

SAVING OURSELVES.

The best exhortation or advice that any man can give to others is that which was given by Peter to the crowd of Jews that stood before him on the first Pentecost after the ascension of the Lord Jesus: "*Save yourselves from this untoward generation.*" (Acts 2:40). This implies that the surrounding mass of people in Peter's day were not in the process of being saved, and it further implies that this conviction on the part of Peter's hearers would be an incentive to exertion in the direction recommended in Peter's words. Further and more important still, it implies that there was a definite line of action by which those whom Peter addressed could achieve the wonderful result of "saving" themselves. It will be profitable to us on the occasion of this weekly memorial of the Lord's death, to consider the application of these things to our own circumstances.

Peter, writing many years after the Pentecostian speech, said,

*"I will endeavour that ye may be able, **after my decease**, to have these things always in remembrance."*

We must not therefore make the mistake of supposing that the words of Peter have lost their significance with the disappearance of Peter and his individual contemporaries. Those words remain in force "*until he come*" who enjoined upon Peter to "*feed my sheep*," and who directed Peter to say to those who came after him in the work.

"Feed the flock of God which is among you: thus exhort I the elders which are among you, who am also an elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed" (1 Peter 5:1-2).

"Save yourselves from this untoward generation"--

—as much as to say, "If you do not make an effort, you cannot be saved, but will perish with this untoward generation." Inevitably: Jesus had previously declared, "*broad is the road that leadeth to destruction, and many there be that go in thereat.*" If you go with those who are walking to destruction, you will certainly walk there too. This is Christ's doctrine. Many there be that dislike and would like to disbelieve it; but this does not alter it. The people that dislike the doctrine of Christ cannot give us another doctrine that we can trust. Christ rose from the dead: they die and perish. Why are we to prefer them to Christ? They give us their thoughts, their opinions, their speculations: why are we to prefer these to doctrines which Christ declared were not his own, and which he proved to be not his own, but the Father's who sent him, offering to submit his declaration to the test of evidence, saying,

*"If I do not the works of my Father, **believe me not**: but if I do, believe the works."*

The logic of this is irresistible.

Many feel concerning Christ's claims in the case, as the false disciples felt who said,

"This is a hard saying: who can hear it?"

Is it possible for unbiased intelligence to take sides with this mere grumble against facts that cannot be explained away? I should say, as a matter of reason, No. The grumblers grumble merely because they don't like the thing they grumble at. What have they to give us in its place? Have they a way of salvation of their own to offer us? Have they something better than Christ to tell us of? Or is it that they ask us to believe, on the strength of their opinion, that we can do without Christ, in spite of his declaration that "without him we can do nothing": or, still worse, that we are to discard him notwithstanding his monumental presence in the affairs of men; and are to be content with the present evil world as the only world we can know anything about, notwithstanding the presence of an element in it which cannot be distinguished from its constitution—historically or morally—that brings with it an absolute guarantee of something as much higher than the present as the heaven is higher than the earth? Reason will turn a deaf ear to such untenable proposals. Who can blot Jewish history from the annals of mankind? Who can

wipe the transcendent name of Christ from the page of history? Who can expunge the Bible from the literary archives of the world? Who can destroy the Jews from the midst of the nations? Who can remove the light of prophecy fulfilled?

The doctrine of Christ and of Peter remains true after all the grumbles. The generation of men upon the earth at this stage of its history is a generation we require saving from if we are to be saved. They are “*an untoward generation*”—that is, they are **not toward** God, but turned away from Him: forgetful of Him, or worse, indifferent to Him; or still worse, unbelieving of Him; or at the best, while entertaining a nominal belief in Him, are regardless of His will, inattentive to His testimony, disobedient of His commandments. God drowned the world in Noah’s day for its transgressions in these respects. He destroyed the whole generation of Jews that came out of Egypt, because of their unbelief and disobedience: He broke up the kingdom of Judah in anger, and almost annihilated the whole nation in the terrible events of the Jewish war of independence. Do we suppose He views with less displeasure the present state of mankind, in which He is ignored as completely as if He had no existence; and Christ left out of account as entirely as if he had never lived, wrought miracles, died and risen; and His will set aside as wholly as if there had been no revelation; and His purpose contemned and made light of, as if He had never condescended to make great and precious promises, and invited the rebellious to come and receive their benefit?

“*How long halt ye between two opinions?*”

said Elijah to Israel on Carmel in the great issue—Baal **versus** Yahweh. The question needs asking in thunder tones again and again. The issue is stupendous, between faith and unbelief. If there is no God, say so. If the deliverance from Egypt is a fable, declare it. If Christ was an impostor—if the apostles were false witnesses, let there be no mincing of matters. Let us have falsehood unmasked: let us have lies stripped bare: let the fictions of fanaticism and superstition be exploded and confuted and slain for ever. But if ye fear to postulate such atrocious propositions—if the assertions die on your tongue—if ye feel that perhaps Christ was not a madman or a liar, that perhaps the apostles were true witnesses when they testified his resurrection, that perhaps Moses was a faithful man, that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is the maker of the universe, then open eye, heart and tongue to the positive, glorious, unassailable truth. Take the attitude of believers, not of doubters. Accustom your mind to the posture of friendship instead of that of criticism and opposition. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly and have free course. Give it the reasonable place it had with Paul, who said he counted everything dung by comparison. Do not be like the Laodiceans, who held a yea and nay position—being neither decided unbelievers nor hearty believers. Be one thing or other—cold or hot—foe or friend. As to which it should be, reason has but one exhortation:

“*Save yourselves from this untoward generation.*”

Who does not flee from fire? Who does not rush to the boats when a vessel is sinking? Who would not wish to be saved from death? Even pride does not stand in the way at last. “Why will ye die?” It is God’s own question. “Save yourselves:” it is God’s own command.

As to how this is done, the manifest illustrations of the apostolic narrative supply a clear answer. The people believed the Gospel which it had pleased God to appoint as the means of saving them that believe.

“*When they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptised both men and women*” (Acts 8:12; Romans 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:21).

To the worldly wise of Paul’s generation, this was esteemed an arrangement of foolishness, just as it is esteemed now by the corresponding class in the modern era:

“*The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness, but to us who are saved, it is the power of God*” (1 Cor. 1:18).

To be on God's side is everything surely in such a matter. To be with the apostles on this question is to be with God.

"He that knoweth God heareth us: he that is not of God heareth not us: hereby know we the spirit of truth and the spirit of error" (1 John 4:6).

This is what Jesus frequently said:

"He that heareth you heareth me."

Let us ascertain and believe the things concerning the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, and submit to baptism, and we stand in the very position of those who were obedient to the Gospel in the first century. It only remains then that like them, we endure steadfastly to the end (Matt. 24:13) not moved away from the hope of the Gospel (Col. 1:23), keeping in memory what has been delivered to us (1 Cor. 15: 1-2), giving earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we let them slip (Heb. 2:1), always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as we know that our labour is not in vain in the Lord (1 Cor. 15:58).

"If we do these things, we shall never fall, for so an entrance shall be ministered unto us abundantly unto the everlasting Kingdom of our Lord the Saviour, Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:10-11).

There is nothing difficult to understand in this apostolically revealed process of "*saving ourselves from this untoward generation.*" There may be something difficult in the later stages of the process, if our eyes are not fully open to the glory of the truth. "*Enduring to the end,*" for example, becomes difficult as time goes on, and the powers of nature fail, and hatred arises for Christ's sake, and many are offended and betray one another, and iniquity abounds, and the love of many wax cold. Nothing will hold a man to the faith of Christ under such embittering circumstances but diligent and regular contact with the facts on which it rests, as recorded in the Scriptures, and embraced in the history of the world. The novelty of the thing will keep us attached for a while, and the ardour of young blood will help in the same way in the beginning of things. But in course of time, these die down, and nothing but naked truth remains to weigh with us. And if we are out of touch with this, and in touch with the thousand appearances that draw the other way, naked truth will lose its power, and we shall drift away into native indifference and ignorance.

So this "*always abounding in the work of the Lord,*" will be found a difficult performance if it is not rooted in a genuine recognition of the Lord himself. Pleasing at first, it will in course of time become tiresome if the motives which prompt us are such as become weak. The lasting motive is stated in its clearest form by Paul when he says,

"The love of Christ constraineth me."

If we are leaning on friends, friends will fail us at last, even if they remain true, for death will remove them from our side. If we are pleasing ourselves in our conformities to the various requirements of the truth, even this source of continuance will dry up: for human nature wearies of everything at last, and we have to confess with David "*My flesh and my heart faileth . . . I am become as a bottle in the smoke.*" If the mainspring of our spiritual action lies in **conviction**, and love of the things that constitute the subject of our conviction, action will outlast all change and all decay, and we shall be found "*always abounding in the work of the Lord.*" "*Whatsoever we do,*" we shall do "*as to the Lord and not unto men*"—thankful for men who work the same work from the same love, but not in any way depending on them for motive—serving the Lord Christ and not any man or ourselves—"*refreshed by the mutual faith of you and me*" it may be, but not turned away from the faith because some poor human heart has failed or some feeble perseverance has snapped under the necessary strain of mortal probation.

How is human nature to be thus made "*faithful unto death*"? Not by wishing it, though the wish is a step in the right direction. It is by adopting the measures that lead to it. There is no mystery about these. Faith will do it, but faith is conviction, conviction is the result of evidence, and the evidence is contained in the word of God.

“The Scriptures are able to make us wise unto salvation.”

*“The Scriptures are able to **build you up** and give you an inheritance among all them that are sanctified.”*

This is the testimony of the apostle Paul and the lesson of experience and the dictum of common sense.

But of course, action must harmonise with the facts. The Bible is the power, but if a man neglect the Bible and fill his mind with other things to its exclusion, the Bible will have no power with him. It matters not what things exclude it. Jesus says, *“The lust of other things entering in”*—the present world to wit, which Demas loving, forsook Paul; or the praise of men, which the Pharisees loving, felt all taste for the praise of God extinguished; and were even unfitted for the act of belief by their receiving honour one of another (John 5:44). It may even be one’s friends, or one’s own life, which a man loving to the exclusion of Christ, will at last lose when those who lose their friends and lives will find them. Christ says pointedly in this connection:

“If any man come to me and hate not his father and mother and wife and children and brethren and sisters, yea and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple Whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple. Salt is good, but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be seasoned? It is neither fit for the land nor the dunghill, but men cast it out. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear” (Luke 14: 26-35).

If we are tempted to think the demands of Christ are stringent, let us realise what it is that he is inviting us to and offering us in the *“crown of life,”* and we shall cease to have any reservations of this kind. We shall be ready to exclaim with Paul:

“The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us . . . for him I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ.”

—On the other hand let us remember there are degrees of attainment in Christ, and that though he sets us a high mark in the exercises that are to fit us for his companionship in eternal glory, he will not despise the faltering efforts of the little ones, nor go away from his gracious declaration:

“Him that cometh to me I shall in no wise cast out . . . faith shall be counted for righteousness . . . he that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved.”

For every element of the truth, there is a place.

A final element in the process of *“saving ourselves from this untoward generation,”* we must by no means leave out, and that is the recollection that Christ is our judge in the settlement of the question which waits us all at the end of each man’s career, namely: *“Are we, in Christ’s estimation, ‘worthy to escape all the evil things that will come upon the world, and to stand before the Son of Man?’ ”* We may know this without recollecting it. The recollection of it is very wholesome. It works in a variety of good ways. It prevents us leaning on our own verdict, or the verdict of neighbours. We may have a good opinion of ourselves, only to find at last that our self-satisfaction is based upon an inadequate and even fallacious estimate of what is pleasing to God. Christ will judge by the rule of what is pleasing to God. Remembering this, we cultivate this rule in the daily study of the Scriptures, and scarcely dare trust our own estimate of ourselves. We say with Paul, *“Yea I judge not mine own self.”* Judging ourselves by the word, we judge safely. Judging ourselves by the opinions men may hold of us is certainly the last thing we will think of. There is a world of meaning in those other words of Paul:

“If I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ.”

Men do not take delight in the things that please God. They are almost all like Peter:

“Thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.”

Recognising this clearly, we shall neither be distressed at the unfavourable opinions of men nor built up in any good opinion we may have formed of ourselves. We shall walk by the light of the word in all the humility of self-correction and in all independence of human criticism or condemnation, looking forward to that appearance before the Lord our Judge, at which we trust to find mercy where men would destroy; and perhaps vindication where men would condemn. This line of action brings peace. We rest on the answer of a good conscience without trusting to our own righteousness: we lean on the kindness of a merciful Creator without presuming on any title to His forbearance. We bear misrepresentation and slander, in the prospect of a vindication that will shut the mouths of all foes at the same time; we do not presume on salvation because of "*works of righteousness that we have done*," but because of the abundance of His mercy to them that fear Him, who love His testimonies and delight greatly in His commandments. Among whom every righteous man can justly claim to be. Thus in composure, peace, confidence, humility, and hope, we may work out our salvation with a fear and trembling that quail alike at the stupendous majesty of heaven and the worm-like insignificance of man, and yet rejoices in the infinite glory which God possesses, and to which He has called us in His kindness by the Gospel.

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