

MATTERS OF MAGNITUDE

We meet upon a very solid foundation when we assemble thus to break bread and drink wine in remembrance of Christ. We are not following a fancy, an opinion, a philosophy of our own. We are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets. How real a foundation this is in a practical sense we may realise as we read the Scriptures in our midst on all such and many other occasions. These Scriptures are the embodiment of very real transactions. They take us a long way back, and introduce us to extensive, multitudinous and solid matters—matters of magnitude and tangibility on no ordinary scale. The Bible is nothing less than a nation's history, and a history extending over nearly 2,000 years; and a history unlike all other histories in this, that it is a history of God's making, a history in which His hand is visible and His voice is audible all the way through—from the day He commanded Abraham to leave Chaldea to the day when, by the mouth of the Lord Jesus, He addressed Abraham's posterity in those pathetic words,

"How often would I have gathered thee as a hen gathereth her brood under her wings, and ye would not."

The hope we have is a hope growing out of that history—a hope as inevitably the logical sequel of that history as any effect is of its cause. For that history is not merely a history of things done, but of the reasons of them, involving purposes reaching forward to endless ages, and promises made as the basis of faith in that purpose. On whatever part of the Bible we lay hold, we are guided by it, if we work it out properly, into the very presence of those great and incontestable facts that lie beneath our position of faith and hope at the table this morning, like the primeval rocks under the soil, and the vegetation in which we have our being. We take, for example, the writing to Timothy, from which a chapter has been read this morning (2 Tim. 2). We realise, by the most ordinary exercise of our senses, that this writing was written in the first century.

It has been in the hands of the public ever since. Although printing is a modern invention, copying by hand is a very ancient art, and was practised as a regular occupation in times when there was no other way of getting a book or document. Go to the British Museum, and you will see how nicely the copies were made. By means of that art the writings of Paul and the other Scriptures were multiplied and spread abroad among all nations (though not in the hands of every person) very early in the Christian era. That we have them now as they were then, —that is, unchanged and ungarbled—is proved by the identity of the copies in all languages and centuries, barring strokes and dots that do not interfere with the sense of scarcely a single sentence. That they were his very own is proved by their unchallenged currency. Their very contents is decisive, even if these facts were not available. By this simple method, we get in one stride back to the first century, and find ourselves in the presence of Paul writing to Timothy. What is he saying?

"The things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also."

Here is at once a busy scene—things much spoken of by Paul over a lengthened period, and "*many witnesses*" to the fact. What things were these that were so important as to require committing to other men for propagation?

"Remember," says he, *"that Jesus Christ, of the seed of David, was raised from the dead, according to my gospel, wherein I suffer trouble as an evil doer unto bonds . . ."*

“Whereunto I am appointed a preacher and an apostle and a teacher of the Gentiles, for the which cause I suffer these things, nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed.”

Here is Paul, a preacher of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and suffering trouble as an evil doer in consequence. In what way did he suffer? He says *“unto bonds.”* What! Was he a prisoner? Yes, often. *“In prisons more frequent.” “In deaths oft.”* Why did this preaching of Christ’s resurrection lead thus to imprisonment and bonds? Because the Jews had crucified Christ and hated to hear of his resurrection: very natural. It was the Jews that hounded on the Romans to the persecution of Paul, as Festus, a Roman official, testified in open court:

“against whom, when I was at Jerusalem, the chief priests and elders of the Jews informed me, desiring to have judgment against him . . . against whom, when the accusers stood up, they brought none accusation of such things as I supposed, but had certain questions against him of their own superstitions, and of one Jesus who was dead, whom Paul affirmed to be alive” (Acts 25:15-19).

Here was the matter in dispute; was the crucified Jesus alive? Paul said “YES” and got into trouble for it. Why did he say, Yes? Was he always of that mind? Oh no, as he said in a speech to a turbulent crowd in Jerusalem:

“I persecuted this way (the Christian way) unto the death (as the Jews were doing) leading and delivering into prisons both men and women.”

As he said to Timothy,

“I was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious, but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief.”

How came Paul to be of a different mind? Not by the argument of others, but the sight of his own eyes. The Lord himself, whom Paul thought to be dead, appeared to him as he was on the way to Damascus on a special mission of persecution. The Lord showed himself as at the transfiguration *“above the brightness of the sun.”* That Paul might never be left in doubt afterwards, it was done in the presence of his whole retinue, in the full light of noon day, and left Paul blind for three days. The officials accompanying him saw the glory, and were thrown to the earth, and heard the sound of communication passing with Paul, though they understood not the purport thereof. That communication commissioned him to preach Christ to the Gentiles. We have the particulars of it by Paul’s own tongue and pen afterwards. Hence in dealing with Paul’s testimony to the resurrection of Christ, we are dealing with a very palpable matter which no man can dispose of or put out of the way. He may shut his eyes, he may look away from the evidence; he may immerse his senses in other things. But he cannot alter the fact that there exists on the earth at the present time, in the form of this Book and all that stands related to it, evidence of the fact that Christ rose from the dead—which is the foundation of our faith and hope in him. But Paul and Paul’s testimony is only one of the things with which we are in touch when we stand before him in the first century as he writes this letter to Timothy. He himself forms part of a line of fact and truth that runs a long way behind him. Who was he? A Jew;

“I verily am a man that am a Jew; circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews.”

Who were the Hebrews?

“To them,” says he, “pertaineth the adoption, and the glory and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God and the promises” (Rom. 9:4)

Here is a list of things throwing us back upon the ages that had gone before, and the things that God has done to Israel in connection with Moses and all the prophets. When we look into those things, we discover facts of the first importance as enabling us to rightly estimate our own portion whether as mere Gentiles in the first instance, or as those who have been brought into beneficial relation with the covenants and promise; and as also enabling us to judge correctly the many-hued sentiments of the age in which we live.

We look first at ‘the adoption,’ which Paul says belongs to Israel. What does this mean? We know something of adoption as applied to the introduction of a child into a family circle to which it did not originally belong. It means that the child so adopted had no connection with the family beforehand. The idea of adoption could never arise in connection with a child belonging to the family. Here then is a relation between God and man styled adoption which, Paul says, pertains to Israel. Is it so that man, as a race, is in such a position as to require adoption before he becomes connected with God? Is man as a race estranged from God, away from God, having no connection with Him? The Bible telling us of the adoption, tells this also; that *“all have sinned and come short of the glory of God,”* that they are alienated in their minds by wicked works and through the ignorance that is in them (Eph. 4:18), that they are without God and have no hope (Eph. 2:12); that they are altogether gone out of the way and together have become unprofitable (Psa. 14). The Bible gives us the very beginning of this unhappy situation. It shows us man at the first, disobedient under law; sinning while friendship and communion prevailed in Eden. It shows us man driven out of Eden in consequence, to till a cursed soil and live out a life of trouble, till resolved into his original dust. Before his expulsion, communion and light were his. After it, he was in a position of exile, estrangement, condemnation. If God had done nothing more, human life must have remained a hopeless vanity, tending ever more to that awful time, when population would exceed the limits of subsistence, and hellish chaos set in. But God did not purpose the earth to be a failure.

“Working all things after the counsel of His own will,” “according to the good pleasure which He purposed in Himself,”

He predestinated another result altogether, even that the earth should be filled with His glory, as depicted in the closing chapters of the Apocalypse, when there shall be no more curse, and no more pain, and no more death. But He works towards this result by a method, and it is the method of *“adoption.”* If He dealt with man according to his inherent deserts, man must be exterminated. But His plan was to be developed in mercy—by grace—by favour—through faith which honours God, and blesses those who exercise it. In kindness He made an adoption—a selection—on this principle of faith and obedience. The plan, Paul says, pertains to Israel. Looking back we see how God made choice of Abraham, and at a certain stage established His covenant with Him. He first told him to leave his native country and to go to Palestine—which he did. Obedience indispensable—obedience absolute, unquestioning. Then He told him He would make of him a great nation, and that all mankind would yet be blessed in him. Abraham *“believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness.”* Then God tried Abraham—put him to the proof—in asking him to offer up his only son Isaac, in whom God promised him posterity. Abraham was of the right disposition, and proceeded to do as commanded, but was arrested in the act, upon which God formally confirmed with an oath of adoption which had been made on the basis of circumcision. This adoption did not

extend beyond Abraham and his posterity. When his descendants, as a nation, came out of Egypt, Moses said to them—

“The Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a peculiar people to Himself above all the nations of the earth” (Deut. 7:6).

God Himself said to them by Amos,

“You only have I known of all the families of the earth.”

Jesus recognised the same restrictedness of the Divine operations in saying,

“I am not come but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel;” and the apostles, in *“preaching the Word (at first) to none but unto the Jews only” (Acts 11:19)*. Everything in the Scriptures shows the truth of Paul’s statement that to Israel pertained the adoption. No other nation was adopted, and even Israel’s adoption was conditional on submission to the conditions of adoption; for there were conditions. They were the conditions that held good in Abraham’s case: faith in the promises and obedience to the commandments of God. With regard to these conditions, myriads of Israel failed, and hence it came to be the case as stated by Paul, that,

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

Israel in general had not sufficient understanding to perceive this. They valued their descent from Abraham and their observance of circumcision as securing favour with God. Jesus told them that it was necessary to do the deeds of Abraham as well as to be descended from him. John the Baptist told them the same—that God was able of these stones to raise up children to Abraham. The time came when access to the adoption and the promises was open to the Gentiles also. This was the solution of what Paul styles—

“a mystery which had been hid from ages and from generations (Col. 1:26) which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men as it is now revealed unto His holy apostles and prophets by the spirit, that the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs and of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ by the Gospel” (Eph. 3:5).

The mystery lay here: the promises to Abraham contemplated the blessing of all nations in Abraham; the predictions of the prophets exhibited all nations as partakers of the benefit. And yet the divine institutions established in Israel’s midst were so framed as apparently to exclude the Gentiles and to limit the blessing to Abraham’s descendants exclusively. For everything there is a season and a time; and the time came for the clearing away of this mystery in the extension of an invitation to the Gentiles to become *“fellow-heirs and of the same body”* with those who were favoured with this privilege of adoption. This did not change the channel of the adoption . . . it was still true that to Israel pertained the adoption.

“The gifts and calling of God are without repentance.”

But whereas thousands upon thousands in Israel failed in the conditions of the adoption—a remnant only obtaining it, and the rest being blinded (Rom. 11:7), God opened the way for another class to come into the favour lost by these, namely, the Gentiles, who are likened by Paul to branches of a wild olive tree grafted into a good olive tree. But it was not the Gentiles en masse that were chosen for this favour, any more than Israel en masse that had been chosen. It was only such of the Gentiles as should believe and obey.

“Because of unbelief, they (the natural branches—the Jews) were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not high minded but fear. If God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest He also spare not thee.”

In the final stage of God's work by Christ, whole nations will be joined to the Lord and become His people (Zech. 2:11); but in its apostolic phase the work consists of "*taking out a people from among the Gentiles*" (Acts 15:14). These, by incorporation with Christ, through the belief and obedience of the Truth, become subjects of the adoption which pertains to Israel, and are thenceforth, as Paul says—

"No more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens of the household of God"—

a household consisting of the children of faith from the time of Abel down to the last days of the times of the Gentiles. The important point to realise in connection with these testified truths is that, as Gentiles we have no divine relationship and no hope apart from submission to the system of righteousness promulgated by the apostles by the authority of Christ. The risen Christ whom Paul preached is the centre of this system. It is his name we are called upon to invoke in the reception of the Truth concerning him and baptism into him. He is the living representative of all who come unto God by him, and by him alone can we receive that forgiveness of sins, without which it is impossible we can be saved. How vain are the ideas current in the world that man can work out a hope for himself by doing the best he can. It comes of the idea that man is immortal and must go to hell if he is not saved. This idea is rapidly giving way. Unfortunately men are not as rapidly taking the other truth that God hath put all judgment into the hands of Christ, and that in him and by him alone can they attain to hope of favour and life immortal. There is much to distress if we look only at man and the state of things upon the earth. It is a vain distress. It can avail nothing.

We must turn our eyes to God—to his purpose—to His will as revealed. In this, we find peace. He has a plan that will come out gloriously at the last. He has an "*elect according to His purpose*." He will find them all. Our concern is at an end when we have done our part as obedient servants. We need not try to carry the world on our shoulders. God will do this. The vast populations that come and go are only as the grass to Him; no void in the scheme of things before they come; no loss when they go; God's substance in circulation according to His will. None of us are necessary to God, for His purpose and of His grace He has called us. Let us do our duty in the part assigned and leave the rest to God. There may be trouble of it; likely there will; but the trouble will have an end, while the result accomplished will last for ever. Paul had much trouble from the doing of his part—trouble as if he had been an evil doer. He says in the chapter read, "*but I endure all things for the elect's sake that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory*." This is the principle on which we must act in our smaller matters. The life of faith is a life of endurance; It is a life of social death, a life of self-denial in this respect that we have, like Moses in another sense, to refuse to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, and to decline the ways that lead, in this world to popularity, honour and advantage. But there is great incentive to those who see clearly and believe fervently the things testified of Christ past and future. Paul supplies it in these words from our chapter: "*if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him; if we suffer we shall also reign with him*."

The advantage of a right course in the matter is all on our side, and it is unspeakable; and the disadvantage of the other course cannot be expressed in words—"If we deny him, he also will deny us"—refuse to acknowledge us, reject us, dismiss us to shame and death.

Oh, how dreadful for us, but not for him. We cannot take from him.

"If we believe not, he cannot deny himself."

Our unbelief cannot alter things. He ever lives by the power of God, and will come at the appointed time if every living soul agrees to ignore his testimony and forget his name. Be it ours to act the part of faithful brethren to the best of our ability in the midst of the darkness and chaos of a forsaken dispensation, committing ourselves to God in constant prayer, and throwing ourselves upon His mercy, if happily we may find entrance at the last into His everlasting favour and joy.

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