

A Sunday Morning Exhortation (27)

There is one characteristic which distinguishes the brethren and sisters of Christ from members of other religious communities, it is their quiet and earnest conviction that what they believe is true, and their readiness to bring forward proofs from the Scriptures, and to give to every man that asketh them a reason of the hope that is in them, with meekness and reverence.

There is no blind credulity here which is so often commended by those in darkness as an evidence of godly faith, but an intelligent and affectionate understanding of the plain first principles of Truth.

So with the emblems before us on the table. It is no elaborate ritual that we shall presently perform. It is a simple ceremony, instituted by the Lord, and intended to bring home to our minds simple, but vital and far-reaching facts. We know that, so far as numbers go, amid the world's teeming millions, we are but a negligible minority. The world regards us as mere nobodies, and so indeed we are when judged by the world's standards. But what are the true facts of the matter? Firstly, the whole world lieth in wickedness, in God's sight the great majority of mankind are just "servants of sin," and in that position they are "enemies of God." Whilst they delude themselves that they have immortal souls, the simple fact remains that "Sin reigns *unto death*." The Divine edict holds good in the case of every unenlightened son of Adam:

"The man that wandereth out of the way of understanding shall remain in the congregation of the dead."

Before we were called, that we might know His will and work in His service, we were "enemies of God." But, brethren and sisters, our Heavenly Father invites us to reflect upon the love that He has already shown us, for—

"God commendeth his love towards us, in that WHILE WE WERE YET SINNERS, Christ died for us."

And what gratitude there should be in the heart of each when we consider the wonderful position we now stand in, because if, when we were *enemies*, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, how much more, *being reconciled*, we shall be saved by his life. Paul says it is a position of joy. Do we really feel that way about it? Paul did. He said, "We joy in God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the reconciliation."

That is our happy position this morning. A people reconciled to God. He is now our Father, always ready to hear us, and to help us, and Jesus, His dear son, who is with us in spirit this morning, is at the Father's right hand, our high priest, who can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, ever ready to intercede on our behalf.

We call to mind the telling figure of the ark, which Peter uses; we have been called out from the perishing world, and by baptism in Christ have entered the ark, and Peter sets the resurrection of Jesus before us as the guarantee of our own safe deliverance from death if we but remain in the ark. Instead now of being "servants of sin," like the rest of men and women, with sin's eternal wages at the end of life's little day, we now have a certain prospect of LIFE ETERNAL if we continue in well doing.

The contrast is strikingly drawn in the last verse of the fifth chapter of Paul's epistle to the Romans, "As sin hath reigned *unto death*, even so might grace reign, through righteousness, unto ETERNAL LIFE by Jesus Christ our Lord."

We are all familiar with death; it is the great curse and the great enemy of mankind; dreaded by all. It is a frequent visitor to the household of faith. How often the sad announcement is made to us, that since we last met to break bread another of our number has fallen asleep. How often we have followed the coffin of a beloved brother or sister to the grave.

In the world, it is not considered good taste to talk of the subject of death: the fact is, of course, the human mind shrinks from the enemy; but unwillingness to speak of the subject will not put the enemy off. Inevitably he takes us one by one. But, as men and women enlightened in regard to God's purpose, we know there are valuable lessons to be taken to heart in the house of mourning, and, thanks be to God, we have that certain assurance which the world has not. The fear of death is inherent in human nature, but the bread and the wine upon the table speak to us of the Lord's great sacrifice made on our behalf, so that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is the devil, and thus deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.

That is why, brethren and sisters, there is nothing morbid about our consideration of death; because, when it removes for a short while one of our number, we sorrow not as others which have no hope, but we believe the scripture which says that "grace will reign UNTO ETERNAL LIFE." Ah! the Psalms truly speak of the loathsomeness of that evil disease — death. Yet the promise of God is that He will re-create from the dust His saints, and clothe them with healthy flesh and transform them into glorious immortal beings; perfect in mind and body, and with powers of perception and intelligence far transcending anything possessed by Adam's mortal sons.

But it requires real faith to grasp what this means. To our frail human mind, death seems such a grim reality that it seems natural to regard it as the end, and faith has to be continually fed and tended so that it may develop into a full assurance. Such a confidence as that possessed by Abraham, who stumbled not when he received a command to offer up Isaac, accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead.

It is for the purpose of strengthening our faith in the Resurrection that we have the details of the wonderful events recorded in the 11th chapter of John. Who can fail to be moved by the narrative, although it is told in such simple language, with the brevity which is so characteristic of God's Word?

About two miles east of Jerusalem, just over the other side of the Mount of Olives, was the village of Bethany, and there lived Martha and Mary and Lazarus. Martha seems to have been the housekeeper, for Luke tells us that a certain woman named Martha received Jesus into her house. What a haven of rest was this for Jesus — a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Outside, in his daily contact with the world, Jesus had the jealousy of the priests and rulers to contend with; the hardness of heart and the evil planning of those who would trap him and kill him if they could; but here, in this little family circle, there was love and goodwill — based on the surest and purest of foundations, a love of God. We read in verse 5 that Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. They were not perfect, of course. How homely was the incident recorded by Luke: Martha, busy with domestic duties, asks Jesus to reprove Mary for sitting and listening to him instead of helping with the serving; then there was the gentle but necessary rebuke to Martha for putting second things first, "*Mary hath chosen that good part . . .*"

While Jesus was away teaching on the other side of Jordan, Lazarus was taken very ill. The sisters' first thoughts were for Jesus. See how the message was worded, "Lord, behold he whom thou lovest is sick!" Surely the Master would not refuse such an appeal.

But there were two points of view here which did not coincide. When we find the way rough and dark in our own lives, it is helpful for us to remember this. So far as the sisters were concerned, Lazarus was ill and getting rapidly worse, and to them there was only one possible viewpoint, and that was to get Jesus there as quickly as possible. But verse 4 of the chapter shows us the other — the higher view of the matter. When Jesus had received the message from Bethany he said, "*This sickness*

is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the son of God might be glorified thereby." What a light these words let in upon a situation which to the two sisters was black indeed. It was a drawing of the curtain aside, so to speak, so that we are able to see the divine "why and wherefore" behind a situation which was causing grief to certain of God's faithful servants.

God's purpose in this case required the death of Lazarus, so that a mighty miracle might be worked; not only for the purpose of restoring Lazarus to life again, but for the convincing of many that Jesus was indeed the Son of God, the promised Messiah, the Lamb of God who should take away the sin of the world. So, in verse 6, we read that Jesus purposely delayed going to Bethany, staying two days where he was beyond Jordan. Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Let us go into Judea again," and he explained to them the reason. "Our friend Lazarus is fallen asleep, *but I go that I may awake him out of sleep.*" Those wonderful words from the Lord's lips fell on dull ears. If those disciples had grasped the full import of what Jesus was saying, how stirred they would have been! They said, "Lord, if he sleep he shall do well." So Jesus told them plainly, "*Lazarus is dead.*" The disciples needed their faith to be strengthened, too. Jesus said to them he was "glad for their sakes that he was not there"—so that they also might be convinced by the mighty miracle he was shortly to perform. But still their ears remained dull. When Jesus said, "Let us go to Lazarus," Thomas commented, "Let us go, too, that we may die with him!"

Meanwhile, taking our minds back to the home in Bethany, we can well feel for the sisters, as their hope gradually changed to despair when Jesus did not come. Why doesn't he come? Why this terrible delay? Then the blow fell, and there was the sorrowful little procession to the cave that was to be Lazarus' tomb. Many Jews came to comfort Martha and Mary, but no words at such a time can fill the place of the one who has gone.

Then Martha was told that Jesus was coming, and she hurried out to meet him, but Mary sat still in the house. What a conflict was going on in Martha's breast; faith battling with an appearance of things that was so very dark. "Lord, if thou hadst been here my brother had not died; but I know that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee—" But it seems she hardly dared, or could not bring herself to believe, that she would ever see her brother again till the day of resurrection. Verse 23 gives the simple answer of the Lord to Martha's sorrowful words, "Thy brother shall rise again." Martha replied, "I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus said unto her,

"I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die, BELIEVEST THOU THIS?"

There was something very penetrating in that question. Here was wonderful news for Martha. A promise that if she really believed she would see the glory of God revealed in the resurrection of her brother from the dead.

Martha called Mary secretly. "The Master is come, and calleth for thee." Quickly did Mary arise and hurried to Jesus. In her grief she repeated the same words of anguish, "Lord, if thou hadst been here my brother had not died." Clearly death seemed to them the great barrier. If Jesus had only come in time he could have healed him, but what could be done now that their brother was actually dead, and rapid dissolution and corruption had set in?

Cannot we share their feelings? What a mighty miracle it requires to reverse that terrible process of decomposition, as the body commences its change into dust. Jesus knew what he would do, and how in a few minutes he would change their grief to joy and strengthen their faith and confidence in the powers of the Almighty, yet he could enter fully into their feelings; he was touched with their sorrow—yes, he was tried in all points like his brethren. The culmination of his own sufferings lay immediately before him, and we remember how, in his agony of mind, he sweat, as it were, great drops of blood, yet he faithfully faced the task and offered his life in love for his friends, so that he might deal the death-blow at this cruel arch-enemy of mankind. Jesus saw Mary weeping, and her

friends, who had come with her weeping also, and he was greatly moved. "Where have ye laid him?" "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept.

There is a saying that "while there is life there is hope." Such a thought was evidently in the minds of some present. "Could not this man, which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that even this man should not have died?" We see where their faith stopped short. They were prepared to believe just as much as was already within their experience. They had not the generous confidence of Abraham, who, without any precedent case to fortify him, was prepared to believe in the resurrection of his son Isaac because of God's word that Isaac was to be the son through whom the promised seed should come. Even Martha seemed not to have grasped the full import of Christ's previous words to her. When Jesus commanded the stone to be taken away, Martha, apprehensive, said, "Lord, by this time he stinketh; for he hath been dead four days." Incidentally, this was an unwitting but powerful testimony to the fact that Lazarus was really dead; there was no doubt of the fact in the minds of those who gathered round the face of the cave. The Lord administered a mild reproof to Martha, "Said I not unto thee, that if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?"

Before the open mouth of the cave, the stone having been rolled away, Jesus prayed to the Father, thanking Him that he had heard Jesus, and that on account of the great miracle he was now to perform many present would believe that Jesus was God's only son, sent into the world.

Then with a loud voice Jesus cried, "LAZARUS, COME FORTH!" And Lazarus came forth, bound with grave clothes. "Loose him, and let him go!"

Thus was accomplished the purpose which the Father had in mind, and which Jesus spoke of when first he was told of the sickness of Lazarus. That God's glory might be seen, and Jesus himself glorified thereby. And the object in view was fully achieved, for many which saw the things which Jesus did *believed on him*.

How marvellous are God's ways; through the sickness and death of Lazarus many had their feet placed on the road to life. Doubtless some of those very witnesses of the great miracle, who were convinced by what they saw, will find a place with Lazarus and his sisters and all the great family of the redeemed in the Kingdom of God.

The resurrection of Lazarus was an earnest of the mighty power of the Spirit in bringing LIFE — ETERNAL LIFE, to the dead. Soon after the raising of Lazarus, Jesus himself made that great sacrifice we have met together to remember. He was taken and by wicked hands was crucified and slain, and he too was laid in a silent tomb. But his flesh was not suffered to see corruption, and on the third day he was raised up by the glory of the Father—a more glorious resurrection than that of Lazarus, for it was a resurrection to *Life Eternal*, Jesus being the first fruits of them that slept.

Every one of us present at this table has a full assurance and confidence that Jesus rose from the dead. Let us rejoice in the glorious fact, for it is the guarantee that our own hopes of a resurrection are surely founded. We are joint heirs with Christ, if we *suffer* with him, that we may be also *glorified together*. If, then, present sufferings weigh us down, if at times everything seems black and depressing, let us be encouraged by the assurance that all things work together for good to them that love God. Think of the case of Lazarus; how sorrow was turned to joy, and of Job, too, how in the end the Lord was very pitiful and full of mercy.

God's glory was revealed to the astonished onlookers when Lazarus was raised. If we hold fast in the few remaining days, it will be revealed in each of us. Just think of the promise of God; a glorious resurrection to life eternal. Paul, reflecting on these things, was moved to exclaim,

"I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."

So, dear brethren and sisters, let us appreciate that our hope is a priceless treasure. Let us remain firm in it, patiently striving in our daily walk to conquer the flesh, endeavouring to bring forth the fruits of the Spirit, and committing our way day by day unto Him who is able to save us.

Our faith and our efforts will be liberally rewarded, and that 'ere long, by the one who himself trod this vale of tears, and is now at the Father's right hand, ready to plead for us in our every need.

G.M.C.
