

## A YEAR IN REVIEW

This is a morning of beginnings, the beginning of a new year: it is the beginning of our system of daily Bible readings; it is a time naturally suggestive of reflection. We naturally look back and look forward; as we look back twelve months, each man and woman may profitably ask themselves whether the twelve months have been twelve months of progress, a twelve months of stagnation or a twelve months of positive going back—in spiritual attainment I mean, for no other attainment, though in its place important, can be placed in the balance with attainment in those qualifications that give peace and righteousness now and unutterable joy and well-being in the endless future that waits, whether we see it or not.

It is an enquiry that can only be conducted for each man by himself; he knows where he is, and how he is getting on; he does not deceive himself with the external appearances that may mislead beholders.

How we are getting on is a question of the measures we adopt, that determine the character of progress. A man of wise measures will become a man of wise attainment. What are wise measures in the case? How ought we to direct our steps so as to make sure that at the end of twelve months, we shall have drawn nearer the divine ideal and left increasingly behind the conditions of the mere natural man? We have a negative answer in the Psalm that has been read, and a positive one too, we will not misspend the time in dwelling for a moment upon these answers. The first answer tells us that we ought not to do, in order to attain to true blessedness.

*“Blessed is the man that walketh ‘not’ in the counsel of the ungodly, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful, nor standeth in the way of sinners.”*

Here is walking, sitting, standing, employed to cover the whole attitude of life. The precept is so perfectly simple that the least intelligent can understand it. Everyone knows who the ungodly are—the scornful, the sinners, and everyone knows what it is not to walk in their principles, nor sit in their seat, nor stand in their way. The difficulty never has been in understanding what is meant, but the carrying out of what is meant. The carrying out of it is an inconvenient course of life and it is a course condemned by many plausible extollings of the opposite course. The course enjoined is condemned as uncharitable, narrow-minded; the opposite course is commended as enlightened and liberal; it is therefore a question who are we to obey—the Scriptures or the world—God or man.

Jesus speaks plainly on the necessity of separation. We all know the words which never can be too often repeated while we are in this weak probation:

*“Ye are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own, but because ye are not of the world, the world would love his own, but because ye are not of the world, therefore the world hateth you.”*

Have we been chosen out of the world, brethren? If we have not, we are without hope. If we have, we must accept hatred and not yield to the temptation of trimming or concealing the colours, for the sake of being well thought of.

We know also those other words of God by Paul,

*“Come out from among them and be ye separate and I will receive you and ye shall be my sons and daughters saith the Lord God Almighty.”*

We have heard this invitation, and have accepted it. If we have, we are, “*separate*” and must bravely accept the position however out of accord it may be with the cultured or uncultured, the scientific or unscientific, the educational or benighted temper of the country and age in which we live.

The positive feature of this class is stated with equal plainness; it is their feature when you find them, but you can scarcely find them.

*“Whose delight is in the Law of the Lord and in His law doth he meditate day and night.”*

The word “law” has different meanings at different times but there is one meaning common to its use everywhere, namely, the Word of God as uttered for the guidance of man. He uttered one word for Israel’s guidance; He has uttered another word for our guidance. Both are the Law of the Lord, and although the Law of Moses is a code not binding upon us, even the Law of Moses has an allegorical foreshadowing of Christ, and has an expression of the highest conditions of human well-being. It is a

profitable subject of meditation to the servants of God to the present day. Reduced to modern phraseology, the verse would read "Whose delight is in the Bible, and in the Bible doth he meditate day and night." How ill descriptive this is of the mass of professing Christians at least here in Birmingham, we know. We also know something of the actual accomplishment of this wisdom. There are thousands in the world who are reading the Bible with us by the Bible companion, and many, many are the testified cases in which they do so with delight. Has each believer here assembled done himself the honour and justice of adhering closely to this rule of life during the past twelve months? Probably the answer in most cases is an emphatic and hearty yes, but in some cases there may have been a failure; this is the time to look back upon the failure and to resolve that the coming twelve months shall be twelve months of daily Bible reading. By this only is it possible in an age like ours to be preserved from the evil that is in the world. We cannot come into contact with the mind of God in this age except in the Bible, all else is the mind of man, tricked out in much gaudy literary finery and deceptive promise. Nothing but bitterness and death can at last result from walking in the paths of darkness, however picturesque and entertaining they may be. The mind of God alone, accepted and imbibed and assimilated in the daily pondering of His testimonies, can give peace and joy even in this life, and as for the life to come, the argument there fails us altogether from its overpowering strength.

If the course of godliness is an inconvenient course, we have every incentive to pursue it. God never asks any man to do anything without applying an adequate motive in addition to the powerful motive that comes from the admiration and love for the Omnipotent wise and good Father of all. The Psalm refers to the incentive that lies before the man who walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly.

*"He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, which bringeth forth his fruit in his season, his leaf also shall not wither, and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper."*

This is the language of figure, but its meaning is too obvious to be misunderstood. We have little experience in our own humid country of the difference between a tree planted by a river and one not so. In the East, as travellers report, the difference is very noticeable; a tree planted in the neighbourhood of a river is one growing, in a state of continued flourishing vigour, while one otherwise situated is liable to be stunted and sterile. In what sense is the godly man like a tree planted by a river? It has a present application, doubtless, in the continual peace and freshness of life, which belongs alone to those who make God their portion. But its ultimate application must be in the future; it is so placed in the Psalm by the contrast it makes with the ungodly.

*"They", it says, "Shall not stand in the judgment nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous."*

It is, therefore, the day of the congregation of the righteous, and the overthrow of the wicked in judgment that is in contemplation. This being so, there is no difficulty in identifying the river, and the flourishing. It is the symbol used in the Apocalypse. A river proceeds from the throne of God in that symbolism.

*"A pure river 'of water of life,' clear as crystal."*

The trees planted by this river are the godly, who are in such vital relation to the eternal fountain of being, that they live and remain with the life and strength of God Himself, from whom they draw eternal vigour. Literally, it means that change to the immortal by the Spirit of God, of which we have so plain a promise in the apostolic epistles.

Consider, for a moment, what a desirable contrast such a state of being presents to that of experience. It is written, *"the heart knoweth its own bitterness."* We can truly say that every man is conscious of his mortal weakness and spiritual inefficiency. We all feel life to be an imperfect and a fleeting thing, and we see it so as we look around. There are some not present who were with us twelve months ago; where they are now, the registrar's record at the cemetery can tell; they have disappeared from the land of the living. There will be similar gaps this time next year, unless the Lord come; whose places will be empty, none can tell, it may be any of us, and once gone our little book is closed for ever, till re-opened in the presence of him who is the resurrection and the life.

To some people, this line of reflection seems lugubrious. To wisdom it ought not, and will not seem so. On the contrary, it imparts the only true cheer which can be thrown over our vain life. It takes away the gloom that otherwise belongs to mortal existence; it disperses the darkness that rests on the whole human horizon apart from Christ; it gives us the power of sustaining the present evil with a subdued and steady and lasting cheer, and imparts to futurity a beckoning incentive which it totally lacks without God. It does in fact what Paul says concerning the mission of Christ, *"delivers*

*them through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.*" It not only takes away the fear of death, but imparts to it a degree of desirability; for whatever reason a man may have for loving life is intensified a thousandfold by the prospect which death introduces to his consciousness with apparent instantaneity. Some people say they would like to live till the Lord comes. The spirituality of this sentiment would be more apparent if the sentiment were limited to a desire for the Lord to come. Analyse the feeling and you will find it has its root in the fear of death. Where faith and hope are strong, this fear is conquered, and replaced by a willingness for death at any time it may be the Lord will allow it. A cheerful willingness for it means an earlier realisation of faith and hope than living till the Lord comes. It means the blotting out of the interval of which in death there is not a moment's consciousness. Let reason act here, and there will be but one verdict. It is because reason has so weak a hold on the mass of the people that most countenances fall blank and irresponsive when the idea is expressed. Living till the Lord comes means waiting in this dreariness for it; dying in the Lord means going to it without waiting. Who that is expecting a good thing, would not rather have it sooner than later? Who that is expecting to be called into a bright and joyous mansion among happy assembled guests, would not rather be called at once than left to stand out in the cold and the rain until the moment for their name to be mentioned? No man who realises the absolute nonentity of death and the certainty of the glory to be revealed at the return of Christ can hesitate in the least about what heathenish men talk of as the leap in the dark. A leap into the darkness in a sense it certainly is, but only the darkness of a sound, dreamless sleep that is gone before we are aware, to be broken by the glorious sunrise.

Our New Testament reading shows us the nature of this sunrise. As in nature, so in the scheme of human redemption. God first made the sun to rule the day. He made the sun by His own power, that is, He made it out of his own strength or essence, as we might say. The sun is no product of magic—nothing is; it is popular theology that has taught that God made all things out of nothing—He made them out of Himself, and He is infinite. All things are the condensations, to use a plain term, of His own eternal invisible force, formed and guided by His wisdom. The Spiritual Sun we know is the Lord Jesus and in a higher sense his introduction is according to the same analogy of things. God has made him, and given us God Himself in him as we have read:

*"He shall be called Immanuel which is, being interpreted, God with us."*

The emphasis and definiteness and intensity of this truth are forced home upon us, time after time, in the sayings of Jesus and the expressions of all the Apostles. Jesus constantly besought his contemporaries to recognise the Father in him and not to make the mistake of supposing that the power he manifested was his own. The apostles always exhibit him as possessing a name above every name, to which every knee must bow that God in Christ may be glorified. The sun that has risen therefore upon the night of our darkness is God Himself incorporate in His Son begotten of Mary. But the full glory of the sunrise is not yet revealed to our sight. The natural earth was enveloped in mist and darkness long after the natural sun was made; and the sun though in the heavens was not visible in the earth. *"Darkness was on the face of the deep,"* so though the Sun of Righteousness has been planted in the heavens *"darkness covers the earth and gross darkness the people."* Not till Christ returns will this darkness fly away. His appearing is the bright morning that will end the sleep of the saints—their short sleep in every age and country which once ended, will end for ever. The morning's dawn will introduce the day of Christ, the day of the Lord, the day of salvation. David says, this is the day that the Lord hath made, the day in which he says *"The righteous shall be glad."* *"I will pay my vows"* saith he, *"now, in the presence of all his people."* This is the joyful feature—*"in the presence of all his people."* They will all be there of all time, of every state and country, not one wanting. There shall not enter in anything that defileth or that worketh abomination or that loveth or maketh falsehood. Brethren, shall we be there? We may hope for it; we are invited; the terms are not exclusive; they are not impossible; though involving present self-denial. The way is not impossible to walk in though 'tis narrow and thinly frequented. All the conditions are most reasonable, most beautiful and most sweet. God asks us to believe in Him, to have faith in His promises, to love Him, to glorify Him, to be reverently submissive to His appointments, to be obedient to His commandments and to be steadfast to the last in compliance with all these particulars. It is written *"great peace have they that love Thy law."* Can we not appeal to every man who answers to this description for confirmation? Nothing but peace and sweetness in the inner man comes from compliance with the ways of godliness. The perturbances toward men are the mere superficial sensations of the passing

moment. *"Godliness is profitable to the life that now is"* in this respect as well as that which is to come.

Who would not then choose to walk in the way of blessedness sketched for us this opening day of the year, in this first of David's Psalms, and who having chosen this way, would not feel emboldened to persevere in it to the end, and who having once entered it and diverged through weakness or worldly pressure would not recover themselves from the folly of a way that leads to death, and resume the path that leads to the Holy City?

Wisdom can have but one answer to these questions and as those who are striving to be children of wisdom, it is our part to be guided by her answer.

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Pages 42-46

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