

## **APPLYING OUR HEARTS UNTO WISDOM**

We have been reminded that our meeting this morning is a matter of command. It is well it is so. If we were left to inclination, we would often be absent when we are present. It is good to be present. It is better than we would think if we were merely left to theorise about it. We would be liable to imagine, as some people do imagine, that, knowing the Truth, it is all one whether we stay at home or come to the meeting. It is not all one. God who commanded this meeting knows us better than we do ourselves. He commanded it because He knows us. *"It is not good for man to be alone."* He requires rousing up by social contact. He will go to rust if left to himself all the time. The Truth will lose its power over us if we forsake the assembly of ourselves together as the manner of some is.

Let us see, however, that we come together for the better and not for the worse. The brethren at Corinth, according to what Paul says came together for the worse. If they did this with the very gifts of the Spirit in their midst, how possible it is that we may do so if we are not on our guard. The mode of conducting the meeting and the topics chosen for the theme of exhortation, have much to do with this. If there is no recognised order of procedure, or if there is want of punctuality in the hour of attendance, or if matters of debate or matters of a merely business or local character are introduced, there will be a great danger of failing in the object of coming together. That object is edification—a building up of the mind in the confidence and comfort of the Truth. This is done by having the things of the Truth passed before us in such a way that the mind is able to lay hold of them with clearness and joy. Reading, prayer, singing, exhortation—all have this effect if rightly attended to. Foolish and unlearned questions avoid, and all strife exclude. Let the Word of Christ be ministered in its richness. If there is no brother present capable of speaking to the edification of those who hear—a man may be able to speak to his own edification and not to that of others, the hearers are the judges—if no such brother is present, then let an absent brother do it. I have heard of spiritually encouraging letters from correspondents being read with advantage in such a case. Others have read extracts from Dr. Thomas' writings. Some read an address from Seasons of Comfort. Some object to this who would not object to Dr. Thomas or other writers speaking if present. It is an objection without reasonable ground. Doubtless, it is best when the presence of brethren able to edify the rest renders all resort to such aids unnecessary, but where there are no such brethren, good sense and an ardent appreciation of spiritual things will sanction them.

Then we have been reminded that we are waiting for the Lord's return. There is an aspect of this which grows more and more powerful with my mind the longer I live. It is perhaps a little difficult to express. It is this—that we are nearer to the Lord's coming than we may be in the habit of thinking. We think of the Lord's coming in connection with the signs of the times—which is right, because the Lord's coming is connected with signs, and the signs are visible: but these signs take longer to unfold than we expect in our first fresh ardour; and there is apt to creep over the mind a sort of feeling that many things may yet divide us from the coming of the Lord. We look back to the destruction of Jerusalem, and to the long-drawn, weary, complicated programme of events that has filled up the time since. And we are liable to look forward to the future with a sense of the ages that are behind us, as if the future acted on the past as a mirror acts on what is behind a person as he walks towards it. Now, there is in all this a good deal of what we may call spontaneous fallacy or self-deception. The fact is—and we do wisely to familiarise our minds with the fact—that the interval that yet lies between us and the Lord's coming may have no existence for us, or at all events a very brief existence indeed. Death will destroy that interval for us as effectually as if the angel of the Lord appeared to us suddenly in the midst of our occupations to tell us the Lord had come. We may assent to this without feeling its full force. There is great power in it when realised. We miss the power of it through thinking that death will be a long time in coming to us. It may, but it may not. We presume on the average of human life, but that average may not be ours. A comparatively young brother (only 27) died over a week ago, who had every prospect within four days of his death that he would have a long and healthy career. A little internal trouble, that might occur to any of us, and of which within five minutes of his death he thought he was getting better, suddenly ended his useful days—for he was very useful in the little ecclesia of which he was a member. What has happened to him might happen to any of us; and it would mean that in a moment we would be wafted away from the midst of our

mortal cares and occupations into the presence of the solemn, though glorious realities that are associated with Christ at his coming. It would seem to us a momentary, an instantaneous transition. Of course, it would not be really so in relation to the progress of events in the universe, but it would be really so in relation to our own feelings, which in this sense are everything to each of us. We will be out of the grave before ever we are aware that we have gone in. In this case, the signs of the times and the weary evolution, it may be, of our own anxious lives, will be stopped and abolished in a moment.

Is it not wise and helpful to carry about with us a sense of this imminent possibility? The power of the idea will be instinctively felt by every one, and its value also as a corrective of life in all its relations. We can imagine, for example, how powerfully up-borne in a spiritual direction our deceased young brother would have felt during the month before his death if he had known that in four weeks, his course would be finished.

The advantage of exercising our thoughts in this way lies in the similar stimulus it will impart to us if we realise that we may but a short time have to do with the circumstances of life as it now is, and may in a brief period of time stand face to face with the Lord Jesus who was alive ages before we were born, and will live for ever, whatever may become of us. If men could carry this thought of common sense more constantly and vividly about with them than is commonly the case, things would be different with them on many points. Many things would receive a less anxious attention, and some things would be better attended to than they are.

This line of reflection is but the expansion of the thought expressed in the 39<sup>th</sup> and 90<sup>th</sup> Psalms—

*“Lord make me to know mine end and the measure of my days, what it is, that I may know how frail I am. Behold Thou hast made my days as an handbreadth, and mine age is as nothing before Thee... So teach us to number our days THAT WE MAY APPLY OUR HEARTS UNTO WISDOM.”*

This measuring of our days—this endeavouring to withstand the deceptive impressions of sense and to penetrate through all the appearances and the feelings of life to the naked fact that we are all the time on the brink of existence, as it were, and may at any moment disappear from the land of the living and the realm of being, as completely as the collapsing bubble on the water, is certainly calculated to lead us to *“apply our hearts unto wisdom.”* The people around us are busy applying their hearts—but not to wisdom. They apply them to everything but this. Wisdom is with them either a matter of aversion or a matter of scorn. We are liable to be carried away with the prevailing taste. It is a broad stream on which the world is drifting to destruction. We are here to resist the flood so far as we are concerned. We come to the Table of the Lord to apply our hearts to wisdom. We do so in recalling the meanings and associations of *“the bread which we break,”* and *“the wine which we bless.”* We do so in the reading of the Oracles of God. They are a continual call of wisdom to us. They are God’s written voice, by which alone we have access in our day to His mind. There is no truth less appreciated by the mass of mankind than this. There is none in such danger of disappearing from the practical recognitions of the educated. We have recently had to insist on it with a special emphasis. We cling to it as to a lifebuoy in the surging waters.

In the whole of the Scriptures—in every part in Genesis as in the Prophets—in the Psalms as in the Apocalypse—we are in contact with the authorised expression of the mind of God in some phase or other. Consequently, as we listen, whatever part is being read, we are *“applying our hearts”* to that wisdom which purifies the present, gives stability and comfort to the remainder of our mortal days, few or many; and enriches for us the future with an exhaustless inheritance of well-being and joy.

What do we learn as we listen? That the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. We may think this trite and even questionable. Increasing age in the truth will show us the truth and depth of the saying. We cannot fear (in the sense of revere), where we do not know. Hence, to know God is the first thing; as Jesus says,

*“This is eternal life, that they might know Thee the only true God and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent.”*

We can only know by acquaintance, and we can only make acquaintance in this matter in the Scriptures. We have read this morning that *“The fool hath said in his heart—There is no God.”* A man must be a fool to say this, and many say it in their hearts who do not say it openly. It is contrary to the most obvious considerations of reason. A man has only to look round and note the myriad indications

of contrivance in things small and things great to feel an intuitive certainty that there is somewhere an intelligence as much above man's as the works of nature are above the works of art. And then when he reflects upon the fact (evidenced by the many things in heaven and earth) that the universe has not always existed, he is taken away back to the beginning, however remote, and made to feel that that which then was (by whatever name called) must have possessed the power and wisdom to elaborate the material creation we now see. Human thought calls it "force" without allowing the wisdom and the power. The Bible exhibition of this beginning is the only one that meets the demands of reason. "*In the beginning—God;*" this accounts for all. It gives us the wisdom and the power equal to the production of what is. "*In the beginning—force,*" this accounts for nothing; it neither accounts for the work of creation when it began nor for the previous quiescence of the cosmic energy. If God is mysterious, force is not less so—a little more so in fact when considered as a something that slept for eternal ages and then without any reason, suddenly woke up and started building up worlds at "*the beginning.*" Let reason rule, and God will be joyfully perceived and received as the everlasting foundation of all things. Only the man in whom reason is weak or warped, or unenlightened, will say "*there is no God;*" and the Bible gives us the right name for a man with reason in such a condition.

Wherever we look in upon the matters contained in the Bible, we find the work of God in progress in some form or other, and all one work—not disjointed acts having no connection one with another, but things and acts that form of a connected plan reaching from the beginning of things upon the earth to the second appearing of Christ in power and great glory. Let us note the illustration of this point our readings today have afforded—Exodus, the Psalms, Romans.

In Exodus, it is Israel in Egypt, and Moses born. Here is the beginning of things in relation to revelation on the earth. The form of that revelation Paul defines in Hebrews 1:1, when he says that

*"God, at sundry times and in divers manners, spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets."*

Here in Exodus we have the commencement of the process. In this early generation of Israel, we recognise "*the fathers,*" and in Moses, we have the greatest of all "*the prophets,*" and in the things about to be transacted, we have the most palpable and impressive of all the "*speakings*" that God performed by the one to the other. The foundation was then laid for the things that came after and which culminated in the appearance and crucifixion of the Lord Jesus. The things spoken of were connected with all that we read of afterwards, down to the closing prayer in John's "*Revelations.*" "*Come, Lord Jesus; come quickly.*" They all pertain to Israel and the God of Israel. They are all beautiful and righteous and full of hope. Rightly estimated, they are the only interesting and truly important things upon earth. All human things apart from these are transient as a flower and worthless as the tinsel on the toys of children. The purpose that God has purposed in connection with Israel has in it the root of every good the heart can desire. God is in that purpose and that work all the way through, and God is everlasting, and from Him will come that perfect adjustment of human life in all its relations which is essential to the realisation of the end and aim for which the planet was made. It is an uninformed state of mind that sees nothing but narrowness and sterility and obsolescence in the Jews and their literature. The Jews themselves are certainly an uninviting theme, but it is very different with their history as regards hope for the future and comfort for the present. The Bible does not ask us to look at the Jews for what they are in themselves. At every stage, it paints them as we find them. It asks us to look at the God of the Jews, who has chosen them for His own end and who says in reference to their restoration,

*"Not for your sakes do I this, O house of Israel. Be it known unto you. Be ashamed and confounded for your own evil way."*

Acquaintance with the Bible enables us to look at the subject as the Bible asks us to look at it, and thus we steer clear of the stumbling-blocks encountered by those who look at it from the outside, who see only the peculiarities and idiosyncrasies of a perverse and ignoble race, and who miss the glory to be seen by those who go inside of the subject and see it from the standpoint of God's own purpose of goodness.

In our reading from the Psalms (53-55) we are not with a different affair though it might seem so. We are only at another stage of the same thing. We are with Israel seated in the Holy Land about 500 years after Moses led them out of Egypt. We are with Daniel enthroned as their king, and writing by the Spirit of God upon him. His theme is related to the purpose of God with Israel. He laments the

obtuseness of the common run of people with regard to God, and the consequent prevalence of violence and darkness. He longs for what God has purposed with Israel.

*"Oh that the salvation of Israel were come out of Zion!"*

He prays that meanwhile he may be shielded from the machinations of ungodly men who are bent upon his destruction. He groans with pain of heart, and confesses that fear and horror have invaded his soul, by reason of the activity and success of men of enmity who have no fear of God before their eyes. In all this, he outlines a mental condition that answers exactly to what is experienced by men in every age, who believe in the God of Israel and have made His Word their portion. It is all within the compass of the ground marked out and all built on the foundation laid at the beginning, when God openly interfered to bring Israel out of Egypt by Moses.

And are we on new and strange ground in Romans Chps. 7 and 8? By no means. It is the same work and the same theme a thousand years later than David. The writer is a Jew—a Hebrew of the Hebrews. He is writing to believers in the hope of Israel at Rome. How comes he to be doing so? Because Christ had called him. Who was Christ? The son promised to David: begotten by the Spirit of God of David's seed. The promise had long been on record. It had but recently been fulfilled in the birth of Jesus, who, at the age of thirty, had presented himself to Israel as the son of God and the heir to David's throne, and having incurred the enmity of the ruling classes, had been put to death, as pre-arranged in the wisdom of God for the accomplishment of a purpose not contemplated by them—the taking away of sin, and the establishment of a basis of reconciliation with God through Christ. This Jesus, in three days raised from the dead, and in forty days more exalted to the God of Israel's right hand—was now preached by the apostles (to whom Paul, a persecutor, had been added in a special manner). He was preached as "the way" to forgiveness, and hope and life, the only name given under heaven for the salvation of men. Paul, in the chapters read, is writing to those who had received Jesus so preached by him—writing to establish them in the faith of Christ, and to enlighten them on many deep matters connected with it, with a view to their preparation for that final attainment of "glory, honour, and immortality," which he told them was the end of his work with them in Christ.

He tells them in chapter 9, that the heedlessness and unbelief of the vast mass of Israel will not interfere with God's purpose with them—that the Word of God could not fail in its effect, and that the oppositions of the unbelieving class were only a part of the process by which the intended result would ultimately be reached; just as Pharaoh's opposition to Moses and Aaron was a part of the instrumentality by which the power of God was shown. All this he sets forth for the comfort of those who are the called according to His purpose. All things, he says, work together for their good. Their very afflictions befall them as a means of preparation for the glorious use that God purposes with them in the glorious ages to come. He asks, *"If God be for us, who can be against us?"* and declares that nothing created in heaven or earth, and nothing that can happen in the form of the direst disaster can *"separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord"*, the Son of Abraham, the son of David, the son of God.

In all this, you perceive, we are in the current of things started in the beginning with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is one purpose, one work, one hope from the beginning. Our wisdom is to hold close and fast to it, giving ourselves daily to the reading of the word and to prayer, and addicting ourselves to those varied services which, though bootless in the eyes of men, the Scriptures assure us are precious in the eyes of God, and will at last be acknowledged and rewarded by Him in circumstances of great honour and joy everlasting.

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