

SUNDAY MORNING NO. 62

The more we become acquainted with the Scriptures, the more we realise the truth of Paul's statement, that—

“Whatsoever things were written before-time were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.”

The psalm read this morning is suggestive of both comfort and hope, or the comfort that comes from hope. It shows us one, beloved and accepted of God, saying in bitterness,

“My bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. Day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me. My moisture is turned in me into the drought of summer.”

It therefore tells us that we are not to think our case an exceptional or a hopeless one, because we may occasionally experience a similar *“horror of darkness.”* We may groan under the spiritual burden and sluggishness that are incident to this weak animal nature; but we are not to despair. We must take fresh courage from the spectacle of the man after God's own heart passing through similar experiences. Our prayer must break through the cloud, and reach upward to the joy and the praise which pertain to the sons of Zion. While exclaiming in our bitterness with Paul,

“Oh, wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from this body of death?”—

Let us not forget to join in the refrain:

“I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Paul was *“sorrowful, yet always rejoicing;”* he was *“cast down, but not destroyed.”* His case and his exhortations are always of special interest to us. He is the teacher of the Gentiles in faith and verity. He is our example in a special sense. He says of himself—

“For this cause I obtained mercy that in me first, Jesus Christ might show forth all long-suffering for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting.”—(1 Tim. 1:16.)

He also exhorts us to be followers of him as he was of Christ. —(1 Cor. 11:1.) His example is strikingly manifest in all his epistles. In the chapter read from Thessalonians, it comes out strongly. The opening words are suggestive,

“I beseech you, brethren, and exhort you, by the Lord Jesus Christ.”

This is the language of earnest solicitation for the welfare of the brethren. This earnest solicitation was one of Paul's characteristics. We see it on his taking farewell of the brethren at Ephesus. He said to them:

“Wherefore remember that by the space of three years, I ceased not to warn everyone night and day with tears.”

Again, writing to these very Thessalonians, he says,

“We were gentle among you even as a nurse cherisheth her children. So being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to have imparted unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were dear unto us.”—(1 Thess. 2:7.)

If Paul was characterised by feelings so strong, and was so incessant in the exertions they inspired, shall we listen to the soulless snobbery that pooh poohs all affectionate care and tenderness, and glories only in the masculinities of intellectual pugilism? Wisdom has but one answer, and by that answer the children of wisdom will strongly abide:

“He that loveth not, knoweth not God.”

The world hastes to be rich, and pays sedulous court to its rich relations and neighbours, and doffs its hat to all the arrangements and connections of the flesh, minding high things, and

taking care not to identify itself with men of low estate, closing its ears to the cry of distress, and regarding not to know the case of the poor. These things are not to be named among those claiming to be followers of Paul as he was of Christ.

What did Paul beseech these Thessalonians about?

*“That as ye have received of us how to walk and to please God, so ye would abound **more and more**.”*

This touches one of the first features of the service to which we are called by the gospel. That service is a service in which we are expected to increase and enlarge. We are not to be like some who have no enterprise and give **themselves** no concern as to the affairs of God in the earth. The true servants do not belong to the stagnation class or the fearful. They are industrious and enterprising traders in the things of God, not with the object of common traders, but that the name of God may be brought into increasing honour, and the poor among men may be increasingly comforted by the consolation of Israel in prospect. The Lord’s parables illustrate the point. It was the servant who laid by his talent in a napkin, who was rejected. Such is the man who receives the truth, puts in his pocket, and goes on his way, attending to his personal advancement, without a care or a thought how the work of God is to be done. Such a man’s example is to be shunned as the deadly miasma.

What we must aim at is to be able to say,

“Lord, thy pound hath gained ten pounds.”

Let our motto be found in those other words of Paul:

*“Be ye steadfast and immovable, **always abounding** in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.”—*

“ALWAYS”—no cessation, no tiring, no curtailing, but widening and expanding as the greatness of the matter in hand demands. There will be no difficulty about this where faith exists. It is only those who are uncertain that falter and flag. Such would be better at home than impeding the exertions of those who are certain their labour is not in vain. “More and more” is the motto of the service and the servants who are such in more than name, even to the point of *“taking pleasure,”* like Paul, *“in distresses, in afflictions, in necessities.”* It is God’s arrangement that the first stage of His work should be done in circumstances of deprivation. The Lord himself is an example, being without where to lay his head. The sham servants turn away to disgust before the hardships.

Paul defines the object of the walk he prescribed, to be *“to please God.”* This is a matter of real concern with true believers; as for those that are otherwise, the thought never enters their heads. It is one of the greatest tribulations of the present time, to be linked with dead brethren—men who have embraced *“doctrines”* in the sectarian sense, but who are insensible to the living realities to which those doctrines belong. There is a walk that pleases God, and a walk that does not please Him. He wills that saints should go in the one and not in the other. It is briefly defined in the chapter before us:

*“This is the will of God, even **your sanctification**.”*

What is this but that being *“holy both in body and spirit”* elsewhere enjoined? Without this holiness we are assured that no man shall see the Lord. As it is a holiness to extend to *“the body”* as well as the spirit or mind, it is well for such as desire to be heirs of salvation, to have an eye on their bodily practices. Any man who defiles his body, either by neglect of ablution or by steeping his faculties in the stupefying and unodoriferous principle of the tobacco plant; whether in snuffing, smoking or chewing, is not holy in body. To be holy in body is to be clean and pure and sweet in body. In the world filthiness of body is a common condition. In being brought from the world, let us take care that we don’t bring the world’s unholiness of body with us. Let us leave all that behind, and go on unto all the perfection attainable in the present nature, in the hope of being counted worthy of that final and effectual purification, which will change this corruptible into the glory of divine incorruption.

Paul no doubt in this chapter applies the principle to fornication, which was very rife in the first century, and unfortunately not extinct in the nineteenth. Still, putting all his exhortations together, we can see that it is entire sanctity that he prescribes to saints. He puts the force of all his exhortations into one remark, viz,

“I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body may be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”—(1 Thess. 5:23.)

This complete sanctity is only to be attained in one way; Jesus indicated that way when he said in his prayer,

*“Sanctify them **through Thy truth.**”*

David points in the same direction in saying—

*“Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed thereto **according to Thy word.**”*

This is the sanctifying agency. Constant reading of the word, with meditation thereon, and prayer, is the true secret of that spiritual-mindedness which will show itself in holiness of body, soul and spirit.

“For God,” says Paul, “hath not called us to uncleanness, but to holiness. He, therefore, that rejecteth, rejecteth not man but God who hath given His Holy Spirit unto us.”

That is, those who rejected Paul’s doctrine of holiness, rejected not Paul but God, whose it was by the Spirit in him. There were some in Paul’s day who did this, as there are in ours. They held that a man being justified by faith in Christ, it was immaterial what his personal behaviour might be. Their motto was, in a sense very different from Paul’s original use of the words—

“Not of works, lest any man should boast.”

The apostles specially denounced this class as a dangerous leaven of corruption.

*“**Let no man deceive you with vain words,**” says Paul, “for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience.”—(Eph. 5:6.)*

John also says—

*“Little children, **let no man deceive you;** he that doeth righteousness is righteous... he that committeth sin is of the devil.”*

John was particularly emphatic on this point. He said,

*“Whosoever is born of God **doth not commit sin;** for His seed remaineth in him; and he **cannot sin,** because he is born of God;”—*

That is, he cannot be and do what the false teachers advocated; he cannot live in sin.

A mistake in the opposite extreme has been founded on John’s words. It has been contended that the children of God are absolutely without offence or shortcoming. This is to contradict John in the same epistle, where he says,

“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”

Again, he recognises its possibility in saying,

*“If any man see his brother **sin a sin** which is not unto death.”—(1 John 5:16.)*

So James (5:19),

*“If **any** of **YOU** do err from the truth, and one convert him, let him know that he that converteth a soul from the error of his way, shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.”*

John expressly says,

“If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”—(1 John 2:1.)

And again,

“If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all iniquity.”

Finally, Jesus put this standing petition into the mouth of his disciples for all time:

“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us.”

There is forgiveness for erring saints on confession and supplication. Yet the cast of their lives, as a whole, is in the form and manner of holiness. The teaching is, that in establishing a connection with Christ, they connect themselves with his death in the act of burial in water (Rom. 6:3), and, therefore, are to reckon themselves as much dead to sin as a dead man is dead to everything that pertains to a living man.

“Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we that are dead to sin continue any longer therein?”—(Rom. 6:1.)

God hath called us to holiness, and, without it, no man will be saved, however much he may know the truth theoretically.

As to brotherly love, Paul thinks it unnecessary to write to the Thessalonians for two reasons: first, they were taught of God to love one another, and, secondly, because they did it *“toward all the brethren that were in all Macedonia.”* As to the first point, the duty of love is one of the first things put forward in the testimony of God. The *“first commandment”* is to exercise it towards God, and towards our neighbour in the second place. It is a fact that love springs, in the first place, from identity of interest. If two men are interested in the same thing—it does not matter what—they become interested in each other, and friendship is the result. It is the same in the gospel, but there is a difference because of the difference of the thing.

The gospel is a larger affair than anything else; it covers every object and relation of being. It takes in God, which covers all, and, therefore, the love springing out of it is of infinite breadth. When two men love God, their love of each other is an inevitable and permanent result. The love of a particular study or a particular pleasure may create friendship in two men possessing this love; but because there are other things and other interests outside the particular study or pleasure, their friendship is on a narrow basis, and liable to destruction from influences arising outside their particular bond of connection. Thus, two men given to a particular pleasure may become enemies when their interests in business conflict. But there is nothing outside the love of God. Consequently friendship on this foundation is lasting and deep, if the love and all that it involves lasts. Hence it is that the love of the brethren, where the love of Christ reigns, is a true and sterling love, that nothing can destroy. When, besides this, the *“new commandment”* is recognised, this natural result is strengthened by the iron band of duty, and then—

“We know that we have passed from death unto life because we love the brethren.”

Then we have a needed lesson on business. Paul exhorts the brethren to be quiet, and to do their own business, working with their own hands. Therefore, a quiet attendance on the common occupations of life is part of the life of a saint. Upon this it may be asked, Wherein does the life of a brother of Christ differ from the life of an industrious decent sinner? We have the answer in the motive power of a saint, and the objects to which he applies the result of his labour. Paul defines the first in saying,

“Whatsoever ye do, do it heartily as to the Lord, and not unto men, serving the Lord Christ.”

The whole economy of a true brother's life is on this foundation, so that, with him or her, affairs of business or the house are a channel of service to the Lord. They are attended to in the spirit of service to Christ.

But again it may be asked, how does this performance of them—say, attending to business for a livelihood or having a care of the household for the comfort and health of those

who are in it—how does a saint’s attendance on these things differ practically from the decent neighbourly managing creature of the present world? The answer is to be found in the difference of the underlying motive and the ultimate object for which they are performed. In the case of a person living without God and without hope, business and the house are looked after for present gratification and well-being without reference to Him by whom all things consist. God is not in all their thoughts. House and family and business are all in all. A saint, on the contrary, attends to those things as part of a life-service to God. Then there is this great difference:

“Having food and raiment,” the saint is “therewith content.”—(1 Tim. 6:8.)

He does not aim to be rich, knowing that—

“They that will be rich fall into many foolish and hurtful lusts that drown men in destruction and perdition.”—(Ibid.)

If he is industrious and scheming in business, it is not that he may lay up treasure on earth, but that he may have to give to them that need (Eph. 4:28), and wherewith to exercise the part of a *“good steward of the manifold grace of God”* (1 Pet. 4:10), that being faithful in the *“few things”* of *“uncertain riches”* (Matt. 25:21; 1 Tim. 6:18), he may be afterwards worthy to share in that higher trust which the Lord will extend to his faithful servants at his coming in power and great glory. —(Luke 19:17.) Not that all who profess the name of Christ carry out these principles, but these are the principles of the household, and the principles upon which the house will be judged at last, without respect of persons. The maxims of carnal prudence will be at a discount when the Lord has returned. Faith is the foundation principle of the house of God, and without faith it is impossible to please Him. Therefore, let every man see to it while the account is still running.

Paul desired the Thessalonians to work *“that they might have lack of nothing.”* Why did he desire them to have plenty in their hands? He answers this question where he advises the Corinthians to a cheerful and liberal contribution. He says:

*“For God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that ye **having all sufficiency in all things, MAY ABOUND UNTO EVERY GOOD WORK.**”—(2 Cor. 9:8.)*

This is the object always contemplated by the apostles in connection with any surplus over our needs. The reformed character he advises to *“labour and work with his own hands the thing that is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth.”—(Eph. 4:28.)* And how does he advise with regard to those that need not to labour? His words to Timothy furnish the answer:

“Charge them . . . that they be ready to distribute, willing to communicate, laying up for themselves a good foundation against the time to come.”—(1 Tim. 6:18.)

These maxims are contrary to the fleshly mind, and put us to the proof. The practices of men are as different from them as possible. As soon as a man gets a large sum, his absorbing idea is how to make it more, and when he gets that more, he still enlarges his schemes that he may enrich himself indefinitely. The more he gets, the more scrubby he becomes. The idea of saving takes possession of his mind, and paralyses every noble impulse and defiles, with the ungraciousness of stinginess, even the little acts of goodness he squeezes, with much effort, out of his dry soul. It is the case of the man with the barns over again. The same story is told in every generation. Men lay up treasure for themselves but are not rich towards God. They spend little or nothing for Him. They have no faith in laying up a store in heaven against the time to come; and, at last, in every case, comes the event of the terrible words,

“Thou fool, this night is thy soul required of thee;”—

And the fool dies and is laid in the bed of corruption for the worms to feed sweetly on him, while his precious hoard is squandered by other hands.

The only wise, wholesome, and scriptural policy is the one prescribed by Peter when he says,

*“As every one hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as **good stewards of the manifold grace of God.**”*

Christ makes our faithfulness in this matter the measure of our fitness for position in his kingdom, saying,

“If ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?”—

(Luke 16:11.)

These lessons may be disregarded now, and men may slide along in the security of their selfish prudences, regardless of the voice of Christ commanding a God-like course; but the day is near when these commandments will ring in their ears with a terrible and appalling force. Christ comes to render to every man according to his work, of which he will judge by the standard of his own word. When the dead awake, we shall know he is in the earth, and the living will tremble who have lived in pleasure and been wanton, and nursed their fattening hearts for the day of slaughter, while the poor among men, and the rich, who have given themselves a living sacrifice to God, will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel, saying,

“Lo, this is our God: we have waited for Him; we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation.”

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