

THE DEAD IN CHRIST

The words read in the ordinary course this morning from 1 Thessalonians are words of comfort. They are very appropriate to our case this morning, for we have need of comfort. We have lost a sister whose society was a help in Christ in the dreary path of pilgrimage we are treading to the kingdom of God. The loss has come upon us very suddenly. She was with us at the breaking of bread last Sunday morning, and this morning she is in her grave where we laid her last Friday.

We cannot help being powerfully exercised by such an event. Sorrow is the uppermost feeling for the moment. The sorrow, however, I think, is for ourselves. We have no cause to sorrow for the dead in Christ. They are at rest. For them, the interval of this dark and trying probation exists no more. Waiting for the kingdom is over with them. Their next conscious moment will introduce them to the great fact of Christ having returned, to which they looked as their star of hope during their passage through “time’s dark wilderness of years,” and that next conscious moment will appear to them immediately consecutive to the last thought they had before closing their eyes in death. For the dead we sorrow not. In a sense, they are to be envied. It is for ourselves we sorrow; we are left behind. We are still in the darkness of night, struggling along our difficult pilgrimage with one less to cheer and comfort us on the road.

Out of this self-sorrow comes a lesson—a lesson always needed though denied by none. We hold life by a very slender thread. Our life is but a vapour that appeareth for a very little time and then vanisheth away. We never know who will go next. Who would have supposed that our sister would be the next to be called from our side—from the very midst of her earnest watching for the appearing of the Lord—to join the band of those who sleep in Jesus? If we had been asked to choose the next most likely to die, we should have made our selection from several others: we certainly should not have included her. Well, as she has thus suddenly disappeared from our midst, between one Sunday and another, so may any one of us.

If so, where is the wisdom of so much care for the present life? Where is the wisdom of large aims for present advantage? When death overtakes us the care is at an end, and the advantages exist no longer for us: and meanwhile, the care may have killed us; the riches, and the pleasures, destroyed our prospects in Christ, in having deadened the heart and interfered with a good account for the judgment seat. The danger in this respect is very great because very insidious, being associated with so much that is legitimate. We are apt to pass from the bounds of what is right and safe to that which is unwise and deadly before we are aware. The cares and pleasures of life find a powerful response in the instincts of the natural man, which are strong with us all, at the beginning of the race at all events. We have to be on our guard.

A look at a dead friend is a help to this attitude of circumspection. We realise what is wisdom for them, at all events. We think how bootless their anxiety, of say a week before, has been: how well they might have spared themselves the load of their cares; how perfectly wise was their zealous addiction to the works of Christ, which alone remain their property in the eternal prospect. A reasonable mind will transfer these views from the dead to the living; from a dead brother or sister to one’s own still living—but perhaps to be soon dead—self. Such a mind will see and feel and surrender to the force of the apostolic precepts. Be without carefulness; cast your care upon God, who careth for you. Have faith in God. Having food and raiment, be therewith content. Labour not to be rich. Mind not high things. Pass the time of your sojourning here in fear. Live soberly, righteously, and godly. Be diligent to every good work. Seek first the kingdom of God. Be counted with the despised. Be like Moses, who refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with

the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt.

By the side of the coffin, these exhortations of the Spirit have great force: yet to be of benefit they must obtain the mastery over us in the common circumstances of every-day life, leading us to walk as saints, “*holy in all manner of conversation*,” purified unto Christ a peculiar people, zealous of good works, not fashioning ourselves according to the former lusts in our ignorance, but walking in the light, that we may be the children of the light, thus made meet for the inheritance of the saints in light. Most people feel solemnised in the presence of death: but most people also go away and forget the lessons that speak to them in that solemnity. Nay, most people are glad to get away, and glad to forget, glad to rejoin the careless throng, glad to efface the sombreness in the occupations of pleasure, or in the laughter of the fool, that crackles like thorns under the pot. In this lies the difference between a wise man and a fool:

“The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a man to hear the song of fools” (Ecc.7: 4).

Is it that the wise have a liking for that which is sombre? Is it that they have no capacity for the cheery aspect of things? By no means. There is a reason. Mourning is not a preference, but a result. The whole present situation of things will, of its own force, cause sorrow in every mind that perceives it. Only those who are blind or insensible can be unaffected by such a sorrowful situation. Folly is in the ascendant; death reigns; God is a stranger among the teeming multitudes. He who made the earth, is disowned in it. He hath spoken good words of promise and healing words of invitation; yet His word is spurned, and men rush everywhere after mere amusement without God. This would all be sad enough even if everybody had plenty, and there were no wretched poor huddled away in garrets, unfed, unclad, uneducated, uncared for, unblessed in a single opportunity of improvement or a single hope of release from evil plight; but when in addition to the pleasures, there is the misery; when in addition to the folly, there is the rotting poverty and hopeless degradation of millions; when, in addition to the wickedness, there is the blight, the stunting, the afflicting, the blasting, the crushing, the destruction of the overwhelming bulk of mankind, at the hands of a small section of monopolists, who surfeit themselves with measureless plenty, and philosophically contemplate the wretchedness without through the roseate atmosphere of their surroundings, venturing even to think the system right and the arrangement respectable—I say when a man of godly aspiration realises this situation of things, he needs not to make any effort at sadness. He is sad because there is a reason for it. He cannot share in the sport of fools with whom there is no recognition of the facts of the case. If he avoids the house of mirth, it is because mirth is misplaced in the present state of things on earth. There is mirth by and by for the righteous, but not yet. The business of salvation is too precarious a thing to allow it. When the *London* was slowly foundering in the Bay of Biscay, a tipsy sailor exerted himself to get possession of some valuables which a passenger (bent on trying to save his life) had thrown away among some chains coiled on the deck, and already under water. The sailor was in vain entreated to leave the trinkets alone and look after his life. Drink had interfered with a true perception of his surroundings, and he went to the bottom in his mad attempt. His case is a fair illustration of the case of the man who imperils his immortality by present pleasures and pre-occupations. The ship is foundering with us all; and the chief business is to save ourselves from this untoward generation; a business which involves the avoidance of many things which a man merely bent on entertainment might think proper to engage in, and the doing of many things which such a man would think unnecessary. Paul defines this important business and its co-relevants in the well-known words:

“Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and run with patience the race that is set before us . . . We ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we let them slip.”

Jesus expresses the same idea parabolically, when he says:

“If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off. It is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed than having two hands to be cast into the fire of Gehenna.”

Because the house of mourning is helpful to all these lessons of wisdom, therefore it is written,

“It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all living, and the living will lay it to his heart.”

But the day will come when this relation of things will be entirely changed. The day will come when the house of mourning will be abolished, and when gladness and good cheer and true pleasure will be the portion and everlasting joy of the chosen of God. This is the day exhibited to view in the words of Paul before us in 1 Thess. 4:13-18. It is the day of the coming of the Lord, whose mission it is at last to put an end to all sorrow and all curse.

“The Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught away together with them in clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words.”

And well we may. It is the comfort we need. It is a comfort exactly suited to our case. We shall see our sleeping friends in Christ again. They lose nothing by going to sleep. They awake from their deep slumber before the living are removed. Their resurrection is the first sign of the Lord's return; for the living go with them in company to meet him. They are caught away together. Therefore they must come together first; from which it follows—the time of the end having arrived—fanatical as the expectation may appear to those who have not realised the grounds of truth on which it rests—that we may be at any time visited by friends whom we have laid in the grave. This re-appearance will not alarm those who are looking for it with a rational expectation. It is simply a question of restoring the combinations of elements and impressions that made them before. They will be the same persons we knew before. We were not frightened by them then: there will be no more reason to be frightened by them now, when they present themselves in flesh and blood as we knew them. Fright in such things belongs to ghostology—not to the glorious gospel of the blessed God.

There will only be one element of fear in the occurrence. The appearance of the resurrected will mean that the day of the Lord has arrived. If we are terrified at the day of the Lord, then may we be terrified at the re-appearance of the dead, but not otherwise. Those who are living as the Lord's servants need not be afraid of the advent of that day. Other sorts, doubtless, have cause for fear, even though they may be looking for the day of the Lord. This we learn from the words read from Amos—strange words at first sight:

“Woe unto you that desire the day of the Lord!”

(Amos 5:18).

Why should there be woe to any who desire the day of the Lord? Because of what it has in store for them if they are not in harmony with it.

*“To what end is it **for you**?”* continues the prophet.

“The day of the Lord is darkness, and not light. As if a man did flee from a lion, and a bear met him.”—

That is, an unworthy man desiring release from the evils of this afflicted state will find the day of the Lord the opposite of a release—a worse form of evil—*“weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth”*—*“or as if a man went into the house, and leaned his hand on the wall,*

and a serpent bit him”—that is, such a man seeking rest in the kingdom of God, finds its arrival to be the advent of the destroyer:

“Shall not the day of the Lord be darkness, and not light? even very dark, and no brightness in it?”

Against whom are such terrible words directed? Is it against idolaters, or infidels, or heathen profligates? No! It was against Israel who complied with the forms of godliness and rendered an external obedience, as appears from the prophet’s continuing speech.

*“I hate,” saith God, “I despise your **feast days**, and I will not smell in **your solemn assemblies**. Though ye offer me **burnt offerings** and your **meat offerings**, I will not accept them, neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts. Take thou away from me the noise of **thy songs**; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols.”*

It was a people offering burnt offerings and peace offerings, holding solemn assemblies, and singing solemn songs, that were to find the day of the Lord darkness and not light. How is this? These things were ordained in the law. These services were required by divine appointment: and yet here is a people complying with these divine requirements assured of their rejection. Here are ordinances of divine appointment declared an abomination.

Why present this discouraging picture? Because of its lesson. These things were written for our instruction. So Paul declares. And is not the lesson obvious? We desire the day of the Lord, and watch for the signs of the times. We hold solemn assemblies at the breaking of bread, and unite in the songs of God. If Israel did all these things and were rejected, have we any reason for confidence, if our righteousness exceed not the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees?

Why were their services unacceptable? The answer is evident from the words that come next after those last quoted:

*“Let judgment run down like waters, and righteousness **as a mighty stream**.”*

This implies that the contrary state of things prevailed, as described by Isaiah.

“Judgment is turned away backward, and justice standeth afar off, for truth is fallen in the street, and equity cannot enter. Yea, truth faileth, and he that departeth from evil maketh himself a prey.”

Here is the next feature: instead of being grieved at such a state of things—instead of being zealous for righteousness in the earth, the leading men of Israel abandoned themselves to pleasures, and lost in the luxuries of wealth all sensibility to the calamities surrounding them. Their attitude is thus stated and condemned in the next chapter of Amos:

*“They lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches, and eat the lambs out of the flock; and the calves out of the midst of the stall. They chant to the sound of the viol, and invent to themselves instruments of music, like David. They drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the chief ointments: **but they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph**.”*

What other lesson is to be extracted from this divine picture, than that which Jesus Himself gives us in Luke 6:24:

“Woe unto you that are rich! For ye have received your consolation. Woe unto you that are full! for ye shall hunger. Woe unto you that laugh now! for ye shall mourn and weep”;

And again by James 5:1, 5):

“Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you . . . Ye have lived in pleasure, and been wanton. Ye have nourished your hearts, as in a day of slaughter.”

We have no rich men among us, or next to none. Therefore, the lesson in this form has, perhaps, no special applicability to us; but it is valuable as showing that we must take no part

in the universal race after pleasure and riches, if we desire to make our calling and election sure; and it is further valuable as showing that all our meetings, and our labours and our watchings, must be sanctified with the spirit of holy and enlightened zeal for God, and entire consecration to His obedience, before they will be of any advantage to us. Both these lessons are distinct and palpable in their nature and of urgent suitability in our situation. We are in danger of being infected with the all-prevalent Laodicean spirit around us. We are in danger of sickening and dying in the pestilential atmosphere of public opinion. We are in danger of rejecting the spirit of the holy oracles, because it is not common to receive it. We are in danger of sinking into that state in which our very compliances with divine requirements, so far as form goes, in meeting and breaking bread, and singing and praying, and contending for the faith, are so many mere performances odious to God; and our desire for the day of the Lord a sentiment destined to be quenched in the anguish of rejection from the Lord's presence at his coming. The danger will continue to the last moment, and therefore, till then the warning must be sounded, "*exhorting one another daily, and so much the more as we see the day approaching.*"

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By Bro. Robert Roberts