

APPEARANCES AND REALITIES, HUSBANDS AND WIVES

Sometimes what we read—sometimes what we sing—furnishes the starting point of our meditations. This time, it is both. We have sung of the ephemerality of our present life; we have read some cheering things touching another life and of the conditions that lead from emancipation from one to the other. Let us grapple with both ideas for a few minutes. They need grappling with: we cannot otherwise grasp them to any practical purpose. Who estimates the vanity of human life as it ought to be estimated? Their number is very few. The appearance of things is against such an estimate. They appear in the gross as if they were always the same. You go out into the streets and there are always babies, and school children, and young men, and middle-aged men, and old men. From year to year the picture is the same. There is no apparent change. Things appear fixed and stable, and people in general give in to the power of this appearance, and unconsciously form their purposes on this tacit but not-to-be-confessed assumption. It is well to take time occasionally to look behind this assumption and see its utter fallacy. Though the picture of human life is always the same in the mass, take it in the detail and you find a very different state of things. If you have it in your power, go to a place where you have not been for twenty years. Consider the people you were acquainted with before you left. Where are the babies you knew? Nowhere. Most of them are in the graves: the rest are bustling young men and women. Where are the young men and women you knew? You cannot find them. You may find sober middle-aged people on whom time is making its mark, and who show little of the blithesomeness of youth. Where are the middle-aged men? They are dead or old. Where are the old men that interested you and were interested in you in your boyhood or girlhood? They are gone. The grass grows on their graves in the cemetery. The picture saddens perhaps, but instructs. What has happened to our acquaintance is happening to all. We are all—young and old—wise and foolish—rich and poor—in one procession—one long ceaseless procession to the grave. We know it in ourselves and in the friends of our bosom. As time goes on we change—slowly but surely. The light of the eye gets more subdued; incipient wrinkles show themselves in the corners of the countenance; the curve and plumpness of beauty give way to the angularity and attenuation of decay. Grey hairs show here and there. Follow the process long enough, and it has but one end in the natural order. The flame of the lamp burns low in its socket till, after a few unsteady twinkles, it goes out. The night comes when no man can work. The mourners go about the street.

It is not mawkishness that conjures such a picture; it is good sense; it is wisdom. Only folly ignores the dreadful inevitable to which all human life is at present subject. It drinks and forgets its sorrow. It revels and shouts and sinks deeper in the miserable mire. Rather let ours be the man of God's prayer,

"So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom."

Rather let us obey the exhortation which speaketh unto us as children:

"Redeem the time because the days are evil":

"Pass the time of your sojourning here in fear."

The exhortation is seated in wisdom. The days are evil. Nothing we can do can alter this fact. We may embellish the evil days and make them more comfortable; but we cannot eradicate the constitutional evil in all human matters which leads every man at last to endorse Solomon's verdict,

"Vanity and vexation of spirit."

Of course, if there were nothing else within reach, it would be un wisdom in the highest degree to trouble ourselves. To make the best of our evil days with as light a heart as possible, would be the most commendable course, though with our best endeavours, the attempt to realise good in evil must be a failure. *"Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die,"* would at least be a natural motto in such a case. But this is not the state of the case. What means our meeting this morning? What mean these emblems on the table? There is a streak of light and hope in human history. We have another relative besides Adam. We have a redeeming as well as an enslaving kinsman. Our glorious Creator,

as our reading informs us (1 Pet. 1), “*hath begotten us again unto a **lively hope** by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.*” And this we are told is “*according to his **abundant mercy.***” Let us take comfort from this intimation. We all know what mercy is. It is the exhibition of kindness where it is not deserved. We all appreciate it keenly when it is shown towards ourselves, however we may at any time fail to conceive it towards others. It is not only mercy we have to contemplate in the case before us: it is “*abundant mercy*”—mercy that abounds: mercy that is large and liberal and overflowing. It is what Paul elsewhere describes as—

“The exceeding riches of his grace, in his kindness towards us through Christ Jesus”
(Eph. 2:7).

It is a something to open our souls to—to rejoice in, to take comfort from. The goodness of God is an inexhaustible fountain of consolation. It is manifest in many ways, but in nothing so much as in the fact that he hath “*begotten us again unto a lively hope.*” It was “*while we were yet sinners*” that this arrangement was made. As yet, the arrangement is only a matter of apprehension by faith. When the thing itself comes, we shall realise how much cause there is for the song which ascribes “*blessing and honour, and glory and thanksgiving*” to the Creator of all things and the Saviour by Christ Jesus. Meanwhile, we take from it all that finite fainting human faculty can draw. It contains provision for all our need—healing for all our woes. Are we weak and imperfect, with souls cleaving to the dust? We shall attain to power of nature and knowledge and spiritual affinity akin with the angels. Do we groan within ourselves, joining even in Paul’s lamentation,

“Oh wretched man that I am!”

We shall be delivered from this bondage of corruption, and exchange the spirit of earth-tending heaviness for the gladsome garment of praise in that emancipation from the mortal which is the highest promise and the strongest desire. Are we harassed and overborne with the difficulties and the complications and the vexations incident to the present form of human life on earth? There is peace and rest and tranquillity and joy in store when Christ comes to take his brethren to his bosom, overshadowing them with his love and harbouring them in his Father’s house—the glorious kingdom of the age to come. Are we poor and despised and of no account among men? The day comes when the saints will realise in their exaltation the promise of the Spirit by Isaiah:

“Ye shall eat the riches of the Gentiles, and in their glory shall ye boast yourselves”
(Isa. 61:6).

Are we lonely and famished of spirit for want of the society of intelligence and nobility and worth? The day of the manifestation of the sons of God will introduce us to a multitude that no man can number of the choicest of mankind, made perfect in their glorification—men of clear eye, and quick intelligent interest, and strong faith, and devout adoration of God—men whom Yahweh Himself styles “*my jewels*” (Mal. 3:17). Such society will be a perpetual fountain of living waters in which we shall bathe and disport ourselves with joy unspeakable and full of glory. There is no good thing to be conceived or desired but what is contained in the hope laid up for us in heaven with Christ, who will bring it unto us at his glorious revelation (1 Pet. 1:13).

With such a “*joy set before us,*” does it not become easy, when we realise it, to endure the evil of present experience, and to submit to the deprivation connected with the profession of our hope? There is but one answer. It would be madness to turn aside. There is but one wise course, and that is to take Paul’s advice:

“Cast not away your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward.”

Just one glimpse at another aspect of the question. For whom awaits all this “*glory to be revealed*”? Is it for all? We have learnt the truth on this point very clearly. Peter, whose letter we are considering, puts the matter plainly by question:

“If the righteous shall scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?”

The apostles always speak of salvation contingently. There is always an “if.” The “if” is not put obscurely. “*If ye do these things*”—things specified. There are “*things*” which have to be done and attained, the doing of which constitutes the doers “*obedient children*” and heirs of the good things promised. There are many such “*things*.” We shall look at one of them strongly presented in our reading this morning; the reciprocal duties of husbands and wives. The truth comes into our houses and tells us how we ought to behave there. It has to do not only with the nature of man and the purpose of God, but with the way husbands and wives carry themselves towards each other. This has a practical interest for us all. We are most of us husbands and wives here this morning. Let us hear what Peter has to say to us on the subject (1 Pet. 3:1). The wives then, in subjection to their own husbands, are to exhibit a “*chaste conversation (or behaviour) coupled with fear*” in illustration of the power of the word over them. This is the opposite of the brazen-faced self-assertion which finds favour in some quarters in our day. They are to commend themselves to their husbands by their attire, but not only their external attire. They are not to aim at effect in this department:

“*Whose adorning,*” says Peter, “*let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel.*”

This is a very cheap kind of ornamentation. Only poor-minded women would aim at distinction by its employment. Daughters of Sarah can afford to allow the other daughters to have a monopoly of finery. It can be purchased at so much a yard! Not so with the adorning that Peter recommends.

“*Let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even **the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit**, which is in the sight of God of great price.*”

Wise and worthy women can afford to act on this exhortation. Woman is attractive enough in herself to make her independent of trinkets and ribbons, not that she is to go to the other extreme and be prudish and unsightly. There is a medium in all these things which good sense easily finds. Women of worth will be found on the medium line. The gew-gaws will certainly be left to the fools. It is the same among men. Where do you find dressiness, dandyism, foppery? Always among the empty heads—never among the wise and righteous. In fact it is almost a safe rule of calculation that in proportion to the amount of adornment outside is the want of adornment inside. Wives are to be modest, and discreet, and sober of character and attire.

Then the husbands have their part. They are to “ *dwell with the wives according to knowledge*”—not according to ignorance: not according to unwisdom. A husband of the apostolic type is governed by intelligence in his ways. A wise man is a beauty anywhere, but especially by the side of a good wife. How is he to behave to her? There is something on this point. He is to “*give honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as heirs together of the grace of life.*” There is a good deal implied in this. The wife is told to be subject to her husband: but the husband is not told to lecture her on her duty to be subject. He is told to “*give honour*” to her. This is the opposite of telling her she is subject. To tell her of her subjection is to cast dishonour upon her. To treat her as a subject is to make her a slave and not a co-heir of life eternal. Let a man do his part and a woman is very likely to do hers. Where is the woman that would not find it easy to be subject to a man who honoured her, “*who nourished and cherished her, even as the Lord the ecclesia*”? (Eph. 5:29). There may be women who even in such a case would be insubordinate and untractable: but they would be out of the common run. If a man, however, loves, nourishes and cherishes his wife, he will not be under much temptation to lay down the law to her on the subject of her subjection. In fact he could not do such a thing, for such a course would be inconsistent with the honour he gives her. If each side would preach and concern themselves with their own duty, each would find their own part easier. It is not for the husband to say to a wife, “It is your duty to obey me.” It is not for a wife to say to a husband, “It is your duty to honour me.” This mode of going to work would frustrate instead of forward the end in view. A wife is not likely to be the more obedient for being told it is her duty, but the reverse; and a husband’s love is not likely to grow for being ordered. Rather let the wife say, “It is my duty to obey you”; and let the husband say, “It is my duty to honour you.” Such an attitude, taken sincerely and naturally on each side, and carried out in a practical way, would be a powerful mutual help. The other way is a mutual hindrance and destruction. The right way is the attitude divinely enjoined, and it is the attitude taken by the children of God. Those who act otherwise are not “*obedient children.*” A man

knowing the gospel and able to talk of it, but acting the part of a tyrant at home, is no brother of Christ, however he may pass current among men. He is what Paul calls “*sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.*” So a woman having understanding of the ways of God, but acting an insubordinate unloving part in private, is no member of the sisterhood of Christ, however distinctly and decidedly she may be recognised as “a sister” among professors of the truth. These things concern the spirit of Christ, and “*if any man have not the spirit of Christ, he is none of his.*”

It wants just one other element thrown in to complete the picture of the conjugal relation as scripturally defined—an element apparently incompatible with the mutual concern just considered—yet not at all so. It is the element of a certain sort of mutual uncarefulness, that referred to by Paul when he says,

“But this I say, brethren, the time is short: it remaineth that both they that have wives be as though they had none”

(1 Cor. 7:29):

And alluded to also by Jesus when he says—

“If a man come to me, and hate not . . . his wife and children, and brethren and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.”

It seems at first sight impossible to reconcile this with the love that a man is enjoined to bestow on wife and children. It is one of those sayings that are apt to make a man feel as certain disciples felt who left Christ, saying of another matter,

“This is an hard saying: who can hear it?”

Persistent dwelling in the word will open this as well as other dark matters. The allusion to a man’s “*own life*” shows the sense of Christ’s words. A man is not to value any human thing on a level with the things appertaining to Christ. The things that are seen are all temporal—short-lived and inferior: the things of Christ, not yet seen, are all eternal and lofty and glorious. Christ asks us to hate the one by comparison with the other. He asks us to put him first—before wife and child and life. This is reasonable. The family relation is ephemeral, an adaptation to the needs of a transitory phase of the world’s history. Enlightened husbands and wives will recognise this, and while loving each other as is meet they will each give to Christ the higher place.

Finally, says Peter, going outside of the domestic circle,

“Be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another; love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous: not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing; but contrariwise blessing.”

The sons of God answer to this character. Unity, compassion, love, prevail among them—even now. Where contrary conditions exist, it is because of the presence of a foreign element. There will be no foreign element in the perfected body of Christ. The mustered family will be perfect and entire, lacking nothing. A powerful mutual affection, on the basis of mutual and unblemished excellence, and nurtured by the unfailing strength of the spiritual and immortal nature, will provide a chief and glorious feature in the feast of good things to come that awaits the accepted brethren of the Lord Jesus.

Taken from: - “Seasons of Comfort” Vol. 1

Pages 454-459

By Bro. Robert Roberts