

COMFORT—WHEN THE LORD COMES

It is good to come here. It is good to get another glimpse of the facts upon which we stand and out of which our hopes arise. The facts are apt to get out of sight somewhat. Our faculties are dim at the best and our lives are apt to make them dimmer in divine directions. Our lives now, in fact, may be compared to a day of fog and rain in which it is very difficult to realise the sun and the glorious blue of heaven. The meetings act as a rift in the cloud. They show us the smile of heaven behind all the unfavourable aspects of the moment. They help us to feel again the reviving strength of the things most surely established by the testimony of God, and to resume the journey with renewed determination.

We are like the children on the road to a house to which they have been invited. Our stature and our strength are small, and though the prospect of the party is attractive, our little steps grow tired. What do we say to the children in such a case? We comfort and encourage them by telling them they will soon be at their journey's end, and that they will forget their weariness when once they get there. Our journey is not long though it seems so. We look at our future in perspective and think it longer than it is. It cannot last above so many years, and perhaps not even one; and when it is over, it is over for ever. The toils of this mortal life will never return. The anxieties, and weakness, and disappointments of this state will be replaced by comfort, strength, and gladness for ever. We get this assurance from whatever part of the Word comes under our notice at these meetings.

This morning it is by Paul to the Thessalonians. His very theme is comfort in distress. This may not have much interest for those who are not in distress. The man at his ease can take the subject very indifferently, and even loftily. He can feel a sort of pity for the weakness that needs comfort—till it comes to his own turn; and then he feels as other men feel who are made to taste the evil of the present state as the Thessalonians tasted it. We are all more or less in this line of experience; that is, made subject to evil and standing in need of comfort. Therefore what Paul says to the Thessalonians is suitable to us all.

He speaks of those who trouble and those who are troubled. With the first, we do not wish to have much to do. There have always been those who trouble. At the very start Cain troubled Abel. Ever since, the Cain-class have done the same to the Abel-class. The Cain-class have always hitherto been in the large majority, and have had power on their side which they have used without mercy for the suppression of the Abel-class. In our day, the power of the Cain-class, in this respect, has been considerably abridged, but the same hostile feeling exists, and makes itself manifest as far as its opportunity allows. It might seem strange at first sight that God should tolerate the Cain-class to the extent he has done in the history of the world. A deeper study of the subject will show that such a class is a necessity in His scheme of things. Faithfulness under trial is the rule upon which God is making a selection of sons for the perfect ages. The action of such a rule requires the prosperity of the Cain-class for a season. God's anger burns against them, but His wisdom restrains judgment till the due time. What God said to Israel applies to all the ungodly of the earth, of whatever name, state, form, aspect, or hue:

“For Mine own name's sake, I have deferred Mine anger that I cut thee not off.”

If God's anger flamed forth before the time, the perfect result that will be seen when the whole of His tried and perfected children are exalted to high places in all the earth, would be prevented. He purposes to exalt His name in all the earth in the exaltation of the humble who prove their trust therein by faith and obedience in a day of unfaith and dishonour. Hence, the triumph of the wicked, though short (relatively) is a necessity for a time; to which the saints are enabled to submit with a patience that is the result of enlightenment. It was thus that Paul

was able to say to these Thessalonians that he gloried in them *“for their patience and faith in all their persecutions and tribulations that they endured.”*

They represented the second class: *“you who are troubled.”* Although the least pleasant to belong to this class we here assembled belong to by preference; not that we prefer trouble, but we prefer to be in that line of things to which the endurance of trouble meantime belongs by divine appointment. We prefer to belong to the Lord’s friends—those who have faith in him of a type sufficiently strong to take sides altogether with him during this the day of his rejection, and to be obedient in all things to him. Why should such a class excite enmity in others? It seems as if such an antagonism should be morally impossible, for the friends of Christ are the inoffensive and excellent of the earth. Many things that seem unlikely do happen nevertheless, and this is one of them. Who would have imagined beforehand that Jesus, the sinless man, who went about doing good, would excite hatred so intense as to bring about his destruction? The explanation in his case is the explanation in the case of all his brethren. He demurred to the ways and principles and sentiments of the wealthy religious, who were on good terms with themselves and in high estimation with all the people. The wounds that he inflicted on pious self-love, by his contentions for righteousness, created for him among his own people implacable foes more cruel than the heathen. They could not forgive his reproofs. Had they loved the praise of God more than the praise of men, it would have been otherwise, they would have rejoiced in Christ’s zeal for God, and would have been ready to believe it possible that his condemnations of their class were just. But on the contrary, they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God. Consequently, his words and attitude hurt their self-love incurably, and goaded them to compass his destruction under the respectable plea that he was a promoter of disorder and a mover of sedition. But God overruled their malice to the accomplishment of His own purpose.

Paul says—

“It is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you, and to you who are troubled, rest.”

What God sees right to be done will be done. Therefore, we may rest assured of this, that the end of all who trouble the word, or work, or people of God, will be an end the reverse of satisfactory to them on all points. It is an end frequently described by Paul. He summarises it thus luridly in Romans 2:

“Indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil.”

In one word, he describes it to the Philippians: *“whose end is destruction.”* Daniel speaks of *“shame and contempt;”* Malachi, of *“ashes under the soles of your feet;”* Jesus, of *“weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth.”* Jesus connects this tribulation with what the weepers will *“see.”*

“Ye shall see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Kingdom of God, while ye yourselves will be thrust out.”

There will be many details of this kind in the terrible experience of the rejected. In his message to the Philadelphian ecclesia, Jesus says, concerning the Satanic element in the body.

“I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee.”

This will be a terrible ingredient in the experience of those whose turn will have to come for tribulation; that they will be made to defer, in abject submission to those whom, in the day of probation, they have rejected and scorned. The elect of God may well in patience wait.

“I will repay, saith the Lord.”

When God executes vengeance it is always with great thoroughness. Wherefore, saith Paul,

“Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves.”

Pray for your enemies. Do good to them that hate you. God may give them repentance to the acknowledging of the Truth that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil. If not, then God’s righteous arm will vindicate the just who wait on Him. The hour will come when the terrible portent will be uttered:

“Your enemies whom ye have seen today, ye shall see no more for ever.”

Thus will tribulation be rendered *“to them that trouble you . . . and to you who are troubled, rest.”* This is the other side. This is the final purpose of God, to give rest upon the earth in righteousness—*“the whole earth at rest”*—the wicked rooted out of the earth and forgotten—the meek of the earth established in imperturbable security, delighting themselves in the abundance of peace which a life of tribulation now so well qualifies them to enjoy. This is the tranquil prospect ever forward on the horizon of probationary life, however troubled by affliction or shadowed by death. There remaineth this rest for the people of God. Nothing can touch or interfere with it. It is the stable hope of the gospel.

“Rest with us,” says Paul—with Paul and with all Paul’s brethren of every age. This is a glorious feature of the prospect. To have a good thing is good; to have it in good company is better. The change to the immortal and promotion to power and honour awaits every son of God. No good can exceed this; but consider the joyful zest of a simultaneous entrance upon such a state by thousands whom God has prepared during the ages of evil—*“glorified together.”* True, the judgment precedes and selects; but this is but a preliminary detail. The glorious event, in its real and ultimate character consists in the entrance into life at the same time, of a numberless multitude of such as have pleased God by a loyal faith and patient obedience in widely-sundered generations and under circumstances of a common difficulty and bitterness, though differing in local form and complexion. It is not possible to conceive a more joyous conjuncture of events. It is what awaits every faithful saint.

It is *“when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven.”* There can be no advance in the direction of consummated salvation *“until he come.”* Everything waits his coming. He is gone into heaven, anointed with the oil of gladness. In his Father’s presence are light and *“pleasures for ever more”*, but on the earth, in his absence there is the darkness that always prevails when the sun is withdrawn. It is needful in the scheme of things upon which the Father is working, that he should be gone for a season. But the promise of his return is as plain and certain as any part of God’s spoken or written Word. Therefore, the saints turn their eyes to that event with longing. They are waiting for the Lord from heaven, not only when confined in the cemetery, but in the various paths of their living sojourn. All of them are *“looking for and hastening unto”* that gladsome event. The expectation of his coming is not with them the sensation of a day, or an anticipation hanging on some conjuncture of political events. It is the inwrought conviction and indelible longing of the deepest reason which the signs of the times may pleasantly stimulate, but which lives immortal in the dearest calms of human life. Eighteen centuries ago, the Philippian section of their company, having turned to God from idols, were waiting for this Son from heaven and they have not yet forsaken that attitude, and never will. They will be found in it when the supreme moment arrives that brings to fruition the hopes and aspirations of a hundred groaning generations. While their waiting attitude continues, their motto is supplied to them in the last words of inspiration:

“Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly.”

There is a third class affected by that event, in addition to *“them that trouble you and you who are troubled.”* And that is, *“them that know not God and obey not the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* Paul says that vengeance is to be taken by the Lord on them, and that they are to be *“punished with everlasting destruction from his presence.”* At the present time, nothing seems less important to a man than that he should know God and obey the gospel. The prosperous and the great and the successful are those who know not God and obey not

the gospel. The man least valued or regarded among men is the man who knows God and obeys the gospel. Consider the great change that will take place in this matter when the Lord comes. His coming, though secret at first, will be a great public and world-booming event, which will alter the views of everyone in a radical manner. What Christ thinks will become the most sovereign of questions, though now so little considered. His purposes—his movements—will absorb public and private attention as nothing has ever done. There will be panic everywhere till things adjust themselves. At such a time, when it is discovered that the thing that finds favour with him is the knowledge of God and the obedience of the gospel, these attainments, so little valued now, will acquire an importance that will make all men wish themselves their happy possessors. It will be too late with the majority. Now is the time to obtain the knowledge of God, and to practise the obedience which by the mouth of Paul He has enjoined upon “*all men everywhere*” (Acts 17:30). Then will be the time for the outpouring of that long-gathering vengeance which God has restrained so long for His name’s sake. And then will be the time when the treasure we now possess, and which we have to hold in difficulty and gloom, will appear in its true character of untold value.

The time draws on apace. Some people say “perhaps we won’t live to see it.” What then? They will die to see it. Those who die will see it quicker than those who live, because the death interval is but a flash. In life, we have to wait the slow roll of years. In death, the interval is abolished, and we are hurried as in a moment to the very coming of the Lord. Consequently, in any case, it will be soon to every one of us. In this, we have great and constant comfort. While sojourning in the land of wickedness and strangers, we may have the constant feeling that we are within sight of home, and that if we can only endure for the short journey that lies ahead, we shall soon be out of the desert, and safe in our Father’s house of righteousness, whose shining form we can discern in the approaching distance. A little more courage! A little more perseverance, and by his coming, the Lord will gird us with immortal strength. He will clear our blurring eyes, and rouse our failing hearts, and strengthen our faltering steps, and revive our drooping life with a vigour that will never abate, wisdom that will never err, and joy that will never end.

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