

RIGHT UNDERSTANDINGS

We have read this morning that when the people of the country of the Gadarenes saw Christ they besought him to depart out of their coasts. We are hoping and desiring to see him shortly; with what different feelings shall we greet him. Shall we desire him to depart out of our coasts? No; he may say to us “*Depart,*” but if we are amongst those who having seen him love him, as Peter says, our desires will be the reverse of the people in question.

What an extraordinary aberration of judgment on their part; what a mighty privilege was theirs, had they only known, to have the son of God in their midst, “*the Word made flesh,*” the long-promised Messiah speaking gracious words such as never came out of human mouth before, and doing such works of power as had never been heard of, and yet they besought him to depart out of their coasts. What was the cause of this extraordinary behaviour? It may be simply expressed as a want of understanding, for had they understood who their visitor was, it is not possible they could ever in reason have desired such an insane thing as that he should leave them. This shows to us what a very great thing understanding is; it makes all the difference between a desirable human being, and one who is undesirable. It matters little how people may look externally, if they have a good understanding. They may be quite plain, or even decidedly ill-looking. They become objects not only of interest but of love if they possess an enlightened and good character, a good mind. On the other hand, a fine figure and comely features become at last repulsive, if associated with an insipid or an empty mind. We can see the wisdom of the constant exhortation in the Scriptures to cultivate above all things the understanding.

“Wisdom is the principal thing, therefore get wisdom, and with all thy getting get understanding.”

But then, understanding must be directed to proper objects; understanding in the abstract may be applied to anything, but if applied to insignificant objects, it ceases to be of great value. The common habit is to apply it to insignificant things—to understanding the structure of an engine, or the anatomy of the human body, or the nature of the atmosphere, or the movements of the planets; they are considered supreme efforts and creditable achievements of the understanding, and in their place they are not insignificant, but in their final results they are, for a man may understand all these things without attaining to a true understanding. The direction in which we are exhorted in the Scriptures to apply understanding is one that includes all others really, for if through understanding we attain to the Kingdom of God we shall understand all things in due time,

“Then shall we know as we are known,” as Paul says.

This form of understanding is not popular, it is scarcely respectable. It receives the treatment that Christ himself received; when the people see it they desire it to be taken out of their way. It is so with the Bible; it has been so with all divinely good men that have ever appeared. Even Moses was refused; all the prophets were slain, and the apostles rejected and killed. It has been universally and incessantly the same since, and will continue to be so till Christ comes. The precious things of God and His precious people are amongst the off-scouring of all things. Here is our danger, for there is a constant shrinking on the part of human nature from contemptuous treatment, and the constant disposition to desire to be in the respectable current of things. Against this tendency we must be on our guard, for it is the appointment of wisdom that things divine should be lightly esteemed and lightly treated at present.

It may trouble us sometimes to understand why God should preface His glorious work with such a time of trouble and chaos. We must simply lay this trouble aside; it is impossible that we can fully apprehend the methods of eternal Power: we may well take them for granted where we cannot follow them. Jeremiah was exercised on the subject on one occasion.

“Righteous art thou, O Lord,” said he, *“yet let me talk with Thee of Thy judgments. Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? Wherefore are all they happy that deal very treacherously? Thou hast planted them, yea, they have taken root, they grow; they bring forth fruit.”*

God did not vouchsafe to Jeremiah what we might call a metaphysical answer; He did not explain to him the philosophy of His ways, probably because Jeremiah would not have understood, had He attempted such an explanation. Instead of answering him, He rather prepared him for worse things, saying,

“If thou hast run with the footmen and they have wearied thee, how can’st thou contend with horses?”

As much as to say far more terrible things were coming, which proved to be the case; for the history of the world since then has been a history of far more triumphant wickedness than what Jeremiah had to deplore.

We have to take God’s ways on trust. We may well do so, for what are we? Only an infinitesimal atom of God’s substance in a temporary and insignificant shape. It is only when people are shut up to their own feelings that they think importantly of themselves. Very likely we all do this more or less; we can scarcely help it in the first stage. It is the very object of trouble to open our eyes, and develop true understanding. We are all no use to God until we attain to this; that is, until we see things as they are, and not as we feel. To see things as they are is to see that we are as insignificant and evanescent as the flowers, mere grass, that withers away with a season; but true existence and true rights belong only to God, of whose eternal power we are but miniature blossoms. The object of trouble is to work us into the recognition of this. We are born without understanding, and only experience can give it to us, and this experience has to be rough in some cases.

There are many kinds of knowledge that do not give us understanding. The Scriptures say, *“The knowledge of the holy, that is understanding,”* but who, or what, is the holy? It is a term comprehensive of God, and all that pertains to Him, for He only is holy; but this is a knowledge of no esteem among men. It is discarded from scholastic attainments, and its presence in the endless examinations that go on from year to year would be resented as an outrage. Well, the understanding of the gospel will save us from this general barbarism, for such it is in truth, though elegant and polished, and tolerable through habit. We are not of those who say unto God,

“Depart from us; we desire not the knowledge of Thy ways.”

Our position around this Table means the reverse of all this. We ask God to come near to us that we may know Him. We desire to come very close to Christ, not only as our Saviour, but as our elder brother, that is, one whom we desire to resemble in all things. He was above all things not only the acceptor, but the exhibitor, and the zealous champion of God. It was his business to show Him.

“I have manifested Thy name to the men whom Thou hast given me out of the world.”

This was the real and ultimate object of his mission. He did not come merely to be crucified, but to illustrate the principles that lay behind the crucifixion; the majesty and authority and holiness of God, that God’s wisdom might be exhibited, and God’s way glorified. He did not come to be raised from the dead merely that a dead body might come to life again; but that the true dependence of life upon God, and its true object for His worship, and the certainty of His final purpose might be shown. He did not come to proclaim his Messiahship merely as the assertion of a political prerogative; but that the purpose of God in making the earth and man might be manifest. And so his coming again is not merely for the purpose of establishing a new arrangement of things upon the earth; but that the earth may be filled with his Father’s glory. All the objects of the work of Christ centre in God; this is his standard, and it must become ours, if we are to be his. When he comes to the earth again we shall be in the presence of this standard. Birmingham will be behind us forever with all its affairs, great and small. Our domestic affairs, our business grievances, our individual anxieties, will all be things of the past. Nothing will remain for us but Christ and his standard. This will be very comforting if we are in harmony with him; it will be much the reverse if the case is otherwise, for Christ is just as well as kind, and the world has greatly misapprehended his character. Christ was very ready to grant favours when on the earth; he was very gentle even to offenders. He will not have lost his kindness nor his gentleness at his second coming, but his second coming will involve other manifestations. His first coming was represented as a lamb to be slain; his second coming is as a lion to avenge.

We have this idea in the chapter (63) read from Isaiah, concurring with the terrible figure in the Apocalypse, with eyes like flame, and face like the sun, and limbs like burnished brass. I point to this concurrence because of the popular feeling which we are perhaps liable to share, that the New Testament

exhibits a different Christ from the Old Testament. Some even go so far as to say that the New Testament and the Old Testament are in contradiction. They say that in the New Testament we have a meek and gentle Christ, saying, *“Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest;”* whereas in the Old Testament we have a Messiah who makes war and treads down all his enemies. It is true that the Old Testament and the New Testament exhibit these aspects of Christ, but not in the sense of being in collision with each other, for the New Testament exhibits a war-making Christ as well as the Old, and the Old Testament exhibits a gentle shepherd Christ as well as the New. The New Testament shows us the wine press of the wrath of God trodden by Christ at his second coming; and the Old Testament shows us a guileless and unavenged Man of Sorrows. Both are one—one Christ and two comings. With the second coming is associated the work of vengeance. This is what we have in the chapter before us.

“Who is this that comes from Edom?”

This implies that the questioner had a picture before his mind of some one coming from a particular direction. We must look at the context to understand this. The chapter before this one supplies it. It is a chapter of favour to Zion,

“For Zion’s sake I will not hold My peace, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest, till the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth. And the Gentiles shall see thy righteousness, and all kings thy glory, and thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord shall name. Thou shalt also be a crown of glory in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of thy God.”

Jerusalem, to whom these comforting words are addressed, is desolate in all senses, topographical, social and political. Considering that she has come to this state through the ascendancy and power of her enemies, it is evident that some great revolution must take place to bring about this change, in which she will no more be termed desolate. What is the nature of this revolution? The end of the chapter informs us.

“Say ye to the daughter of Zion, Behold thy salvation cometh, behold his reward is with him, and his work before him.”

It is the coming of Christ that is to bring about the change. Isaiah, in vision, sees him coming from Bozrah, and he asks,

“Who is it that comes thus arrayed in blood-stained garments?”

The answer is,

“I that speak in righteousness, mighty to save.”

Why? Because he has trodden the wine-press, that is, a wine-press of blood. We know from other Scriptures that he overthrows and disperses the confederated armies of Europe, but in this work he says,

“Of the people there were none with me.”

A work on behalf of the Jews which was not achieved by the Jews. We know the principle of divine operation, that no flesh should glory in His sight. The Jews are excluded from all glory in their deliverance. *“When the enemy shall come in like a flood”* it is the Spirit of the Lord that lifts up a standard against them, and not the arm of flesh in any sense. Brethren and sisters, we are on the verge of these sublime occurrences. We shall presently see this personage whom Isaiah saw travelling from Bozrah; he will be very dreadful to his enemies, but very precious and delightful to his friends. As to which of the two classes we shall be found among in that day will depend upon our present conformity or otherwise to his will. Let us wait and endure a little longer; the day of gladness and salvation is at hand.

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