

SUNDAY MORNING AT THE BIRMINGHAM CHRISTADELPHIAN ECCLESIA, NO. 153

“Exhort one another daily.”—PAUL.

A few weeks back we looked at the account of Paul’s shipwreck, as recorded in Acts 28., and found some profitable reflections arising to us from the mere existence of such a record. Like the extruding vein of ore on the mountain side, we found when we followed it up that it led us into a whole mine of treasure. Paul’s shipwreck led us to Paul’s master in glory, and gave us fortifying conviction of the truth of the proclamation which John heard in Patmos: “I am he who liveth and was dead, and am alive for ever more.” Leading us to Paul’s master, it leads us to Paul’s motives, Paul’s aims, and Paul’s principles. The interval of time that separates us from Paul himself has in no way altered the power or bearing of these.

In the course of the storm, an incident occurred that yields a principle we may profitably apply. We are told that when “neither sun nor stars for many days appeared, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope that we should be saved was then taken away.” We may suppose that Paul himself shared in this hopelessness. He had no certain knowledge of the mode in which his apostolic labours (now drawing to a conclusion) were to terminate. So far as he was concerned, a watery grave would have been as acceptable and appropriate, as the executioner’s block; and to this he may have supposed he had now come, unless he inferred from the Lord’s intimation to him at Jerusalem that he must testify at Rome—(Acts 23:11)—that he must survive the voyage. At all events, whatever his fears and feelings may have been, they received a perfect quietus from an angelic visit towards the end of the disastrous voyage. The angel stood by him during the night, and said, “Fear *not*, Paul: thou must be brought before Cæsar, and lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee.”

This may help us to realise the potency of Spirit-power. If ever there is a time when spiritual things seem unreal, it is during a storm at sea; amid the howl of the tempest; the rage of the waters; the reel and lurch of the helpless vessel; the cold and wet and confusion among those on board, who, with chattering teeth and failing heart, await with prayer and patience the subsidence of the elements. At such a time, our poor weak faith is liable to fall like a lifeless bird to the bottom of its cage. But here, an angel stands by Paul in the midst of it all—the storm no impediment to his arrival at the vessel: a storm is but air in motion, though impressing frail mortals so much: and there is something more subtle and powerful than air.—The rushing waters and flying foam are no distraction to his mind or message; the perilous position of the ship no discouragement to his clear sight and confidence. The Spirit of God underlies all elements and all phenomena, and this messenger is Spirit, and can make even the storm his chariot to bear him onward on his journey. It is but at any time a question of the will and purpose of the Almighty Father, who is Spirit, and at whose command are legions of these His angels who excel in strength. Our lot falling in an age when God’s open work is momentarily suspended (as declared beforehand) leaves us a prey to the impressions and fears of feeble sense. But let understanding have the sway. God can take care of us in the darkness and the storm without appearing to do so.

And His purpose will come gloriously forth to a triumphant issue at last, whatever darkness and inefficiencies and aberrations may afflict human experience in this age of sin.

Having received the message, Paul presents himself before the ship's company, with cheerful look, and after a pardonable allusion to their blindness in not seeing the wisdom of the advice he had given them against undertaking the voyage some fortnight before, he says, "Now, I exhort you to be of good cheer, for there shall be no loss of any man's life among you but of the ship: for there stood by me this night the angel of God whose I am and whom I serve, saying (and he repeated the message), Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer: for *I believe God that it shall be even as it was told me.*" Now, here is confidence in spite of appearances. The storm had in no degree abated. The heavens were still a mass of ominous grey: the gale still roared at its height: the sea still raged like a cauldron, with unbroken fury: the vessel still creaked and groaned and laboured among the breaching waves. In spite of all, Paul is confident and tranquil: on what ground? "I believe God that it shall be even as it was told me."

It requires no particular ingenuity to apply this to our own situation. Here we are in the midst of an evil state, in which, so far as what is actually going on in the earth is concerned, there is no ray of promise in the darkness. The nations are walking after their own ways without any apparent regulation of their proceedings from above, and without any natural prospect that there will ever be anything different, than the chaotic collision of "mights" evolving artificial and scarcely definable "rights." Generation follows generation to the grave without the least apparent indication of any coming adjudication and discrimination of the righteous from the wicked. Life all over the earth is a weary tale of early hopes blighted, youthful aspirations disappointed, philosophic theories mocked, poetical ideals quenched in bitterness and gloom. Bright youth dulls into sober manhood, which, in its turn withers into the impotence and decay of old age. Ineffective life, made a thousandfold more of a failure by bad social and political arrangements, is harried with care, and clouded with disappointment, till a quiet grave in the cemetery or in the depths of the sea, ends the scene, and bears witness to the truth of the Preacher's verdict, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."

This is life as it actually is before our eyes. Yet here are we with tranquil hearts, and, on the whole, gladsome faces. What is the secret of our serenity? It is to be found in the words of Paul, which every earnest man and woman here present can utter as their own: "*I believe God that it shall be even as it was told me.*" None of us has had a message personal to himself; but we have had a message that is personal to all who choose to listen to it. That message is as much a fact as any of the facts to which I have referred. The Bible is as much an element of the human situation as death itself. It can no more be obliterated from human history than pain, or the Pope, or Mahomet. It is coeval in its complete form with all the turmoils of the last 1800 years. It is a great public institution, which has had powerful public modifying effects in the national and racial evolutions of eighteen centuries past. It is its own witness to every one acquainted with it, and able to discern between things that differ, that it is of God. Its literary fabrication alone is inexplicable on any hypothesis of its being due to human motives, designs, or conceptions. Its character defies classification with human productions, Jewish or Gentile. It is of a piece with the grandeur and perfection of nature. It stands immovable, like the primeval rocks, offering a passive but indomitable resistance to the fretful waves of hostility that dash over it from age to age.

Even if we were ignorant of all external confirmations, we have in itself an all-sufficient evidence of the divinity of its voice. But the external confirmations are complete, and leave no room for uncertainty in the convictions of those who are able to discern the bearings of evidence.

The establishment of the Christian faith in the earth, the existence and position of the Jews, the history of the world in its correspondence with the Bible prophecy, the character of Christ as drawn by men confessedly illiterate (and the most learned of men could not have conceived of such a character, still less depicted it with such simple majestic power)—the nature of Christian doctrines and precepts, are all so many powerful witnesses to the same fact:—not only in their cumulative force, but taking them one by one, there is not one of them capable of a rational solution, apart from the divinity of the events and influences leading to the production of the Bible.

Discerning this, then, the Bible is to each of us the voice of God as much as was the angel's voice to Paul that stormy night, and because of this we are able, like him, to be cheerful in the storm, and to ask our fellow-voyagers to be of good cheer also. The sky is dark and the sea is rough, but we are full of confidence as to the issue of the voyage, because we can say, "I believe God that it shall be even as it has been told me." We see mankind sunk in ill-being through their vain attempts to manage their own affairs. We see history one long futile struggle after blessedness among men, a struggle continuing to the present hour, and threatening, by all present appearances, to be interminable. We say, "This will not last." We say, "This age of human failure will come to a close." We say, "God will interfere; God will destroy the kingdoms of men all over the world; God will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed; God will give laws that no Parliament will be asked to sanction; God will set up institutions that will owe no part of their existence to human legislation. God will send Christ to do all this, and Christ will associate with himself in the work the tried and righteous men of all ages past, made immortal and efficient for the work like himself. Under their righteous and irresistible reign, all nations will be blessed; war and poverty will cease; righteousness and universal joy will take the place of the vast clouds of despondency and misery that cover all the earth. We are enabled to indulge this glorious prospect, and to endure with calmness the present evil world, because we can say, "We believe God that it shall be even as it has been told us."

We see death reign with indiscriminating power. The man who fears God sickens and dies, and is buried equally with the man who neither fears God nor regards man. The man whose mind is rich with the golden sunshine of faith, and whose life is beautiful with many variegated compliances with the beautiful commandments of God, descends to sheol equally with the man all-blighted and frost-bitten with unbelief, and whose life is hideous with selfishness and unmercy. The man who is a blessing in the midst of his kind, with kindly word cheering the desolate, and more kindly act alleviating the sufferings of weakness and misfortune, who sheds some light in the gloom, and causes some soothing in the affliction so far as it is in the power of mortal man—such a man at last becomes food for the worms as well as the human monster who increases bitterness among men by his churlish speeches and merciless ways.—We say, "There will be an end to this. Things will wear a very different complexion by-and-bye. There will be an hour upon earth when the grave will give up its dead: when a divine tribunal will be erected: when men shall receive in body according to what they have done." "Then shall ye return and discern between the righteous and the wicked; between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not." God will cause every man present on that occasion to find according to the way he has followed in this evil state. You will see shame, fear, dismay, suffering, rejection, and disgrace judicially dealt out in terrible tribulation and anguish. Those who have followed wickedness—sent away to ultimate death from the presence of the glorious judge. You will see joy and confidence, glory and honour, beauty and immortality conferred by the same smiling and glorious hand on the beaming multitude of the righteous, to whom the earth and the future, yea

heaven and all things, belong. You will then see the meaning of the present trial, present lowliness, present absence of all apparent difference between the righteous and the wicked. Discerning this now, we are able to endure with patience and good cheer. Our happiness is due to the promises of God. We are blessed in being able to say, "We believe God that it shall be even as it has been told us."

We see life a doleful failure in all important respects at present. Youth rejoices; folly makes loud mirth; but age groans, and in much wisdom is much grief. The whole multitude of the living unite at last in a common verdict: "There is nothing in it; I would not live away." The depressing picture loses its dreariness in the light of the truth. We are able to say to friends around (though we speak in the ears of the deaf), "There will yet be upon earth a life that is worth living: youth that will not fade; joy that will not wither; strength that will not diminish; pleasures that will not pall on the appetite; personal comeliness, intellectual nobility, and moral loveliness on which the lapse of endless ages will produce no impression. When this gladsome vision is established in all the earth, there will be multitudes to rejoice in the perpetual feast; and you will find nowhere upon earth the present dreary spectacle of sad and blighted and ineffective forms of life." "No more curse, no more death," means the disappearance of wan cheeks, lustreless eyes, empty minds, despairing hearts and their causative accompaniments of empty pockets, squalid homes, unclean persons, and mal-development of body and mind. "The former things will have passed away, and all things will have become new." We are able to proclaim these joyful news, because we can say "We believe God, and it shall be as it has been told unto us."

Finally we look into our own hearts and lives, and find there many aches, and voids and disfigurements. This body of death is a heavy load to carry about. Our souls cleave to the dust. A murky atmosphere often obscures the sun. Our desires are towards the remembrance of the High and Lofty one, in whose hand our breath is, and whose are all our ways. We yearn to bless, and see blessed, the blighted population of our fellow-men. We aspire to moral heights and intellectual brilliancies, which we can only now and then see afar off, in the rifts of the heavy-laden clouds. In this we groan, being every way burdened and held down. But we are able to indulge in right good cheer in the midst of the gloom. We are able to say confidently, "The afflicted state is but for a moment. The moment of deliverance will come. The Lord Jesus, who is our life, will return to the scene, and in the twinkling of an eye, we shall roll off the burden of corruption and death. This mortal shall put on immortality. The day of cloud will then pass for ever away. The fogs, and mists, and damps, and chills, of this dark night, will roll away before the powerful sunrise, and we shall bathe and rejoice in the clear blue of heaven, over-arching the scene with gladness, to the utmost encircling horizon. Our dim eyes will see; our longing hearts will swell with pure delight in God; our fellowship, all cramped and long-restrained in this terrible night, will burst forth in mighty gladness, on the right hand and on the left, to all the sons of God. O glorious day! hasten thy tardy flight hitherward." We believe God that it shall be as it has been told to us.¹

¹ (2001). *The Christadelphian*, 21(electronic ed.), 59–63.