

SUNDAY MORNING NO. 292

Assembled round the table of the Lord to call his death to remembrance, we may claim, dear brethren and sisters, to be included in the statement of Paul just read in our hearing:

"We are not children of the bondwoman but of the free."

We stand in the same position as those to whom these words were addressed, except as regards their relation to the change that was in progress from the Law of Moses to the dispensation of the gospel. They lived at a time when the claims of the Law of Moses had great cogency. The law, divinely established in the beginning, had been in force for over a thousand years. Paul, who brought the gospel to them, had lived under it from his youth. Even Christ, who sent Paul, had been born under the law, as his mission *"to redeem them that were under the law"* required. The whole nation of Israel was zealous for its maintenance, under the leadership of a strongly-established hierarchy. It was natural therefore that there should be great difficulty on the part of individual believers in getting away from its jurisdiction. The Galatians had never been under it, but they were much in contact with Jewish brethren who could not help thinking that a law divinely established was intended to be always operative, and that therefore Gentile believers just introduced to the hope of Israel should submit to the commandments enjoined upon Israel through Moses. It was not wonderful that through their influence and their arguments many of them should come to think *"it was needful that they should be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses."* This contention early aroused the opposition of Paul, following in the wake of the decision promulgated by the apostles in council at Jerusalem (Acts 15). He went so far as to say that those Gentiles who yielded to the argument in question and submitted to circumcision, would cut themselves off from beneficial connection with Christ (Gal. 5:2-4). He supported his view by the allegory of Isaac and Ishmael, both sons of Abraham, but one by Sarah as the result of promise when Sarah was *"past the time of life,"* and the other by Hagar, a bondwoman, as the result of a mere marriage of policy, entered into with the idea of saving the promise of God from failure, and both having a difference of disposition corresponding to their origin. The whole incident he interprets as a miniature or type of the two covenants under which God has proceeded in his dealings with Israel—first, the Mosaic covenant which convicted every man under it of sin, and showed him his helplessness; and secondly the covenant of forgiveness through faith in Christ, by which men are reconciled to God and constituted heirs of life eternal. Sarah, the free woman, stands for the latter, and Hagar, the bondwoman, for the former.

"So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free."

The immediate controversy signalled by this declaration has long since died out. The Jews are no longer in view in the operations of the gospel. Though first in the field, they have disappeared as entirely from it as if the gospel had never been offered to them. They stand apart in sullen adhesion to the dead forms of Judaism, or in the contemptuous opposition to the claims of Jesus. They are no longer a "factor" in the situation related to the truth in modern times. The question now is—whether we belong to the bondage of the Law of Moses, or the freedom that belongs to the gospel, but whether we attain or shall attain the fulness of liberation which that freedom means—a liberty so great that Paul speaks of it as *"the glorious liberty of the children of God."* A full view of that liberty will justify the description.

There are many bondages connected with the present life, and from all of them the Gospel has the power to set us free if we will only let it do its work. There is the bondage to which Paul alludes when he speaks of those *"who, through fear of death, are all their lifetime subject to bondage."* This is a bondage common to man. Having no certain knowledge of what comes after death, or of the principles that determine a man's favourable relation thereto, whatever it is, they regard it with a feeling of apprehension. It is a subject they dislike. They turn away their eyes from the future. They prefer to live in the brightnesses and excitements of the present moment. Any casual glimpse of the subject, such as may come with the sight of a coffin or a skull or a funeral, or the advent of death in their own circle, causes a solemnising and unwelcome qualm. All the time they have a sense of the skeleton in the closet from which they dare not lift the curtain.

How different is the position of those who have been made free in Christ. Death has been robbed of its terrors. So far from its being the concealed horror of their lives, as it is with unjustified

sinner, it is the loop-hole of light in the dungeon of their present darkness. From being the terrifying descent into a yawning abyss, it has been converted into a side door through which at any moment they may be summoned to the presence of eternal glory at the coming of Christ. For in death, there is not a conscious moment. Therefore they can always say to themselves, "There is but a step between me and Christ." And this is a perpetual comfort to them in the midst of all the distresses of this evil state.

There is another bondage from which they are not yet quite so effectually delivered, but from which a measure of deliverance comes even now, and will come in a perfect form at last. There is a mental and moral bondage that weighs heavily upon every believer whose soul, like David, thirsts after God, "*as the hart panteth after the water brooks.*" It is the bondage connected with the imperfect nature of present experience. We would rise to higher and more continuous attainments of godliness than are possible with a "soul cleaving to the dust," and standing in need of daily quickening. We are held in lines of thought and feeling and action that we inwardly disown. To use Paul's words in Rom. 7,

"The things that we would not, we do; and the things that we would (in the high sense) we find to be impossible."

What is the result of such an inharmonious experience but just the worse than dissatisfied feeling that Paul expressed when he said,

"Oh, wretched man, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"

If we have our share of this distress, it is not a bad sign. It is the reverse. Sinners are not troubled with it. The stream is all one way with them. It is when you go against the stream that you get broken water. The existence of conflict in the mind is distressing, but it is a wholesome indication so far as it goes. So as we are pulling the boat up stream, all is well, even if some of the water gets into the boat. It is not a crime that—

"The Spirit lusteth against the flesh and the flesh against the Spirit."

Such a conflict is the inevitable result of the implantation of the new law that comes with the truth. It is where the flesh prevails against the Spirit that danger arises. Men of God are not servants of the flesh, though they are inconveniently obstructed by the flesh in their service of the Spirit. Like Paul, they keep the body under, "*lest, having preached to others, they themselves become castaways.*" It is "*to him that overcometh,*" that the prize of victory will be awarded. Nevertheless, the battle is often sore, and some feeble minds are unduly exercised by the fact of there being a battle, as if God would lay this to their charge.

"Comfort the feeble-minded," says Paul.

This comfort, with the memory of such words as we find in Psa. 103:

"Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him: for HE KNOWETH our frame: he remembereth that we are dust."

The weakness of present nature invades even our prayers:

"We know not what to pray for as we ought."

What then? Is God displeased? If we were inattentive or unconcerned, he might be. But "*what saith the Scripture?*"

"The Spirit itself helpeth our infirmities . . . making intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God."

Here is a divine side of the matter of which we cannot be conscious, except by belief of the testimony. It is a matter to be received by faith, that though our inner man may be overwhelmed by the incapacities of the flesh, the Spirit reflects to the eternal throne the inner aspirations and affections of the mind which can only be expressed on our part by inarticulate groanings. Before the throne stands the Lord Jesus, whose part it is to focalise these transmitted distress signals as it were, and "*make intercession*" with the Father on behalf of those concerned (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25). It pleases the Father that the matter should be handled in this way; and His children receive the benefit in that "*mercy obtained and that grace found to help in time of need*" (Heb. 4:16).

This is a bondage that will be swallowed up at last in "*the glorious liberty of the children of God.*" Give us that "*clothing upon, with our house which is from heaven, that mortality might be swallowed up of life,*" of which Paul speaks in 2 Cor. 5, and we shall find ourselves possessed of what

the Spirit in Isaiah describes as “*the garment of praise*,” a state of mental exhilaration in which the cloud and weakness of this labouring and heavy-laden state will never be known. “*Rejoicing in the Lord*” will then be something more than a feeble effort of mortal mind to be glad about God. The heart will be open to Him all day long like the blooming flowers to the noon-day sun, and we shall have to make no effort to remember His commandments. We shall “*live in his presence*” in glad communion, and rejoice in His love with more than all the sweetness we ever experience from mortal friendship, and find in His praise a revel of ecstasy, comparable only to the pouring carol of the lark at heaven’s gate in the cloudless dawn.

Another bondage will disappear in the day of liberty. How helpless we are to succour others—our friends in their need; the needy in their distress; the world in its woe. How often we groan at the spectacle of the “whole creation groaning and travailing in pain together until now.” How impotent we are to confer on neighbour and friend and all men the blessedness which the truth has taught us to yearn to bestow. Our hands are tied as completely as if we were manacled prisoners in a dungeon. How entirely we shall be set free if in the finishing of the Lord’s work we are among those addressed in Isaiah 61:

“*Ye shall be named priests of the Lord: men shall call you the ministers of our God: ye shall eat the riches of the Gentiles, and in their glory shall ye boast yourselves,*” and elsewhere:

“*Turn ye to the stronghold, ye prisoners of hope*”:

“*I will cause you to ride on the high places of the earth*”:

“*Ye shall possess the Kingdom, even for ever.*”

Sometimes it happens that a title is conferred upon a man without an estate befitting his rank. He finds it a burdensome honour. Instead of being able to benefit his friends, the difficulty of maintaining his own position is increased. There will be no such discrepancies in the Lord’s arrangements. If he make a man a king and a priest, he will endow him with such amplitude of possession as will enable him not only to sustain the position with a liberal hand, but to overflow in numberless bounties to those whom God places under his hand. The promise that the meek shall inherit the earth is no empty one. No one inherits who does not possess. “*The uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession*” is the larger grant in which the portion of the saints is included. The kingdoms of this world do not become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ in a merely sentimental or poetical sense, or even in a spiritual sense. They become so in an actual political sense at the point of the sword, for they shall “*make war with the Lamb*,” as the Canaanites did upon the typical Joshua (Josh. 11:19-20) and “*the Lamb shall overcome them*” (Rev. 17:14). Only then will divine law take the place of human law, and the possibility arise for the nations to become enlightened, and blessed in Abraham. What is there that we now desire to do in the way of conferring benefit that will not then be possible? There are many “*vain talkers and deceivers*” abroad in the earth just now, “*whose mouths must be stopped*” before the public can be emancipated, but whose mouths cannot be stopped under existing conditions. There will be an end to their demoralising babble when power is taken from man in all the earth and vested in the friends of God alone. It will be at a man’s peril if he refuse to submit to the authority of the Lord in the hands of the saints. The day of unbridled liberty will be past. The day of the iron rod will have come when there will only be liberty to do well. The children of modern license, who say with certain ancients, “*Our tongues are our own. Who is Lord over us?*” (Psa. 12:4) may demur. Their demur will be without avail, as it is without reason. When a thief caught in the act of robbery in the street is handcuffed and walked off, who complains of interference with the laws of liberty? Even now, a man is only at liberty to obey the law. There are consequences if he set himself against it. In that sense, it will be no new thing for men to be coerced against evil-doing. The only difference will be as to the standard of well-doing. The circle of human duty will be much widened. Men rob God of His due; this is not considered a crime under human law. Under divine law, it will be reckoned and dealt with after its true character:

“*Every soul that will not hear that prophet shall be cut off.*”

“*It shall come to pass that when any shall yet prophesy (teach falsely) . . . (even) his father and his mother that begat him shall thrust him through,*” saying, “*Thou shalt not live, thou speakest lies in the name of the Lord*” (Zech. 13:3).

Under this law, there will be a wholesale suppression of evil teaching by press and platform. God is eliminated from public tuitions of all kind at present. This will not be tolerated when the glory of the

Lord fills the earth as the waters cover the sea. Magazines and newspapers and books that ignore God and tickle human vanity will be suppressed, and it will be the work of God's friends to do it. But there will be higher work than the work of repression.

"I will give them pastors according to my heart who will feed my people with wisdom and knowledge."

Set free themselves from the trammels of human weakness, and from the darkness of mere naturalism, the saints will have it in their power to lead mankind into the same liberty by the simple and powerful methods which will be placed in their hands when they are invited to reign with Christ. Under this reign, plenty and righteousness will go hand in hand, with boundless liberty to do well, but none at all to do evil for Satan will be bound for a thousand years, and then destroyed from the face of the earth for ever. The present world, founded on revolt against God, is a world of bondage, with much promise of liberty in many "*good words and fair speeches*," which deceive the people to their disappointment and ruin. The world to come, founded on the fear and worship of God, and the loving obedience of all His commandments, is a world of liberty—glorious liberty in which there will be no jar or blemish, but will shine for ever in the joy of well-being and praise.

"So then, brethren, we are children not of the bondwoman but of the free."

"Stand fast, therefore, in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again therein in the yoke of bondage."

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