

ALTOGETHER VANITY

It is indeed true, as we have been singing, that few are the days, and vain the strength, and empty the joys of man. The saying that “*all is vanity and vexation of spirit*” is hackneyed, but terribly real, as applied to this life apart from the blessed hope. The finest intellect grows dim and twinkles out at last; the sublimest powers wane before the decay of years. The most splendid honour shrivels in the presence of death. Friends with their pleasantness and favours avail nothing to avert the unalterable doom. Riches, with all their surroundings of ease and elegance, are powerless to stay the hand of the Destroyer that sweeps all, at last, into the pitiless abyss of oblivion. The dread consummation hurries. Death walks in the noonday, and the thousands fall before him. Every soul is ultimately included; every good destroyed. The finest estate has to be left; the fondest desire surrendered; the largest fortune given to others.

“Every man at his best is altogether vanity.”

The coffin is the goal: the fret and sweat, the anxiety and the effort, the hopes and the achievements, the laughter and tears of life, as lived by the unjustified sons of Adam, end in the quietness of the grave.

But there is a better lot for man, if he would but put forth the hand. We behold not in the earth, as we see it now, the consummation of the divine purpose therewith. A poor outcome it would be of the stupendous power and wisdom we see at work on sea and land, if there were to be nothing higher than the incessant coming and going of perishing races, and the highest of these an abortion. No, no! A destiny commensurate with the marvellous power put forth in its creation and maintenance, is in store for this beautiful world. A habitation of joy will it be when the work is finished—a sparkling gem of the imperishable universe. All wisdom and righteousness and excellence, and love and favour, and goodness, and strength and beauty will crown the blessed heads and swell with praise the hearts of the redeemed multitude that will be revealed with the rising of the sun, at the end of this dismal night of darkness and nightmare. This is the sum of the great and precious promises made sure by transactions of unimpeachable historic record.

Yet men turn away from this glory to be revealed. They seek good in that wherein is none. They spend their money for that which is not bread, and their labour for that which satisfieth not. They hew themselves cisterns that can hold no water. They turn away from the real and lasting concerns of the divine purpose and bestow supreme attention on the concerns of this passing life, which, though important in their own place, are trifles in comparison with the things that are of God. Like the miser in Bunyan’s “*Pilgrim’s Progress*,” they scrape among the muck, while the angel stands over them with an offered crown.

What is the meaning of this almost universal infatuation? It has an explanation, but the explanation involves many details, which there is no time to elaborate now. Briefly stated, it may be defined as the want of understanding. In spiritual things, the generality of mankind are what the agricultural labourer may be supposed to be in relation to “stock” as trafficked in by a broker on ‘Change. “Stock” is a commercial fiction. In its right relation, it may be the doorway to all the realities of this life; but actually, it has no existence except in the brains of those who deal in it. It is an artificial embodiment of the value attached to houses and lands, and minerals, and merchandise. In itself, it is a nothing, though vastly productive of wealth, when skilfully manipulated. Now, the ignorant agricultural labourer knows nothing about stock. He understands turnips and potatoes. He can see, and handle, and appreciate them, and has no objection to buy a field of them from his neighbour, if he can do so at a low price. But suppose a commercial visitor offer him stock! Perhaps the visitor is of a benevolent turn; and perhaps he happens to know that a particular stock is going up, and that his acquaintance on the farm would make a fortune if he could be persuaded to invest his little savings in it. What does the rustic say to it? He shakes his head. If it were “fat stock” he could understand, but stock that he can neither handle, nor see, nor understand, is beyond him; so he concludes to leave it alone, and stick to his potatoes. His visitor pities his stupidity, and goes away to

invest as largely as he can in the artificial article which the other has despised. He has understanding of the matter, and the other has not. By the eye of commercial faith, he sees fortune through the invisible article which he buys at the Stock Exchange, and by an act of commercial insight, secures, in a single week, more potatoes and turnips, and houses and lands, than the other could get in twenty lifetimes.

So it is in spiritual matters. The world has many who can see the turnips and potatoes of this mortal existence; they can appreciate clothes on the back, money in the pocket, bread in the cupboard; they can understand working night and day to get a house over their heads; but to talk to them of justification, and faith and obedience, the promises, and sowing to the spirit, and heirship of the kingdom of God, and they do worse than shake their heads: they spurt out, "Theological trash!" and pronounce you a fool. The gospel is a mythical affair with these children of the flesh. The short-sighted deluded creatures! There is at last more even of their real things in the gospel than they can ever reach with all their pains. There is life and health, and wealth, and honour, and joy, more abundant than they ever dreamt of. They do not see the connection. They have no faith in the spiritual stock, because their understanding is darkened. That is their misfortune. We are here this morning as representing a happier state. We surround this table because we are better informed. We know how faith in the unseen verities of the gospel will lead at last to things more seen and tangible than those the world now hugs with fond desire.

The foundation of the matter lies in the fact symbolised on the table. Our stock has for its basis the historic reality Of Christ, and we know that this is a reality—our enemies themselves being witnesses. We are not dealing with matters of surmise and speculation. We have not followed cunningly-devised fables. The historic reality of Christ defies all the efforts of the keenest criticism to overturn it. Unbelievers have given up the attempt and changed their tactics. They admit the historic reality, but try to explain it away, which is more futile than denying it altogether. We take our stand on the historic reality. We have not seen Christ, but we are certain he was, and is, and is to come. We have not seen China, but we are certain there is such a place. Why? Because many people tell us there is. But how are we sure they do not lie? Because people of ordinary sanity do not lie without an object. An incessant uniform testimony of personal knowledge, where no selfish object is served by the testimony, is a guarantee of the truth of the thing testified. Where the testimony brings disadvantage on the testifier, the rule is all the stronger. On this principle, we are as certain there is a place called China as if we had been there; and on the same principle, (strengthened by the second condition named), we are as certain there was a man Christ Jesus in Judea 1,800 years ago, as if we had been alive and seen him; and on the same principle, we are certain he rose from the dead and now lives. We begin with facts open to the eyes of all men. It is not a matter of speculation or opinion at all. Here is a fact: A fame of Christ fills the world; millions of people believe on him though they do not understand him. How came they to believe? This introduces a second fact: The people of the present day have inherited their belief from forefathers, but how did the belief begin? This we have on the witness of history, apart from the New Testament; history admitted by unbelievers to be true. We have the testimony of the Roman historians, that the foundation of it was laid by the incessant agitation of Christ's disciples, in the teeth of persecution, in the first century. This testimony, which is given in a very superficial and incidental way, is amplified in the writings of the apostles. By the concurrence of these two sources of evidence, we have the apostles before us as actually as if we were eyewitnesses of their operations. We hear their voices as it were. What is it they say to us as we listen? We hear them declare that Jesus Christ, whom Pontius Pilate had publicly executed, was raised from the dead, and was offered to men as a means of eternal life through faith in him. They one and all made this declaration. They all told the same story in different parts of the world; and in all places, the result was the same—opposition, insult, spoliation, and death. This is proof positive that they believed what they said. To prove this is, in the circumstances of the case, to prove the truth of what they said: for upon what ground did they declare that Christ had risen? Because someone had convinced them? Because someone else in whom they had confidence had seen him? No, No! They declared it on the authority of **their own personal eyewitness**.

"We are his witnesses," they said (Acts 10:39).

"We ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead (verse 41).

“Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord?” says Paul; “he was seen of me as one born out of due time.”

Not only did they declare they had seen him since he rose, but they testified that he was with them forty days, precluding the idea that their sight of him could be an illusion, and furthermore that he had taken a formal leave of them, and ascended in their presence to heaven, leaving a promise of return. Now prove the honesty of men as applied to testimony like this, and you prove the testimony itself. Where a witness of proved honesty testifies to facts of which he declares himself personally cognisant, his testimony is accepted as proof in every court of law, even when it is not against his interest to give the testimony; but where the testimony tells against himself, confidence is established ten-fold. Now in the case of the apostles, the testimony related to facts seen and heard.

“We cannot,” says Peter, “but speak the things we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20).

Hence, the evidence of their integrity which their submission to evil consequences affords, is evidence of the truth of their testimony. If it is not, there is no such thing as proving anything on testimony and our courts of law are a farce. But there is such a thing as proving on testimony—the every-day practices of all society being proof; and the only reason why the process is so strenuously resisted in the case of the apostles, is because there is an intense desire to get rid of the fact which their testimony proves. But it cannot be done. The competence of the apostles to give evidence (proved by their logical, clear and forcible epistles), and the honesty evinced in the course they pursued, together establish beyond the possibility of refutation the fact that the crucified Christ rose; and if Christ rose, Christ lives; and if Christ lives, Christ will come again; and if Christ come again, he will take possession of the kingdoms of the world, and those acceptable to him will revive from the dead and be glorified, and enter into the kingdom he will establish. Those only will be acceptable to him who believe and obey the gospel. Hence, the sanest thing a man can do is to study his gospel, become acquainted with his commandments, and live in the hope and practice of both. In fact, this is the only sane course, for all other ways of seeking good (and what are men doing everywhere but seeking good?) end in miserable failure.

Thus is the invisible “stock” of spiritual things more valuable than the things which are seen; and as to its being “safe,” the evidence is before the world. It has as real and sound a basis as any commercial scheme ever submitted to the Stock Exchange. People have no apprehension of the solid basis on which it rests; therefore, they cry, “Trash.” Poor fools! Do they think themselves wiser than Paul, who said—

*“I count all things **but dung** that I may win Christ!”*

He lived in the very age when the scheme was launched, and when he had far better opportunities of deciding whether it was worthy of confidence or not. They profess to admire Paul, but practically set him down for a fool. They pooh-pooh the language of his letters, which is the language of our spiritual exchange. They treat his most serious propositions as chimeras. His dissertations, such as that read this morning (Rom. 4), are meaningless jingle to them. How differently do the words of wisdom sound in the ears of those who understand them. Those phrases of Paul bring to such, glad tidings of great joy.

Let us look at some of the joyful thoughts represented. *“Justification by faith”*: this tells us that *“not by works that we have done, but by the favour of God,”* are we admitted to a saving relation. Had we been left to what we could do for ourselves, we must have perished, for no amendment of our ways is perfect; and even if it were, it could not release us from the natural inheritance of death, nor from the consequences of our own transgressions, even if there had been no natural inheritance. The kindness and love of God have come near through Christ, to offer forgiveness through faith in him on whom He laid the iniquities of us all. This is scriptural justification; not the imputation to us of acts of righteousness we never performed, as orthodox religion proclaims, but release from the consequences of the wrong we have done. That this is the right sense of justification is evident from Paul’s quotation of David’s words, in illustration of the blessedness of justification:

*“Blessed are they **whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered.**
Blessed is the man to whom the Lord **will not impute sin**” (Rom. 4:7-8).*

It is further evident from the association of the word “*justification*” with the process of absolution:

*“By him all that believe are **justified FROM ALL THINGS**, from which ye could not be justified by the Law of Moses” (Acts 13:39);*

*“Through this man is preached unto you the **forgiveness of sins**” (verse 38);*

*“Repent and be baptised . . . **for the remission of your sins**” (Acts 2:38);*

*“God was in Christ . . . **not imputing their trespasses unto them**” (2 Cor.5: 19).*

Scriptural justification consists of a wiping-out of a sinful past; a giving to men a clear foundation, whereon to build the “*works*” which shall be unto life eternal. Justification does not ensure final salvation. A man may be “*purged from his old sins*,” and forget himself (2 Pet. 1:9), and return like a washed sow to her wallowing in the mire (2 Pet. 2:22). In the justified state to which he is introduced on his obedience to the gospel, he may bring forth fruits of the flesh (Rom. 8:13), and not of the spirit, and of these he will reap—not life everlasting, but corruption (Gal. 6:8). Justification merely places him in a position where he may “*work out his own salvation*” (Phil. 2:12). This position is all of grace or favour. Without it, a man’s exertions would be entirely in vain. In this respect, salvation is “*not of works*”: the basis of it is the bounty of God. Yet in the position, works will determine everything. We shall be judged “*according to our works, good or bad*” (2 Cor.5: 10; Matt.16: 27; Rev. 22:12).

The glory of justification is seen in contemplation of the unjustified man’s position. Do what he may, he is debarred from life and joy to come. Nothing he can do can put him in probation for the kingdom. He may develop intellect to a high point; he may cultivate the moral faculties to a noble excellence; he may attain to great refinement of thought and manner; he may surround himself with the accessories of affluence; he may attain a world-wide reputation for talent, shrewdness, and philanthropy; he may be in favour with admiring crowds on the platform, and make a pleasant company for cultivated fellow-sinners at elegant and refined assemblies. So far as futurity goes it is all in vain. There is a worm at the root; poison in the blood. He cannot extract it. He cannot avert the law of sin and death. The skull and cross-bones are his family crest. Into a coffin he must at last be nailed; down among the worms he must at last be lowered; to a piece of clay he shall turn, and worse than clay, a mass of corruption from which his warmest friends would recoil in horror. The way of God alone can justify. That way is revealed in Christ. If they will not hear Christ, corruption is their lot.

Be it ours, brethren and sisters, to keep fast hold of the wisdom which we have learnt from the word. Let us cast not away our confidence which hath great recompense of reward. Let us cling to the word, and let this be our guide unto death. Talk not of the standard being thus held too high. This (the book of God) is the standard. No man is safe to be listened to who holds the standard lower than this. Only the mind of Christ will avail as a standard in that shining day, when we shall stand in the heavenly presence, to hear what he thinks of us, and intends to do with us. The wicked world will have passed out of account. Wisdom only will sit in the judgment seat: our safety lies in making friends with Wisdom now. Hearken daily to her counsel; wait at the posts of her doors. Partake of her feast of fat things. Let no man take your crown.

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