

THE ANTIDOTE TO SPIRITUAL DISTEMPER

There is an antidote in the chapter read this morning (Gal. 1) to a spiritual distemper which is not uncommon in the present state of things upon earth, and from which we are ourselves liable to suffer. We have all, probably, at one time or another, heard the remark made concerning the truth, that it is a good and glorious thing in itself, as regards the prospect it holds out, but that it is simply too good to be true—that it belongs to the idyllic conceptions of mankind—that, in short, it is a beautiful dream, which will never be realised in this woe-stricken planet. Perhaps, at times, in moments of weakness (and most of our moments are moments of this sort), we ourselves have felt like this—not that the feeling has shaped itself distinctly, not that it has been an idea we would at all own, but we have had a dim, scarcely-definable fear that, after all, *“the unsearchable riches of Christ”* would for ever remain merely a matter of discourse—that the golden consolation that glows before the jaded spirit, on the horizon of Bible-illuminated hope, would never come near in the *“joy unspeakable”* of actual realisation.

This is the distemper to which the chapter furnishes the antidote. The very first verse gives us the antidote:

“Paul, an apostle (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead).”

Paul’s apostleship—Paul’s gospel—Paul’s hope—*“not of men, neither by man,”* but of Christ—of God! As he says, in verse 11,

“I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man: for I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it but by the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

If the hope of the gospel be a matter resting not at all on man, but on God, we have to ask both the critical Satan and our diabolical selves, “How can it be too good to be true? How can it fail of accomplishment?” To this there is no answer but one. Even the adversary is compelled to say, “If the thing is of God, doubtless it will be as good as He says.” The adversary, while he says this, has a reservation in his heart. He says, “Is the thing of God?” He is sufficiently answered to say to him, “Search and see.” We are of those, this morning, who have searched and seen, and who have come to the only conclusion admissible in the premises: that Paul spoke the truth when he uttered the words we have read from this chapter.

Consequently, brethren and sisters, it is our privilege this morning to draw the fullest comfort that such a conclusion is capable of yielding. To do this, it is necessary to turn upon ourselves, and criticise ourselves, for we are in ourselves the most dangerous foes we have. Our gloom and fears that paralyse the heart and arm, are far more formidable to the new man begotten within us, than the opposition of ten thousand braggart foes. We have to look these glooms and fears in the face and diagnose them. Whence are they? Are they not the sensations of mortal brain and nerve? Why should they be regarded in estimating facts substantiated to the reason? Is it not the fact that we are impressionable creatures of circumstances? When the morning breaks and we see the sun emerge on the eastern horizon, we feel that he rises: we know as a matter of mathematical demonstration that he moves not from his place. As we walk the solid earth, we feel that it is fixed while we know that it moves. We feel that the sky is up and the earth down, while, as a matter of fact, the overhead heavens of noonday are beneath our feet at night, there being neither up nor down except in our sensations—very real to us, no doubt, but not attributes of the universe. Many other matters might be mentioned in which facts and impressions are at variance, and have to be brought into harmony by reason. At night, it seems as if the day would never return, but it comes for all that.

In no matter is impression and fact more inconsistent than in this matter of the day of Christ. The night prevails with such intensity of darkness and cold that it seems as if the day were a dream: but the coming day is a fact for all that. It does not depend upon our feelings. Life as it now is—in its feebleness, its pettiness, its mal-arrangement every way, seems permanent; but a very small exercise of reason suffices to show it is but an appearance. We step backward but a short distance, and where were we and the people we know, and the town we inhabit? Absolutely non-existent. We step forward a similar distance, and what do we see with mathematical certainty but this, that all these things that exist before our eyes, and exercise our minds in various ways, must cease to exist? We can see this without the aid of the truth at all. Yet the impression of the moment is that these things are very real and abiding. When we can see this much in matters common to all men, does it not become easier to estimate the verities of things pertaining to Christ? He does not seem to exist; but we know he exists. His coming does not seem as if it would happen; but we know it will happen, as a thing not depending upon appearances. His kingdom does not seem as if it would ever be more than a talk upon earth; but we know the fact is contrary to the appearance. We know it by the application of our reason; and reason, fed by the materials furnished in the Scriptures, can be quite positive in the presence of the most unpromising appearances.

We have only to work sufficiently far backward to discover the grounds of a conviction very different from that created in the mind by a careless observation of current facts. Going back far enough, at a time when British life was as yet unknown under the sun, we come upon Paul in the land of the living; the apostles in the land of the living; Christ in the land of the living; the Jews in the land of their habitation; further back, Daniel at the court of Nebuchadnezzar; David on the throne of his glory; Moses in the camp of Israel on the march from Egypt; Abraham receiving the promises, and the test of his faith in them; Noah upborne on the face of the world-destroying waters; Enoch and Abel pleasing God in a day when men were few, and human life a purer and nobler thing than in this crowded modern era. When these facts of the past come into sight, they yield, in logical construction, a conclusion very different from that which is forced upon fools by the loud-voiced glaring facts of the present. They tell us, in their combined interpretation, that—

“God at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, and did in the last days of Judah’s commonwealth speak by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things,” “whereof he hath given assurance unto all men in that he hath raised him from the dead.”

Telling us this, they bring hope, and joy, and gladness unutterable to the heart, in the midst of the surrounding desolation: for God has spoken things many and glorious fit to make the heart leap for joy. He has declared His purpose to spread on the desolate hill of Zion, *“a feast of fat things for all people”*—fat things indeed, for—

“He will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth”

(Isa. 25:6).

He has declared that He will set His king on that holy hill of Zion, in pursuance of the covenant made with David to give him a son to sit upon his throne, reigning and prospering, executing justice and judgment in the earth (Psa. 2:6; 89:34-36; Jer. 23:5; Acts 2:30); whom all peoples, nations, and languages shall serve and obey (Dan. 7:14); in whose days the righteous shall flourish, and abundance of peace, so long as the moon endureth (Psa. 72:7); a king who shall be as a hiding place from the wind, a covert from the tempest, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land (Isa. 32:2); who shall rise as the light of a cloudless dawn upon earth, full of joy and blessing (2 Sam. 23:4). Such, and many more great and precious

promises, hath Yahweh spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets which have been since the world began, and His word cannot fail.

"There are many devices in a man's heart; nevertheless the counsel of the Lord, that shall stand."

And consider, besides, these glorious things spoken of Zion—consider what God hath spoken by Christ concerning Zion's sons—concerning the brethren of the Lord Jesus, among whom we aspire and labour to be included. He has spoken things concerning the present, and concerning the future, which are full of comfort—which we have but effectually to call to mind, to be filled with *"joy unspeakable and full of glory."* Concerning the present, he says,

"The Father himself loveth you."

"Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of before ye ask him."

"He careth for you."

What comfort there is in these facts. What though He suffer evil to befall? So He did to His beloved Son in whom He was well pleased. What if He appoint chastisement in stripes that sometimes seem beyond our poor endurance? It is that we may be partakers of His holiness. What if He leave us among those who are despised, who are poor, who weep, who inherit meanwhile evil things? It is that we may stand well in that grand coming reversal, when those who mourn shall be comforted; when those who are despised shall be crowned with glory and honour; when those who are poor shall enter upon the possession of the hoarded riches of the sinner; when those who are without a portion shall inherit all things.

On all these testified things we are justified in relying, if we are the subjects of a Scriptural repentance toward God and an obedient faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. They are matters of present, though secret, dispensation of the divine hand towards us, leading us to confidence and peace even in these days of our vain life. But what shall we say about those other testified things—those things future—those things not yet seen, which God hath laid up in store for those who please Him? Christ has spoken them: the apostles have re-echoed them by his authority. They are no cunningly devised fable. Surrender to them in the fulness of their power, to cheer, encourage, and strengthen in this warfare with evil. They cannot be defined in their true excellence. Paul speaks of them as—

"A far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory;"

And of the worst sufferings of the present as—

"Our light affliction which is but for a moment, not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us."

He declares them—

"The unsearchable riches of Christ."

By the side of them, he says he accounts all things but dung. His ardour of expression is warranted by the subject. Consider them in their simplest enunciation:

"This is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day."

*"I give my sheep eternal life, and **they shall never perish.**"*

"They shall come forth to the resurrection of life."

"Because I live, ye shall live also."

"I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you."

We cannot exhaust the goodness and glory of these promises—of these assured prospects of the brethren of Christ. We are favoured to know plainly what they mean: that we shall **all be changed**—changed in our physical, our material, our actual nature, for—

"As we have borne the image (partaken of the nature) of the earthy (the nature of the first Adam), we shall also bear the image (partake the nature) of the heavenly (the nature of the last Adam)."

“This corruptible must put on INCORRUPTION: this mortal must put on immortality.”

“He shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body.”

His glorious body has been exhibited to witnesses whose testimony has been authenticated to us by—

“God bearing them witness with wonders and divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit.”

They saw his glorious body shown beforehand on the mount of transfiguration:

“His face did shine as the sun: his raiment was white as the light.”

Paul saw him several years after his ascension, and the light of his person was *“above the brightness of the sun.”* He is a living illustration of what a spiritual body is—a body living, not by blood, but by the incharged presence of the primal life-power of God in every atom—a body incorruptible in substance, glorious in aspect, powerful in faculty, honourable and holy in all its functions—perfect in its enjoyments.

These are not fairy tales; they are sober facts. It looks not like it now. We know life only in connection with the weak, earth-cleaving, unclean, and dying nature of present experience, and we are liable to droop under that knowledge.

“We that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened.”

We find life a cloud, a vanity, a vexation of spirit: and looking through the smoky atmosphere of our feelings, we see but darkly and faintly. But these feelings are not to be trusted. This is the lesson we have to learn. We are so to exercise our senses on these things as to be able to say to ourselves whenever there is need,

“Get thee behind me, Satan.”

There is often need for this; and if we are not ready when the need comes, Satan (our own poor weak nature) is liable to get the upper hand, and sit upon us like a great nightmare, almost suffocating the spiritual man. The glorious truth is just as outside and independent of us as the sun in the heavens. Whether we are weak or strong, it is there all the same. It does not in any way depend upon our strength to bring it about. It rests on God’s purpose, and not on our skill. It subsists in its own nature, even when our power to realise it is eclipsed in death itself.

Say not in thine heart, “It is too good ever to be realised.” Rather look into thine heart, and say, Poor, weak, stupid heart, thou art considerable of a fool. Thou thinkest thyself wise in judging by what thou hast felt and seen during seventy years or so, or hast read of for a longer time: knowest thou not that the longest time that man has been upon the earth, is but as one tick on the great clock of the aion of God, who is from everlasting to everlasting? Why should thy brief moment be a standard wherewith to judge the ages? Thou thinkest thyself prudent in estimating existence by the sensations of thy marred and mortal humanity: knowest thou not that there was life before thy life? power before thy puny strength? wisdom before thy blundering skill? songs and satisfaction before thy wintry joy? Why should thine afflicted experience be the measure of the best that can be? Look around on heaven and earth: canst thou not see the evidence everywhere—yea, the manifest form of unbounded strength, wisdom, joy, and power? Do you mean to say that mortal man is the best that Creation’s strength and wisdom can produce? Know ye not that Creation’s strength and wisdom is the God revealed to Israel—the *“everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth, who fainteth not, neither is weary, and there is no searching of his understanding”*? Hush your foolish tongue: open your weak eyes, and look up at the glorious light that has come to the Gentiles—the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ—the promise of life everlasting in the ages to come, wherein He will show the exceeding riches of His kindness in Christ Jesus towards such as honour Him before the sons of men. He means to do better than

you have seen. Listen to the explanation of our present weakness and vanity: accept joyfully the goodness of the Father's intention to reconcile all things to Himself, and to fill the earth with life, and peace, and glory. Walk courageously in the joy of the divine purpose, and listen no longer to the whinings and maunderings which are but the aberrations of an intellect weakened and destroyed by the frailty of perishing human nature.

No, the goodness of the salvation propounded by the apostles, which excites the incredulity of men who flatter themselves on their superior shrewdness, is only another evidence of its divinity. Man could not have conceived so great a goodness: and, coming from God, we should expect it to be the highest goodness. Our business, this morning, is to open our hearts to it. It is the only reality there is for us. Nothing else is abiding. Our days upon earth are as a shadow. Our affairs are constantly on the move. Fifty years make a wonderful difference. Fifty years, apart from the Lord's coming, will see most of this assembly in the grave. Fifty years will see all the children, if they survive life's tempest so long, grown to be elderly men and women, "in the sere and yellow leaf," with hair silvered, and faces wrinkled with care. Fifty years will see the joys and anxieties of the present hour gone for ever. Change is our portion now, as we have been singing, but, "there is that changes not." Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and for ever. Where is our wisdom, then, but in keeping this truth constantly before our eyes? Let us fight against appearances. Let us resist the deception of our senses. Let us nail up as our motto:

"We have here no continuing city—we seek one to come."

And remember that our seeking is no uncertain seeking. We are not as them that beat the air. We are not following a shadow. We are not nursing an illusion. The words of the Lord are words of truth and soberness. Christ has risen. That is the foundation on which the edifice of our hope is built. It is a foundation that cannot be shaken. It is a fact that speaks to us from all past history, and from the events of the present hour. The sure word of the Lord is fulfilling before our eyes.

Behold Israel, after ages of dispersion, turning their eyes to the land of their fathers. Behold the land after a desolateness of "many generations," preparing to receive back her long-scattered children. Behold a man uprisen to seek the welfare of the children of Israel. Behold this developing situation showing itself at the very time foreshown to Daniel the prophet. Ponder well its significance to the household of faith. Recognise the tokens of that coming again of the Beloved Master—Oh! How beloved! —which has been the hope and the prayer of all the saints since Paul was sent forth to form Christ in them the hope of glory. We know not at what hour the Master will arrive; we only know he is due towards day-break, and we see the faint grey streaks on the horizon, the first token of morn. Our long waiting will end at last. We patiently endure like Abraham, but it will not always be endurance. The time will end, the vision will speak, the Lord will come, and the angels of his power will apprise us of the glad event, and conduct us to his presence; if with fear because of our unworthiness, yet with confidence inspired by Yahweh's own declaration:

"They shall not be ashamed that wait for me."

"To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word."

And what if the fears of the old, concerning this time of the end should be realised? What if death should overtake them, or any of us, at our post, and lay us among the sleepers before the joyful hour? Do we suffer thereby? Far otherwise. There is no loss, but gain. We shall only find ourselves all the sooner where we want to be; for death sends us by a very quick road to the judgment seat. The dead know no time, any more than the unborn. Therefore we may think very comfortably concerning the whole subject every way. The Lord stands a very short way onwards on our path at the worst. A little longer waiting; a little longer patient continuance in well doing; a little longer endurance of the bleak present evil

world, and all will be over, and our eyes, by death or the Lord's arrival, will open upon the scene which the gospel has planted deep in our affections. God grant that in that scene—alive with the bustling thousands of the Lord's risen friends—we may find ourselves welcomed as fellow-citizens of the household of God.

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