

SUNDAY MORNING NO. 296

We are seven days nearer the great finish that waits every man than when we last assembled at this breaking of bread, and how soon it may come, no man can tell. Are we prepared to face it? The world at large is not. They live with eyes closed and life all awry and on the drift of an aimless current, hoping and believing, under the inspiration of false prophets, that some “far-off divine event” will put everything right in spite of themselves. If we are in a different position—if we have some definite understanding of the position of matters, some definite hope on our horizon, some clear assurance that leads us to hasten our steps towards a future which most men dread, it is because we have been led to give heed to the wondrous message from heaven that has come by Moses and the prophets, Jesus and the apostles. That message is spread over all these Scriptures from which a portion has been read this morning, and brings light and cheer and comfort and holiness wherever it is received with the affectionate docility that is becoming in men approached in love by God.

We have been reading (Rom. 8).

“There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.”

What can be more cheering than this, when we remember who are *“those who are in Christ Jesus.”*

“As many of you as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal. 3:27).

A man who has “put on” Christ is in Christ, and *“in Christ, ye who were far off are made nigh”* (Eph. 2:13). This is our position. We have believed the Gospel, *“which is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth”* (Rom. 1:16); and we have been baptised, as it has pleased God to appoint for the assumption of His name. Therefore we are entitled to rejoice in the freedom to which we have been introduced. Yes, but there are corollary conditions which we must not overlook. The non-condemnation of which Paul speaks is (as he immediately adds) for those *“who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit.”* A man might be *“in Christ Jesus”* and *“walk after the flesh.”* What then? He tells us a few verses further down:

“If ye walk after the flesh, ye shall die” (13).

It is not enough to be *“in Christ.”* As Jesus himself said,

“Every branch in me that beareth not fruit, he taketh away.”

It is of the very utmost importance that this be recognised. Some dangerous views lay an overweening stress on the efficaciousness of being in Christ, making little account of that *“walking after the Spirit,”* on which its final virtue depends. Men truly cannot be saved without being in Christ by the belief and obedience of the Gospel: but they may be in this position without walking after the Spirit, and in that case the hope of salvation is vain.

What is this *“walking after the flesh”* and *“walking after the Spirit?”* How very important to have clear ideas here, in view of what hangs on it. To get clear ideas, we must ask, What is flesh? and What is Spirit? And we can get our answer. *“Flesh”* is a Bible synonym for human nature. When it says *“All flesh is grass,”* it means all men and women are short-lived. When it says *“All flesh corrupted his way on the earth,”* it means all men and women had done so. When it says *“Be silent, O all flesh before me,”* it means all the population. And so in hundreds of cases. By a comprehensive definition of one of the Psalms, man is *“but flesh, a wind that passeth away and cometh not again.”*

Now this short-lived *“flesh”* has certain impulses and desires of its own which, acting disobediently to law, will make men savages. By nature, it has no knowledge of law. It comes into the world with affections, lusts, impulses and desires, but not with any knowledge. All it may afterwards know, it has to learn, and it learns but very imperfectly in most cases. The knowledge of God, it scarcely learns at all. Why it is so, is not a question we need trouble ourselves with on this occasion. The fact itself is unquestionable, and it is facts with which wisdom has to deal. Because the knowledge of the will of God is a thing extraneous to man, and man has no natural liking for it when it is accessible. Therefore it comes to pass that the works of the flesh are evil. Those works are many

times described in the Bible. In some cases, a formal list of its deeds is given, and it makes a very ugly picture. Jesus says,

“Out of the heart of man proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, foolishness.”

Paul’s list is like it:

“Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murder, drunkenness, revellings and such like,”—

Concerning which, he adds the warning words,

“Of the which I tell you beforehand, as I told you in time past, that those who do such things shall not inherit the Kingdom of God.”

These are *“the works of the flesh”* in their undiluted hideousness. How different are the works of the Spirit.

But what is the Spirit in this connection? Just as the flesh is MAN, so the Spirit, it will be found, is GOD. God is Spirit, and has spoken to us by the Spirit in prophet and apostle. To walk after the Spirit is to live according to the moral attributes of the Spirit, as revealed. Those attributes are a great contrast to the attributes of the flesh in every way. They may be said to be summed up in the character of God. This has been declared many times, and constitutes the most comforting part of the Scriptures. Even so early as at the giving of the law on Mount Sinai, God’s character was said to be—

“Merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and in truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty.”

How frequently in the Psalms are we assured that—

“His mercy endureth for ever.”

In Christ, we have the divine character drawn to a focus as it were.

“Learn of me,” cries he; *“I am meek and lowly of heart.”*

We hear of *“the meekness and gentleness of Christ.”* As applied to man, here are the characteristics of the Spirit as recommended to our cultivation:

“Love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness.”

This is a very different category from the works of the flesh. How beautiful! As to the other, how ugly! Even the children of disobedience admire the fruits of the Spirit in the abstract. There is not a scoundrel upon earth but desires to be considered a good man—an involuntary compliment to excellence.

Here then is the inexorable law of the Kingdom, that none shall enter therein who do not in some measure conform to the character of the King. Men who trust to “the merits of Christ,” as the popular phrase goes, and have no merits of their own, will find themselves mistaken at last. It is true that no merits of ours (if we ever could have had any) could have redeemed us from our sins, or opened the way of eternal life. That was the act and arrangement of the grace of God through Christ *“without works,”* but having admitted us to this arrangement of His grace, he requires of us that we yield to Him the merit of obedience to the commandments of Christ, thus *“working out our salvation”* in fellow-workmanship with him. It is true also that, left to ourselves, we never could have evolved merits of our own that would have in any way entitled us to His attention; but being no longer left to ourselves—the grace of God that bringeth salvation having appeared in the preaching of the Gospel—the good seed of its announcement having been sown in our hearts, we are expected to bring forth fruit in liberal return (Luke 8:15.)

“If we walk after the Spirit, we shall live;” so Paul assures us in the chapter read (verse 13). He means, of course, in the day of recompense. He does not mean now, as some have been mischievously teaching of late. As regards **now**, his testimony is—

*“The **body is dead, because of sin**, though the Spirit is life because of righteousness.”*

The statement is perfectly plain. It combines the two phases of our actual experience. The body continues mortal as ever, notwithstanding our relation to *“The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus”*—a law in Christ and not in us, and a law of immortal life, not animal life; and a law that will only come into force with regard to us when—

“Christ who IS our life shall appear.”

Till then, we are waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of the body, as Paul mentions in our morning’s chapter (verse 23). The body will then be no longer *“dead because of sin.”* It is so as yet—dead because of ancestral sin—mortal by inheritance from the first sinner. It will remain in this dead state till changed in a moment when the Lord, our life and glory, returns from the heavens. Then *“this mortal”*—this deathful—will put on immortality, if the Lord and Judge think well to grant this unspeakable privilege. Then we shall finally part company with the first Adam. We are in process of this redemption, and in process only. The process will be complete with *“the redemption of the body.”* There has been much unskilful and obscuring talk on this subject.

But though *“the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.”* We may understand this if we consider that, notwithstanding the utter mortality of our body, our spiritual prospects and relations are those of life, and life only: for *“He that hath the Son of God hath life,”* because life is in the Son of God for us to receive by-and-bye if he is satisfied with us. We have the Son of God by the possession of faith. He is ours, he belongs to us, and all that he has is ours in that sense, if he repudiate us not at the last. And this lively relation of our spirit or mind as distinct from our body, is due to righteousness—righteousness in its largest sense—righteousness of Christ, as distinguished from the sin of Adam (for as it is *“by the offence of one”* that many are dead, so it is *“by the righteousness of one”* that the way is open for life to many): and Christ is made to us righteousness in the belief of the Gospel: for *“therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith”* (Rom. 1:17), and finally, believers are called on to fulfil the righteousness of God in themselves in the doing of His righteous commandments, under the assurance that *“he that doeth righteousness is righteous,”* and that the man deceives himself who expects to become righteous in any other way (1 John 3:7). Thus, it is *“because of righteousness”* in the most comprehensive way, that our spirit is life, though our poor body be *“dead because of sin.”* It is all a process of beautiful evolution which takes time and involves pain, but will bloom in flowers of paradise at last.

“Therefore we are debtors, not to the flesh to live after the flesh.”

No, indeed! How powerful is the logic of this observation, coming after all that has been rehearsed before. What inducement is there to live after the flesh in view of the inevitable ending?

“What fruit had ye,” enquires Paul (6:21) *“in those things whereof ye are now ashamed, for the end of these things is death.”*

Sin may be sweet for a moment, but there is nothing but ugliness, destruction, and ruin at the last. Righteousness may be bitter sometimes, but the fruit is sweet holiness, and the end everlasting life (v. 22).

“In the way of righteousness is life: in the pathway thereof, there is no death.”

“Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths peace.”

“She is a tree of life to them that lay hold on her: happy is every one that retaineth her.”

Paul continues:

“Ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear: but ye have received the spirit of adoption whereby ye cry, Abba, Father.”

We need to remember this. We are liable to droop under the burden of a weak nature and conscious imperfections. We must look on the other side, and rejoice in the fact that—

“As heaven is high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward them that fear Him,” and that *“as far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us.”*

“Be glad in the Lord, ye righteous.”

Open your eyes and expand your heart to the heavens, in remembrance of the power and the glory and the wisdom and the goodness that are inherent and inexhaustible in the fountain of life and being. Look not much unto yourselves, except to remember that any little gift of faculty we possess is derived from God, in whom there is a fathomless deep of the same; and that the clouds and inefficiencies and insufficiencies that distress us are the infirmities inseparable from an earth-cleaving nature permitted for a purpose and for a time, but which will disappear in the day of God's accomplished purpose as completely as the morning mist before the sun. God is pleased that we should glory and be glad in Him. He has asked us to do it. He has said He will look to us and regard us and help in all the rough ways of our present pilgrimage if we are humble and contrite in spirit, and turn not again to folly. And even if we stumble like Peter, He is ready to pardon, if, like Peter, we earnestly repent, and invoke the mercy which is greater than our need.

“If we confess our sins, He is gracious and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all iniquities.”

Paul could say in the day of the Spirit's manifestation, that—

“The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit that we are the children of God.”

The conviction of sonship did not rest on the word discerned and received by faith, but was visibly endorsed and attested:

“God bearing them witness with signs and wonders and divers miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit” (Heb. 2:4).

In our day, we cannot say that the Spirit beareth witness: but we can say, the Spirit has borne witness. It has not borne witness to us as individuals, but it has borne witness to the fact that it has pleased God to receive as sons and daughters all who believe the Gospel of His grace, and yield themselves to it in submissive obedience, and come out from the world which rejects Him. Therefore we may stand with the same assurance on the Gospel in our day as the apostles did in theirs, while carefully discriminating between the open witness of the Spirit in their days and its indirect witness in that day to us.

“If children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ.”

Here are our rich title-deeds. There is an “if,” but we are on the right side of the “if.” We know we are children because we believe the Gospel and love and obey all things connected therewith. Being children, then are we heirs. We know what an heir is: one destined to possess. “Heirs of God:” his heirs in the sense of being the appointed inheritors of the inheritance He has provided for His children: and His heirs also in the sense of being the destined partakers of the divine nature. A more glorious prospect for perishing human beings there could not be. Everything that men can think of as desirable is involved in the inheritance of His nature and the possession of—

“What he hath prepared for them that love him.”

There is no joy, no excellence, no good thing that men desire absent from the salvation that God offers through Christ on submission and reverence.

“He that overcometh shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be my son.”

And in all this, we are *“joint-heirs with Christ.”* That is, he is an heir—*“the heir”*—and we are permitted to rank as heirs with him, if we please God and are found acceptable at the judgment seat of Christ.

“If so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.”

Suffering is inseparable from the preparatory phase of divine sonship. It works a work that nothing else can do. This is recognised even among the wise of this world, who subject their sons to hardship in preparation for the prizes of life. There is a deep philosophy in the statement that—

“Whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth.”

Character cannot be either proved or developed apart from suffering. *“All are partakers,”* Paul says. Every son, every daughter will be made to suffer in some way. Each case will have its own suitable form, and the forms will differ, but all will suffer. The Gospel is not only a call to salvation, but it is a call to suffering for the time being. Even as to Paul, Christ said,

“I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name’s sake.”

Therefore it is that most men turn away from the Gospel. They are hunting for pleasure, and the Gospel brings trouble. Men hate those who submit to the truth: and no man likes to be hated, and in this alone there is trouble.

“I have given them thy word, and the world hath hated them because they are not of the world.”

“Ye shall be hated by all men for my name’s sake.”

“But the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us.”

No suffering that a man can go through is to be put in the scale with the privilege of life-everlasting and entrance into the Kingdom of God. And though the world condemn those that believe in God and obey Him, the whole creation, including that condemning world itself, if they but knew it, are waiting for the consummation of things bound up in their hope. The hope of the world is in the hope of the Gospel—not that they have a hope in any definite sense, but they have desires at which they labour in various ways—desires that will never be realised except in the Kingdom of God, which is the essence of the Gospel. Their political aims, the social regeneration they would like to effect, are unattainable except in the purpose that God has purposed in himself, *“to gather together in one, all things under Christ.”* Therefore in a very practical sense—

“The earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God.”

The creature has been made subject to vanity as part of a purpose of God—*“not willingly”*—not by their own will, *“but by reason of Him who hath subjected the same in hope.”* The creature at last will be delivered from the bondage of corruption, into the glorious liberty of the children of God. That is, all the world will share in the benefits that will finally come out of the work of God by the hands of the saints.

“All families of the earth will be blessed.”

This view of matters enables the sons and daughters of God to be patient under the maltreatments of evil men. They can say to themselves, *“If the world only knew, they are afflicting their true benefactors.”* God permits this for the development of the benefactors. But the benefactors can meanwhile regard the maltreatment with a certain amount of compassion, like Christ who wept over the city that was to reject and destroy him. *“Not only they,”* but ourselves also groan within ourselves at the prevalent evil. But the groaning is not of the destructive order.

“We are saved by hope.”

We look forward and know that all will come out right at last. Not only are we thus sustained in our conflict with evil. But *“the Spirit itself helpeth our infirmities.”* How?

“We know not what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings that cannot be uttered. And he that searcheth the

hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints, according to the will of God.”

The Spirit and Christ are now one. What he saith is what the Spirit saith (Rev. 2:1-4). Christ making intercession for us (Rom. 8:34) is the Spirit making intercession for us. The Spirit reflects to heaven our unuttered feelings and desires, and Christ in heaven, who is conscious and cognisant of all things by the Spirit, takes note of them and makes them the subject of intercession with the Father—the fountain of all Spirit and life. So that often, when we cannot pray, from weakness, our needs and desires are wafted to heaven as unuttered and unutterable groanings, and succour supplied as we need. Complete succour would interfere with the discipline that comes from trouble. God knows how much to allow. He has promised to grant this, that we may not be tempted above that we are able to bear, but may, after all the storms of life, sail safely into the haven of rest, and peace and joy for ever.

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