

## SUNDAY MORNING 1898

WE have been told this morning that it is our duty to exhort one another. We have also been reminded that we are here for an act of remembrance which it has pleased the Lord to require at our hands for his satisfaction and for our benefit. Both things—the need for exhortation, the need for the breaking of bread—are rooted in a common liability to forget what we have not seen, do not see, and cannot see. Who has seen what happened before he was born? Who sees what Stephen saw—heaven opened and Jesus standing at the right hand of God? Who can see the things that are going to happen when Christ has returned to the earth? Yet we stand related to and are called upon to remember these three classes of things, and our ultimate well-being depends upon our success in doing so. It is upon this memory that present comfort and present action depend. Who is not comforted by pleasant anticipation? Who is not stirred to action by strong conviction? This is the victory of faith: and “*faith is the substance of things hoped for.*” Faith looks at things not seen because they are going to be; it looks not at the things that are seen, because they are going to pass away. This is a pure act of reason, and not of fanaticism at all. But the trouble is that reason does not reign, but mere sensation. People believe what they see, and say, “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.” This would be all very well if what they see had any endurance, or if there was any doubt at all about futurity in the case. But seeing the world passeth away—seeing that life ebbs with every pulsation of the blood—seeing that death and darkness are insensibly encroaching at every moment—seeing that the best result that can be achieved by the most successful efforts in any line of human action are fleeting as the flowers of spring—seeing all this on the one hand, as man after man does see at last, as the facts come to his own door; — and seeing, on the other hand, that there is a future coming on—that there is a Christ in heaven waiting only the right moment to return to the earth to make his enemies his footstool—that there is a resurrection in store, and a judge to meet, and a kingdom to inherit, and an everlasting age of enjoyment to enter, —it is not the part of reason to talk about “a bird in the hand,” which is not really a bird in the hand, but a bird escaping from the hand; or about “two in the bush,” which are only in the bush as a man’s provisions are in his larder—there only till the moment comes for setting them on the table. The part of reason is the part prescribed by Paul, when he says, “*We ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we let them slip.*”

It is this “*letting them slip*” that is the danger—it is so easy—it is so natural. There are things that we must do, and that there is a certain amount of pleasure in doing. We must sleep; we must get up and have a morning rub down (if we do as wise men do); we must have breakfast (even if some do not always give thanks); we must go forth to some kind of occupation (for in the present state of human life, the rule is inexorable, that if a man do not work he cannot eat); we must continue at our occupation, with slight intermission, till nightfall, and return home fatigued with the day’s labour, and ready for the blankets once more. There is a “must” about all these things that we cannot escape. As to the things of God, there is only an “ought” which is not so strong. The danger is, the “must” will carry the day to the exclusion of the “ought.” We have to make a place for the “ought,” whereas the “must” makes a place for itself. Here is the battle. Shall we lose or win it? That is the question. Some will win; some will lose; that is certain. We all want to win; that also is certain. Well, all are invited, and all will be welcome to win, but the conditions are the same for all and will be enforced.

In a sense, the conditions are strict, and in a sense, they are not onerous; but as Jesus says, “easy” and “light.” They are strict in this sense, that “*in no case*” (Christ’s frequent

expression) will entrance to the Kingdom be granted in their absence. They are easy in this sense, that they are within the capacity of ordinary minds where there is no specially obstructive influence.

*“Except a man humble himself as a little child, he shall in no case enter into the kingdom,”* expresses one of them. There ought not to be anything very difficult in this if we realise how conditional a thing our whole existence is, and how inferior at its best. Consider our dependence upon food: upon the admission of air through the bronchial tube: upon the involuntary contraction of the valves of the heart: upon the unobstructed action of the intestinal machinery. And consider that all these organic processes are the workings of machinery God has made which we could not keep going for a moment without His permission and enablement. And consider when all the processes have had their fullest effectuation, that the result is only a mortal man, corruptible and unclean, easily wearied out, and working steadily towards dissolution. And consider, in contrast to all this, how great is the dignity and grandeur and the glory of the divine nature, of Him who is Spirit, who is self-subsisting, incorruptible and eternal, *“who fainteth not, neither is weary, and there is no searching of his understanding.”* We only require to think of these things to be enabled to rate ourselves at the low degree that Jesus enjoins—to humble ourselves as little children and become servants of all. The proudest man by nature is abashed in the presence of royalty. Let a man realise that he is all the time in the presence of the Eternal Father, and he will be helped in this matter. The lesson of His presence is a little more difficult to learn in the direction of God, because of His apparent absence. But it can be learnt, because it is a truth; and when it is learnt, it is almost a pleasure to humble ourselves as required. A brother of unusual worth and promise in spiritual directions, but who laboured under a disabling disease that took him off in a few years, in lamenting his inability to do what he would like in the service of the truth, used to say, *“There is one thing I can do: I can humble myself as a little child.”*

It is certain that God hates the proud. It is so revealed many times, and it seems almost natural it should be so, for if a proud man is an offence to fellow-mortals, how particularly odious must his self-consequence be to Him upon whom he is dependent for the breath he draws, and who sees him through and through in all his native corruption.

Another of the constantly expressed conditions is that we believe. *“Ye believe in God, believe also in me.”* *“If ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins.”* This also ought to be easy, and is easy, when all the facts are before the mind. No doubt there are difficulties. Jesus said to the Pharisees, *“How can ye believe that receive honour one of another and seek not the honour that cometh from God only.”* There is more hindrance to belief in this than most people suspect. When men are on the outlook for human deferences and compliments, and especially when they live in an atmosphere of that kind, their minds are not in a state to receive impressions. To love the praise of men and run where it is to be earned is almost fatal to the child-like simplicity of belief which God requires in His friends, and *“without which,”* Paul says *“it is impossible to please him.”* One can see how this should be when one considers how much the thing we are called on to believe is a thing asserting the divine honour and lowering the glory of man. The mind that craves worship is naturally out of relish with a system of things based upon the worship of God alone, and whose keynote or overture was so distinctly sounded in Israel’s ears: *“All flesh is grass and the glory of man as the flower of the field. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth, but the word of our God endureth for ever.”*

But apart from any special disqualification of this sort, belief ought to be of the easy character which Jesus attributes to his yoke. Belief is the result of evidence, in every matter. It is an inevitable, an involuntary result. You cannot help it, when sufficient evidence is before you, if there is nothing to “blind your eyes” to its nature and its force. If ever there was a case of sufficient evidence, it is the case of Christ and the Bible, and all that is involved in them. There is no ancient testimony half so self-evidently true on the face of it. There is no matter, ancient or modern, so powerfully confirmed by collateral supports of all kinds, as the history and prophecy of the word of God with Israel, contained in the Bible. But, of course, the evidence must be before the mind before this can be felt and seen. And here is the principal source of weakness and difficulty with most men. They do not familiarise their minds with the subject. “*The cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches and the lust of other things*” so engross their minds as to prevent them from giving that amount of attention to the facts of the case that is necessary. The belief, which ought to be easy and gladdening, is often difficult and sometimes impossible.

All of us require to be continually reassuring ourselves, because of the adverse appearance of things. What is before our eyes is, as it were, a continual denial of historic truth, and historic truth takes no pains to assert itself. You would not suppose from the busy street traffic of London Bridge that once, there was no London. You would not know in the bustle of a Parliamentary election that once the Romans were in England, and England but a province of Rome, and the only “votes” the voice of the army in the election of an Emperor. You would not suppose in the quiet of a harvest-field that there had been Napoleonic wars in Europe less than a hundred years ago, and a torturing Inquisition before then, and a tyrannical priestcraft, hunting the Bible and heretics to death. So you would not gather in the monotony and pettiness of mere business life, as it is in modern days, that there was once an Israel in Egypt and a miraculous deliverance therefrom, and a fiery law given from Sinai, and a long succession of messages by prophets through whom God spoke, and lastly a manifestation of God in the babe born in Bethlehem, and the carpenter baptised in the Jordan, and the divine teacher and miracle-worker crucified on Calvary, and that Jesus raised from the dead to die no more. Such things, though as certainly true as the sunrise and the blue sky, and the waving trees in the wind every day, cannot be known in their truth except by stepping aside from the rushing stream of daily life, and holding converse with the events and the ages of the past. This is to be done by no Herculean effort or supreme exercise of genius, but by the little daily regularities of reading and thought. All great things are done in littles. It is the patient littles that pile up and make a mountain at last. Those who know their day in this respect, and who obey the Spirit’s counsel in the Proverbs, to “*stand daily at wisdom’s gates, and wait at the posts of her doors*”—seeking for knowledge and understanding, and for wisdom as for hid treasure, find at last in the sweetness of intellectual attainment, how easy is the yoke of faith, how light is the burden of conviction, how inevitable is the exercise of belief—and how delightful is the victory which such mental equipment enables them to achieve over the deceptive appearances of things. They can re-echo with joyful energy the words of John: “*This is the victory that overcometh the world, our faith.*”

And lastly, we are required to act out our belief in God in the doing of those things that He has commanded, and abstaining from those things that He has prohibited. It might be supposed at first sight that this at least is a difficult part of the divine conditions, even if humility and belief were easy. In truth, it may turn out that this is the easiest of the three when the two other are in sound form. What is more natural—more inevitable—than action when its causes are active? The strength of idea in causing a man to act may even be terrific. It is this that makes mental derangement so dangerous. All the executive power that is

ordinarily at the command of correct impression lends itself as readily to false as to true idea, just as a locomotive engine will dash forward whether the driving lever be turned by a child or a man. Only let belief be vivid and sincere, action will require no forcing. Let a man believe in God and love Him, and he will not find it difficult to obey Him. This is where the importance lies of *“keeping the heart with all diligence.”* If a man fritter away faith by neglect, obedience will soon die. When David said, *“I made haste to keep thy commandments,”* he expressed a state of mind that is almost natural where David’s strength of conviction exists. An obedient life is the natural outcome of knowledge and faith, and knowledge and faith depend upon the measures we take to acquire them. One of those measures is this assembling ourselves together in obedience to the Lord’s command. From this table, as a centre, many influences radiate that help us in the good fight of faith.

In the battle, we shall suffer scars and bruises. We shall often feel that we have not succeeded so completely as we should desire; we shall even feel sometimes that we have failed to an extent causing “confusion of face.” There remains this final comfort, that *“if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all iniquity.”* *“We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”* *“Having such an high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith,”* *“that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.”*

(Taken from Sunday Morning No. 294, 1898 Christadelphian, by Bro. R. Roberts.)