glory of immortality that will never fade away.

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