

NEARING THE DAWN

We are commanded to walk in wisdom and to dwell mutually according to knowledge. To do this, the mind must be exercised in discernment of facts and their relation. Even in temporal things, it is this that constitutes wisdom. A man who is ignorant and unobservant can never succeed in anything. There are various things to know to be wise in. All are more or less important, but some more so than others. Some things we can dispense with the knowledge of. Others we must know or perish. Of such are the things that cluster round this Table of the Lord to break bread and drink wine in remembrance of him. Without a knowledge of them and sympathy with them, we are the mere natural creatures of the day, with which creation teems in countless thousands—sustaining a brief organic existence and disappearing for ever like the insects of a season. Only he that doeth the will of God shall abide forever (1 John 2:17). Only he who learns that will can do it. Only he who reads or hears the revelation of that will can learn it. Hence the transcendent importance of the reading of the Word of God and the studying of it.

People scorn us as a people of one book. They say that a man of one book is a dangerous man. No doubt this is true of human books, though even then, it depends upon what book it is. But how can it be true of a book that God has given us? How can it be true of a book that makes us wise unto salvation? How can it be true of a book that makes the man of God thoroughly furnished unto all good works? It is, no doubt, good (for present uses) to have some general acquaintance with the literature of the age; but as between a man of general literary culture, ignorant of the Bible, and a man enlightened in the Scriptures, and of poor acquaintance with human writings, there is no comparison. Even now the mentality of the latter is preferable to the other for real purposes. It is more solid and tranquil and beautiful as the result of a daily familiarity with writings produced by the mind of God, containing the views of God on history, the thoughts of God on human ways, the principles of God prescribed for human conduct, the promises of God for human need and human futurity. The mind of the mere literary man is a thoroughfare of the mere human crowd with their noise and dust and shallowness and futilities. His mind is soaked and deluged with human thoughts and sentiments which end in nothing. Even now, the man of God has the advantage; but consider the upshot. Even Balaam could say, "Let me die the death of the righteous, let my last end be like his." The upshot will make it manifest that the man of God has achieved the objects of existence, and that the other has lost them. Christ, returned to consummate the purpose that God had in the formation of this planet, can have no pleasure in or use for the merely elegant gossip in human affairs. Such a creature can have no natural place in the final and lasting form of life upon the earth, an immortal life of holiness, glory to God, and fellowship with the spiritual intelligences of the universe. It is, "the man that is (now) godly that the Lord hath chosen for Himself"—the man who knows, believes, fears, loves, and serves God in a time of ungodliness, when the doing of his commandments is difficult and disadvantageous. Natural men may dissent from this principle of choice, but they can no more change it than they can change the constitution of the atmosphere. And their reasons for any desire to change it would be found upon a full examination to be as insufficient and insane as the interference of the limited and the human must necessarily be with the infinite and the divine.

The force of these thoughts is overpowering when a man has reached the end of his mortal journey and lies down to the rest of the grave. How much more will they be so when he emerges from death (instantaneously as it will seem to him) to face the Great Dispenser of life's issues according to the will of God. Let our reading then be as continuous as its importance demands—not literally continuous of course, but continuous as a daily habit. The man who is no reader is necessarily more or less of a barbarian according to the true standard, for not otherwise than by reading can we know and remember what God has done, what God has said, and what He wills us to do. Our reading furnishes constant materials for inspiring

reflection concerning our present ways. We are saved by what we read from being overcome by the weaknesses and the dolefulnesses of present life. We are enabled to see the present life in its right place in the great place God has with the earth and man, and to be patient and wise accordingly. Each part of our reading will give us something different but something suitable for this. Nothing that is in the Bible is unrelated to the plan that it embodies as a whole.

We have Moses before us in the pathetic attitude of imploration against a sentence pronounced against him. What bearing this incident has it may not be difficult on reflection to see. First, what guarantee it affords us of that truthfulness of the Bible which is the first element of its value to us. How came it to be recorded that Moses erred and was in consequence forbidden by God to enter the land of promise, except that the thing occurred? It is not conceivable that such a story could be invented. Stories are invented for credit or advantage. What of either could there be in the solemn record in the national archives of an account which threw a slur on the character of Moses and on the character of the nation? (for the error of Moses is represented as the result of the obstinacy and implacability of the congregation). Such an account cannot in the nature of things be an invention. The occurrence of the incident recorded is the only rational explanation of the existence of the account of it. And being true, what then? Why, that all is true of which the incident forms a part. If God condemned Moses to die before entering the land, because Moses in a natural transaction took the glory that belonged to God, then God was with Israel in the exodus from Egypt, and if with them then, he was with them in their subsequent experience, in which case, Christ's appearance amongst them was a divine reality, his resurrection a fact, and all the hopes, promises predicated thereon—Secondly, see the powerful instruction the incident affords as to the due relations of God and man: God says—

“I will be glorified: I will be exalted in the earth;”

“My glory will I not give to another.”

Could He have more forcibly pressed this home upon us than by the spectacle of Moses (the most privileged and faithful of His servants among men) excluded from the land of promise because of failure on this point at a very trying moment? The common run of men may be insensible to the idea of the glory of God. But it is the governing principle of the universe for all that. Man is mortal and Israel is scattered because the principle has been overthrown upon earth for a time; and man hereafter, at the great settlement of futurity's affairs will be justified or condemned by the operation of that principle. “That God may be all in all” is the object of God's whole work upon the earth. It will be reached when the population is limited to those (selected from all generations) who reflect His glory in the fervour of true enlightenment and the vigour of an immortal nature. When this goal is reached, the wicked will have perished for ever, and the wicked are those who know not God and glorify Him not—a much larger category than popular theology provides for, or than human thought recognises. As for the scientific modifications of theology, that is paganism in a new form. Theology is bad: scientific theology is possibly worse. The only true godliness is in the Bible which theology darkens and science rejects. The true light will yet come forth to all.

Then we have Gideon asking his tokens. Gideon was what in modern language we might call a small farmer—with a farm away in the mountains, specially subject to the depredations of marauding bands who watched their opportunity and pounced upon the crops at the right time. All Israel were exposed to this affliction because of their neglect of the institutions Moses had delivered to them. The affliction was very bitter, and Israel cried for deliverance. One day, Gideon was threshing corn in secret, for fear of the Midianites. An angel came in response to Israel's prayers and informed Gideon that God would deliver Israel by his (Gideon's) hands, and proceeded to indicate steps he must take.

Gideon desired a token that his visitor was a divine reality. He could not enter upon such an apparently hopeless undertaking as the overthrow of the Midianite armies of

occupation, without the assurance that God was with him. He asked his visitor to stay while he (Gideon) should present him something. The visitor assented, and Gideon prepared a repast of flesh and broth and unleavened cakes, and brought it to him. The angel asked him to deposit the things on a certain spot on the rock. Gideon did so. The angel then touched them with the end of his rod, and flames issued from the rock and consumed them in a moment. This satisfied Gideon for the time, and (the angel having departed) he proceeded to carry out his directions. But days having passed, it appears to have occurred to Gideon that possibly the angelic visit was a dream or an illusion of some kind. He desired a further confirmation. He asked God in all humility that He might suffer Himself to be tested. He would put a fleece of wool in the open air during the night; let it be wet on the fleece in the morning and dry on all the ground. God granted the request. Gideon found the fleece wet and wrung a bowl of water out of it, while all the ground was dry. But Gideon appears to have doubted again. Perhaps someone knew of his wish that the wool should be wet and took and dipped it in water and replaced it in its position whilst he slept. Would God refrain His anger and allow him one more token: namely, let him again place the fleece on the ground, and this time, let the fleece be dry and let all the ground be wet: he would then be sure that there was no human deception. God heard Gideon in this also: the fleece was perfectly dry and all the ground wet, and Gideon went on without further hesitation till he succeeded in routing the Midianitish army and driving them out of the country.

What is there in all this for us? Why this, it is the illustration of a fact meeting us at every turn throughout the whole course of Bible history, that the transactions upon which our faith and hope are founded were all of a practical, palpable, tangible character. They were not of the dreamy unreal character of heathen prodigies.

There never was any room for the possibility of “cunningly devised fables.” There was no hole and corner character about them; none of the demands upon “confidence” that are more or less characteristic of every form of imposture. From the day that Moses brought Israel from Egypt by public acts of power which the magicians of Egypt could not imitate (at last killing the Egyptian firstborn and opening a way in the sea), to the day when mighty signs and wonders were openly performed by Christ in the midst of Israel. For three-and-a-half years, there was one long, strong, and divine interposition of a character as open and substantial as any transaction that ever transpired among men. If God has spoken “at sundry times and in divers manners,” He has also attested the fact in a way not to be mistaken by common sense and child-like candour. Faith rests upon a foundation that could not be made more solid except by the performance of miracle before our own eyes, and even this would not, in true logic, add to its strength. The resurrection of Christ is the crowning assurance. His miracles, while he lived, were convincing enough; but had he died and passed off the scene in the ordinary way, it might have been suggested that the power enabling him to perform these miracles was a power mysteriously resident in himself as an extraordinary man, and of no wide significance as regards other men. But what can the caviller say when the dead Christ rises from the dead? A dead man cannot raise himself. A power external to himself must do this. That he rose is certain on the evidence. The world is full of crucifixes today because he rose. The cross of Christ would never have come to be magnified if Christ himself had not risen. The world would never have heard of the crucified Christ had he not become the risen and glorified Christ. The testimony of the apostles is before us in the written form in which they left it; and the evidence of their testimony having been given is to be seen in the altered state of the world, which while idolatrous under the Caesars at the time their work began, is now “christian” and civilised to a degree, bearing witness to the employment of some powerful agency effecting the change. These considerations are of a great helping power while we look for “the dawn” of which we have been singing.

“The dawn will bring us light.”

It is a beautiful figure. It is of Scriptural origin. It is David by the Spirit that has spoken of the coming of the day of Christ as the breaking of a “morn without clouds.” It is Paul who speaks

of the present time as “the night”—far spent, but still “night.” We wait in this night for the dawning of the promised day in the full certainty that “That hallowed morn shall chase away the sorrows of the night.”

The advent of day is caused upon the earth by the rising of the sun in the east. And it is the most beautiful of all the beautiful phenomena that are to be seen upon its face. Darkness prevails unbroken till the hour approaches for the return of the day. Then a faint glimmer is seen on the eastern horizon. Gradually the light increases. The narrow band of grey becomes a broad body of diffused light mounting higher every moment into the sky. The brightness grows brighter. The heavens which were black grow light and azure. The face of the earth which was hidden becomes visible in its garment of sparkling green. The birds begin to twitter and man awakes from the slumber of the night. Soon a flood of brightness pours from the eastern sky. Then the high hills are tipped with gold. At last the glorious orb emerges and fills the whole country with life and light and warmth and gladness. The day has begun and the world rapidly fills with life and activity.

There is an analogy between this and the day we are looking for. At present all is dark. Sin and death run riot on the earth. Where hope and plenty, and gladness might be, there is want, and toil, and misery, and disappointment and fatuity of every kind. Man is without a kindly, powerful head, and does not know how to manage his affairs. God, despised, has hidden His face, and man welters as in a bog. God has His plan, and out of the confusion will bring order and light. Christ is the key of the plan. He is the sun whose rising will bring the promised day.

The night is far spent, and there is a grey, faint grey, on the horizon. We are nearing the dawn. The day bursts not all at once. Gradually the preliminaries of his coming unfold themselves in the appointed signs. Gradually the light increases. His own presence will finally dispel the night. The day will be glorious. This is a figure, but not too strong for the reality. The reality will be the arrival of a friend, all excellent, and all powerful, and all beneficent in his purposes of good—not only for his friends, but for all the world. What is there to be desired that he cannot do for us? There is but one qualifying consideration which the analogy of the natural day supplies no equivalent for. Christ judges before he enlightens and heals. We must all appear before his judgment seat before we are admitted to “the inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away.” At this we need not quail if we are the friends of the judge. We are full of imperfections, but our judge is also our intercessor, and much will be forgiven where the heart is strongly set upon him, and the life conformed to his commandments. We might fear before a human judgment seat, where frailty, bias, ignorance, fallibility and unmercy presides, but before Christ, we stand in the presence of righteousness, penetration, justice, kindness, mercy. We cannot be misrepresented to him or misunderstood by him. His judgment is according to truth. Righteous men will join with David in saying,

“Let us now fall into the hands of the Lord, and not into the hands of man.”

“Let Him do with me as seemeth good unto Him, though He slay me.”

The judgment will be no empty pageant. We must give account. British law closes a prisoner’s mouth, and decides only upon evidence exteriorly derived. The divine judgment will reverse this order. We ourselves will be interrogated by the judge, and no evidence is needed. The judge knows all without witnesses. He will know how by some leading simple question to plunge right into the heart of our case. Seizing hold of some transaction, “You know what I commanded in such a case! Did you do it?” “Did you live for me, or merely as a human creature seeking its own comfort?” “I was hungry; I was in distress, and did you exert yourself on my behalf? If so, what case?” By test questions, he will rapidly thread his way through multitudes of cases in the presence of the vast auditory assembled, and according to

results, will separate the assembly into two companies—the one of which, when the process is complete, he will dismiss, He tells us so:

“Depart from me, ye cursed.”

And he tells us what we should expect, that among those so addressed,

“There shall be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.”

You may have been at a fire or a shipwreck, or at some other scene of human agony. But never have you heard a wail like that which will ascend from the multitude to be overwhelmed in the judgments that will overthrow the present evil world in the war that will ensue between the Lamb and the confederate kings of the European polity.

The rejected gone, there will remain the other assembly, standing massed in sublime expectancy. Imagine yourself of their number. You are still mortal, but the King has signified his favour. In this alone you are happy, for everything will come out of this. Presently, you cease to be a mortal: for,

“In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, we shall all be changed.”

A thrill of transforming power passes through the assembly, from him who is the resurrection and the life. In him dwells the power to change the vile body at the right moment that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body. This power, he exerts at the right moment and every person in that vast multitude is instantaneously changed. Each one feels the change. A sense of lightness and freedom and joy passes over them, such as they never felt before;

“The garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.”

The mortal fibre of their being is fundamentally altered, so as to be incorruptible. Day has begun with them. In that day they will shine; for they are the children of the light and of the day. They are the stars of the new heavens. It is their place to reign. They cannot reign until they have taken the kingdom. As yet this is in the hands of the kings who, seeing their power threatened, “gather their armies.” They gather them in vain against Yahweh’s King and those who are with him, “the called and chosen and faithful.” These shall overcome them in terrible war, which will spread devastation to the end of the earth.

“And the kingdom and the dominions and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High . . . and they shall reign.” To each man his place assigned as Christ shall arrange—and such a place—a place of power and honour and wealth such as no mortal ruler has ever filled. Such power to bless his subjects and such joy in making them happy, and such honour at the hands of those he governs—such pleasure in arranging human affairs on a new and divine basis; such ecstatic satisfaction in leading them in worship and bringing the true and real blessing of God upon them in his capacity as their Priest as well as their King.

These are not cunningly-devised fables. These are the true sayings of God. They are the real and practical and promised form of the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him, of which He has given us the pledge in the resurrection of Christ.

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