

STRANGERS & SOJOURNERS.

WHAT is our position this morning, but an illustration of the statement of the Word, that we are but strangers and sojourners? The symbols on the table tell us that we are waiting for the Master; and the Master, when he comes, is to destroy the present order of things. Consequently, "this is not our rest." "We have no continuing city here." We are merely passing through. Our aim is beyond. Our citizenship is in heaven. "We are looking for that blessed hope." We show the Lord's death "*till he come.*"

But these facts ought to find a further expression than merely in our meeting together to break bread. They are not facts with us if they do not affect the whole life. We are under law to Christ, and his law is very specific on sundry matters pertaining to our temporal ways. It tells us, for instance, in the scripture read, that we are to "Let our conversation be without covetousness, and be content with such things as we have" (Heb. xiii. 5). What is this but condemning in a saint that which is a deliberately chosen policy with the world? To make money is the great aim among those who know not God. To save is extolled as the very highest virtue. To be rich is to be honoured. It is the old story "Men will praise thee when thou doest well to thyself" (Psalm xlix. 18). Hereby are saints in great danger. They are liable to fall in with the general tendency, and to set up Mammon as the god of their lives. Of course, it would not be acknowledged in this form. All evil things are varnished with "good words and fair speeches" which deceive the hearts of the simple; and this treachery to Christ would be glossed over with pleasant phrases. One would not allow, to himself even, that his policy is to establish and secure himself, when all the while there may be scarcely another motive at work. The heart is deceitful. The nectar of the golden cup is intoxicating, and quickly finds the head, and makes the poor thing reel in the path of Christ. Riches may be honourably possessed if used as Job used them. The picture of his doings is profitable to contemplate, because it is a picture of a man whom God praised. He imprecates a curse upon himself if the following things were true: "If I have withheld the poor from their desire, or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail, or have eaten my morsel myself alone, and the fatherless have not eaten thereof . . . If I have seen any perish for want of clothing, or any poor without covering; if his loins have not blessed me, and if he were not warmed with the fleece of my sheep. . . . If I have made gold my hope, or have said to the fine gold, Thou art my confidence. If I rejoiced because my wealth was great, and because mine hand had gotten much." And then he says: "The stranger did not lodge in the street, but I opened my doors to the traveller." "Did I not weep for him that was in trouble? Was not my soul grieved for the poor?" Job is pointed to by James as an example. The excellence of that example is manifest. His was the case of a man "making to himself friends of the Mammon of unrighteousness." He exemplified beforehand the exhortation of Paul: "Charge them that are rich that they be not high-minded . . . that they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate, laying-up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold of eternal life."

To rich and poor alike, the exhortation of wisdom is, in the words read: "Let your conversation be without covetousness; be content with such things as ye have; for He hath said, *I will never leave thee nor forsake thee.*" Here is a promise made to the fathers directly applied, by the Spirit in Paul, to their children—believers in all ages who are sons and not bastards. It is a promise having reference to the present life, as the context shows Godliness hath promise of the life that now is, as well as that which is to come (1 Tim. iv. 8). And what is the promise? That we shall have plenty? No; perhaps that would be a curse. That we shall

always be well off? No; perhaps that would blind our weak eyes to the wretchedness of our present lot, and dim the glory that is to be revealed. It is a promise that we shall not be left or forsaken; and this means a great deal. It means that come prosperity or come trouble, come plenty or come poverty, come health or come sickness, come honour or come reproach, come the couch of ease or the bed of thorns, come weal or come woe—come what may, if we are called according to His purpose (which will be evinced by our obedience of His commandments in all things), He will be at the helm, to make all things work together for our ultimate good, even in such things as may incline us to say: "All these things are against us." And if God be for us, with Paul we may say: "I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The lot desirable for saints, in this present probation, is nowhere better shadowed forth than in the prayer of Agur: "Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me" (Prov. xxx. 8). But occasionally, a Joseph of Arimathea is wanted. "A rich man and a councillor" can do sometimes necessary work that is beyond the reach of Christ's poor men. When such are needed, God provides them, and they do their work with humility, but such are few and far between. Thanks be to God, the day is coming when they will not be few. His purpose will require a royal gathering of them—poor men once—but prepared in trial for the great joy of sharing with Christ the riches and the glory of all the earth, in wisdom, and strength, and joy, and immortality. This world of fools will then have passed away. The nightmare of the seven-headed monster will have vanished before the dawn of the blessed morning without clouds, when the glory of Yahweh shall be revealed, and fill the whole earth as the waters covers the sea. Where then will be such as disregard the apostolic counsel, and "Let their conversation be always with covetousness, never content with such things as they have," but always grasping after more? They will be with the poor quadrupeds which "fill their holes with ravin and their dens with prey."

So that we may boldly say, "The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me." If this was suitable language for saints of the first century, how is it unsuitable now? It cannot be so. It can only be a saintship having a name to live but dead, that finds such language awkward. Of course, there is such a thing as cant: no righteous man would advocate that; but there is such a thing as the other extreme. There is such a thing as being proud before God; not broken and contrite in heart; not humble under His mighty hand; ashamed to acknowledge our dependence on Him. This is the natural man, who is strong with us all to start with. But we have put on the new man, if we be Christ's; and the language of the new man is a different thing from that of the old. The language of the new man is to be learnt in the Word. The Spirit of the new man is to be drunk in there. Let this Word dwell richly in us, and we shall soon be at home in those pure, lofty, dignified forms of speech in which it finds expression. If we fail to read the Word continually we shall fail in this matter of salt-seasoned speech.

We always speak like the company we keep. If we are all the while among the foul-mouthed gabblers of the flesh, we cannot expect to be free of their Sodomite brogue. If we read nothing but the literature of Atheistical refinement, we shall never rise above that thin, proper, superficial, cold style of talk, in which a practically godless state of mind expresses itself. Give us the atmosphere of the Spirit and the company of the Spirit's watchmen in the Word, and we are in altogether a healthier land. "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the

scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law doth He meditate day and night."

Another lesson affecting our ordinary life is contained in the words: "Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and run with patience the race set before us." Men on a journey do not unnecessarily burden themselves. A man running to catch a train puts up with the dust and discomfort of his hurried exertion. The principle is the same. In the race for life eternal, there are many things lawful enough in the abstract; but that viewed in relation to the object to be attained, are highly inexpedient, and to be "laid aside," as Paul advises. It is a simple, and a safe, and a reasonable, and a wise rule, and one that will give us much cause for joy at the last, to dispense with every habit or pleasure, or occupation, or friend that hinders our progress in the narrow way. This is but another way of saying what Christ said: "If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out. It is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into the fire of Gehenna." It is better to make our calling and election sure at the expense of worldly friends and engagements, and advantages, than to secure all these, in this present time, and find, at last, that we have cherished them at the expense of Christ's approbation, and have to pay for them with the loss of the kingdom of God. These considerations may fall faintly now on the heart, pre-occupied with the affairs of this life; but in the day certain to come—as certain as the final flight of the life that is every hour passing with us now—they will be felt with a force and a grief that will cause "weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth." It is better to listen to wisdom now in the day of her call. She stands at the door and knocks, saying, "Receive my instruction and not silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold; for wisdom is better than rubies, and all the things that may be desired are not to be compared to it." The Spirit tells us to hear: and the reason is beautiful: "Length of days is in her right hand, and in her left hand, riches and honour. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her, and happy is every one that retaineth her." But if we turn away from her voice, a terrible retribution awaits: "Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded. But ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof. I will also laugh at your calamity. I will mock when your fear cometh. When your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish cometh upon you. Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me. For that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Lord."

Yet another lesson: "By him (Jesus) therefore, let us offer the sacrifice of *praise to God continually*, that is, *the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his Name*." What is this but the continual command of the Spirit in the Psalms: "Praise ye the Lord"? A necessary lesson, indeed, that needs to be continually dinned in our ears! We have come from a state of things in which no sentiment is more distant or unreal than ascription of honour and thanksgiving to God. The carnal mind reigns in the world in all its rank development; "it is not subject to the law of God, neither can be." God is not in all their thoughts. They say "Our lips are our own; who is Lord over us?" If there is one lesson we have to learn more than another, it is that it belongs to our calling in Christ to "offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His Name." God will be praised. This He declares of Himself, "I will be exalted in the earth" (Psalm xlii. 10). "My glory will I not give to another" (Isaiah xlii. 8). "He that offereth praise glorifieth me" (Psalm l. 23). He has revealed that all things are formed for His glory; for His pleasure they were created. All intelligence is out of Him, and must bow to Him, as saith the scripture: "Every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue confess." Adoration of Him is the highest act of created intelligence. The fear of

the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Nothing exists by itself or for itself. All exist in God: all power, and strength, and wisdom, beauty and wealth is of Him. Nothing can be without Him; all would perish by a word if He gave it. But He is great and wise, and kind, and long-suffering; and so the world is established that it cannot be moved.

All flesh before Him is as nothing. He will not allow the flesh to glory in His sight. Adam was banished from Eden for casting dishonour on Him by disobedience. Moses was punished for taking to himself the credit of the miracle at the rock of Meribah. David fell into the hands of God, in three days' plague, for exulting in the numbers of his army. The Assyrian was brought down for taking to himself the credit of what God did by him in the punishment of Israel. Mighty and arrogant Nebuchadnezzar was sent to herd among the beasts till he learnt that "the heavens do rule." Herod was eaten up of worms, because he gave not God the glory; and salvation is by God in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself—not of works, lest any man should boast.

It is all very reasonable. The Eternal should be first; the first should be highest; the Omnipotent should be feared; the Most Excellent should be worshipped. The Creator of all things, the source of all life, the upholder of the universe, the giver of all good, the fountain of life eternal—should be extolled, and had in supremest reverence. "Holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty: heaven and earth are full of His glory." What abortions and bastards of saints must we be, if we are backward to join our mortal praise with the ascriptions of the angelic host! We must or perish. The education of the truth is to prepare us to take part in that mighty anthem which will peal forth like the noise of many waters to the honour of the Eternal Father: "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour, and power; for Thou hast created all things, and for Thy pleasure they are and were created."

(Taken from "Seasons of Comfort" Volume 1, pages 69-73 by Bro. Robert Roberts.)