

WITHOUT FAITH IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO PLEASE GOD

“Without faith it is impossible to please God.” We may be very thankful that we have come to a recognition of this great fact, especially at a time when it is almost universally denied. Our assembling this morning is a token of admission on our part that *“without faith it is impossible to please God”* and that *“he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.”* We accept the great fact upon the authority of Christ; for though written by Paul, it has the force of a statement by Christ himself, on the principle laid down by Christ, that whosoever hears the apostles hears him, (Luke 10:16). The statement that *“without faith it is impossible to please God,”* is also in complete accord with all that Christ himself said.

As to what is meant by this God-pleasing faith, it is defined in the first verse as something having reference to the future—the substance of things HOPED FOR; the evidence of things not seen (as yet). Belief in God who promises, and belief of the things promised, embraces all that is affirmable of faith. This is the faith without which no man can be well-pleasing to the Creator. We are assembled this morning on that footing, believing and testifying to others—that if men will please God, they must have faith in what He has said; *“they must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.”*

There is very great comfort in that double belief; it is the only sterling consolation of existence. When we realise the fact that God is—that all things are in the hands of an Almighty Being, whose unerring wisdom is slowly guiding things to a pre-determined issue of good, we are enabled to put up with much that is grievous in the experience of men and women whose thoughts are not of God. There is no difficulty, philosophically speaking, in accepting the proposition that God is. We see that it must be so; because things are, and because things have not always been.

Things could never have made themselves. If ever there was a time when there was nothing, there could never have come a time when there could be anything; for it is impossible that something could come out of nothing. Hence an eternal antecedent is a philosophical necessity; and that eternal antecedent must have had the quality of intelligence as well as force, for all the developments of the universe are characterised by wisdom. It is therefore an easy effort of the mind to grasp the fact that God exists, and that fact once realised, is inexpressibly consolatory.

There is a sense in which we may say we are not. But a few years ago, there were no such persons as ourselves in existence, and in a short time to come (apart from the coming of the Lord), there will again be no such persons to be found. We have no power of self-continuance; we depend entirely upon those relations of life that God has established. We are just like a flower—indeed the Bible compares us to a flower—which is the mere product of forces behind it, over which it has no control. We also are mere products of forces antecedent to ourselves, and have no power in ourselves; we can only glide along in the channel marked out for us.

In such an ephemeral condition, how comforting to feel that there is a Great Power for ever, the primary energy out of which all things come; and that to that power, “with whom is no variableness nor shadow of turning,” we sustain the relation of children. How comforting to know the truth of what David says, that *“like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him;”* and that *“no good thing will He withhold from them that please Him;”* that there is no error or caprice with Him; for He is long-suffering, patient and benevolent to a degree beyond our knowledge; that kindness is the first quality of His being—that God is love. When we feel all that, we are solaced in the midst of life’s uncertain experiences. We come to realise by the meditation that comes with the daily reading of the Word—that things will go right; that however wrong they appear to be, they will go right in the end, if we do those things that are well-pleasing in His sight.

“All things work together for good to those who are called according to the purpose of God.”

Though things may seem to shape adversely, Eternal Goodness guides the current to a beneficent end, even when the beneficence is not realised in the present state.

The sufferer may imagine that God is not in his lot, and he is liable to become disheartened. With as much reason might the prophets have come to that conclusion regarding themselves; for Paul testifies in this very chapter concerning them, that they wandered about in sheepskins and goat skins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented. The kind of affliction they were occasionally subject to, is exemplified in the case of Jeremiah, who was let down by cords into a dismal pit of mire at the bottom of which he sank up to the armpits in mud.

Might not Jeremiah have supposed at such a time that God had forsaken him? Especially considering that the cause of his horrid imprisonment was his faithfulness in adhering to the divine Word. Had he thought so, he would have made the mistake which some short-sighted people fall into with regard to the incidents of ordinary life.

The fact is, God's dealings with the prophets had regard to the prophets themselves as well as those to whom He sent them. God accomplishes many ends with simple means. In sending the prophets, He not only reproved the generation addressed, but brought out His Word for the enlightenment of subsequent generations, and at the same time developed circumstances for trying, purifying and disciplining the prophets themselves. Jesus testifies that the prophets are to be in the Kingdom of God—

"Ye shall see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the prophets in the Kingdom of God."

We also read in Revelation that the time is come for God *"to give reward unto His servants the prophets."* It was therefore needful that they should be tried by adversity.

A man is unfit for use—even in the human sphere—till he is tried. A character is without value till it has gone through the fire in some way or other. A person who is all the time in agreeable circumstances cannot have that hearty appreciation of the Truth which adversity engenders; neither is it possible that his character can be brought out distinctly. Development depends upon activity. "Pleasure" does not tend to spiritual activity, but rather to spiritual lassitude and death. It blunts the perception of the need for the truth. It makes the mind contented with the present. It brings mental rust and moral sluggishness. It hides the spiritual mind. When he is tried you see him, and get to know what he is made of, and he knows himself as he never can with a pleasant breeze on all sides. The man who has come through trial and suffering is a more complete and a more precious man in every sense than one who does not know what trouble is. He is qualified to judge justly of other men, and to sympathise with the erring; and we must remember that the object of God's operations towards us in the Gospel, is to develop an order of men who will be qualified to be the associates of Jesus in the administration of the Divine law in the earth, in the day of the Messiah's glory.

When you consider this, it throws considerable light upon many things that would otherwise be dark. It enables us to understand how it is that the sons coming to the Father receive chastisement. It helps us to respond to the words of Paul—

"If ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers (even the prophets themselves, and the apostles; and Jesus himself, the highest of all)—then are ye bastards and not sons."

No one will ever come to any perfection of divine development without chastisement. Chastisement fits a man for future exaltation.

You can see that in the case of Joseph. He was the best of twelve sons, and was loved the most by his father. At seventeen years of age, you know what happened. Sent on a hospitable errand to his brothers whose envy had been excited by the preferential attention of his father, and fed by the naturally superior carriage of Joseph himself, he was put by then into a pit. And there, although there is nothing in the narrative about it, we may imagine he abandoned himself to the utmost extravagance of grief. As much is implied in the words of his brethren, when in the austere presence of Joseph (ignorant that he understood them), they said,

“We are verily guilty concerning our brother in that we saw the anguish of his soul, when he besought us and we would not hear.”

Joseph is let down into the pit, and by-and-bye, a gang of Ishmaelites come along and his brethren change their minds and sell him to them, doubtless glad to get rid of him without putting him to death. Imagine a fate more truly heartless than to be taken away from a fond and affectionate father, in comfortable circumstances, and given into the hands of traders as a slave. This was Joseph's desolate position, and what he must have suffered we cannot easily realise, for at this period there was no indication of the purpose to be served in his slavery. The surroundings were those of blackest night. We see the light that afterwards broke upon the scene. We look from the throne on which Joseph sat in Egypt, and are enabled to view his enslavement with composure; but if we try to put ourselves in the position of Joseph at the moment he was sold by his brethren, we can realise that it must have been a position of utter desolation; and it was a long time before his path began to brighten. Taken to Egypt he was sold as a slave menial into the house of one of Pharaoh's officers, and you know that after serving for a time, through the power of slander he was thrown into prison, and there he lay in the lowest depths of adversity, apparently abandoned by God and man. Now, in such a position Joseph might well have reasoned, if he had been of the faithless sort, and had not endured as seeing Him who is invisible—if he had not as it were, a hand grasping the invisible hand of God—that God was taking no cognisance of his position; whereas He was guiding Joseph to a splendid destiny and preparing him for the high position he was to occupy. Adversity gave a robustness of character he could not otherwise have possessed. His afflictions were spread over thirteen years; and they were thirteen years of utter blackness, pure adversity, unmitigated evil, in which to the eye of sense there was no token of divine regard, and yet in which God was at the helm all the way through.

Now, here we are, so many Josephs; we have been called to be the sons of God; we have been called to be the seed of Abraham, the children of Israel and the brethren of Joseph; and like him, we are going through a training for a throne. We are being put through the fire, like ore, that the precious metal may come out at last, tried and refined, for the Royal use. Let us think of this, and endure evil with composure. Let us avoid the mistake of thinking that God has forsaken us, because it may be we are placed in circumstances in which there appears to be no evidence of right guidance. God knows what is needful for our development, if we do not. Let us commit our way to Him, and roll our burden on Him, knowing that He careth for us.

What a blessed thing then, to believe that God is. Few practically believe it. Outside the truth there is a perfect desert in this respect. With the exception of a few misguided orthodox people who have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge, the great mass of people around us are without faith of any sort. God is not in all their thoughts. Such as attend upon “public worship” do so because it is a “respectable” custom, to neglect which, is to incur social odium, and because it affords scope for display under the pleasing and self-deceptive guise of sanctity. A great body of the people pay no regard whatever to religion in any shape, but serve the flesh out and out, without pretence of anything better.

It is to be feared that faith is a scarce article even amongst those who have embraced the Truth. The sort of method by which we have to get at the Truth in these days, is unfavourable to some extent to the development of this kind of thing. It is a process of intellectual sifting, by which venerable fables are put to the test and rejected, and the truth ascertained in its theoretical features. The process is conducted in the face of opposition, and followed up by argumentative contention. The consequence is that the mind is liable to become so absorbed in the mere process of finding out what the Truth is, as to fall short in the apprehension of the purpose for which it exists, and to fail in those moral developments in which alone it has its lasting and valuable fruit.

In this respect, there is great danger connected with the modern phase of apostolic truth. In its primitive phase, there was no need for the amount of argument and investigation which in our times are indispensable. A certain authoritative testimony was presented and confirmed by sign, and believers had but to receive it and at once surrender to the moral power connected with it. All they had to do was to believe the truth infallibly presented, and make use of that truth in the purification of the inner man in preparation for the Lord Jesus. We have to get at the same result by a different

process. The process is a matter of indifference so long as the result is secured. The danger is we may come short of the result. This ought to be an anxious point. Let us not devote all our time to mere intellectual exertion. Having attained the Truth, let us realise the use of it in the formation of the character Christ will approve.

One often sees lamentable cases in which interest in the Truth is kept up so long as the excitement of polemic encounter is maintained, but disappears when that calm region is reached, in which the Truth has to work out the fruits of righteousness and true holiness. Argument and contention for the Faith are not worth the trouble if they are to end in the mere establishment of a theory. The object of all work in the Truth is to develop real, loving, warm-hearted, intelligent and consecrated disciples of Christ, who personally feel that they are not their own, but the property of him who died that he might purchase a people with his own blood. Therefore, as Paul says, leaving the first principles, let us go on unto perfection, rising with increasing strength to the great fact that God is, and that He has all things in His hands, that He doeth according to His will in the earth as well as in the armies of heaven.

Give us a man or woman of this sort, with living faith based upon an intelligent understanding of the testimony—who have the faith of God in their hearts as the result of the Truth comprehended—and you give us a man or woman who will act of their own accord in the things pertaining to the divine service. Having the light “within” themselves, they are not dependent upon external stimulus. They will be found in the way of duty, because it is their duty so to be found, and not because it is pleasant. It may be unpleasant. It is oftener unpleasant than not, but the children of light are not children of pleasure. Finding themselves in a probationary state of evil, they accept their lot with that resignation which is the only attitude of wisdom, and bend their energies to that high calling of God in Christ Jesus, working out their salvation with fear and trembling. They will always present a contrast to the class who can only be brought to the meetings by special attractions, and get soon out of the way and tired, if they are not the objects of personal attention.

The latter class are to be met with at the interesting meetings, when there is a lot of people and warmth, and music, and everything that is agreeable and pleasant in the surroundings. You look in vain for them when there is work to be done in the cold, with few people present, and no attraction. They have the Truth as a theory: they have not realised the idea of being its servants.

“They are not all Israel that are of Israel.”

Those only will be approved by Christ who are given up to him entirely—in whom he is the power and motive of their lives, and the highest object of their desires. The other class are useful as scaffolding, which is useful to a building. Their presence contributes somewhat to that warmth which is favourable to the implanting of the seed in the minds of the good and honest-hearted. They are not altogether useless; only their usefulness, like that of the scaffolding, is limited to the preliminary stage. When the building is finished, they will be dispensed with.

Now we seek a higher place in the work of God than this. We labour to get beyond the mere scaffolding of the flesh period; we aim to become living stones in the glorious living temple, that will be reared in the earth when the Master Builder arrives. This is a destiny all-glorious. The community of the saints in the resurrection is a city of Light and Life most precious. It will consist of the very cream of the human race—men of excellent spirit—of divine knowledge—of tried faith—who in their several generations served God in the face of disadvantage, endured the trial for a long and wearying period of time. Abraham himself for an example, was tried more than a hundred years; Isaac and Jacob likewise; Joseph lived one hundred and ten years; and so with most of the holy men of old. Faithful lifetimes did they all lay on the altar; and still their number is not complete.

At the eleventh hour of our dispensation, the Master is hiring servants. The existence of the Word in our midst, is evidence of this. What infatuation to disregard or treat coolly the call. We may be of the number of that glorious company that will spring into being at *“the manifestation of the sons of God;”* but we must be like them. We must be men of faith, men of service, men of benevolent hearts; for those who are not of living hearts are not of God; and men and women of good consciences, who would not do wrong to save their lives. Persevering in this line of character during

our brief struggle with evil, realise the joy of being made one of a multitude of that description, whom no man can number, and whose former ills and frailties are all swallowed up in the glorious and deathless nature of the spirit in which there is no more sorrow or sighing. Look at that multitude, filled with everlasting joy; think that the Lamb dwells in the midst of them—the central sun that lighteneth every man of them that entereth that bright world. Behold them come to Zion and plant themselves in the seat of honour and power. Consider that they constitute the ruling brotherhood of the world, in whose righteous hands all the property and the power and the law, and the honour and glory of the world will be vested, for the promotion of glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, and goodwill to men!

Is a place in that illustrious body not worth any trial? What infatuated creatures those men and women must be, who, having put their hands to the plough, look back, and allow their hearts to be taken and their hands weakened by the ephemeral interests of this life, which, at its best, supposing we could do all that we wished, are “vanity,” ending ultimately in the grave. How perfectly suicidal for those who have such a glorious destiny before them, to slacken their hands and become lukewarm in relation to the duties they owe to their Lord and Master. Let us beware. The bright side is pleasant to contemplate, but we must accept the dark side in present duty and reproach. We must carry the cross if we mean to wear the crown.

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