

COMFORT.

Sometimes in reproof, sometimes in comfort: thus the Spirit speaks as need requires. Here, it is the voice of comfort; the voice of the shepherd, Peter, as he executes the commission assigned to him in the parting words of the Chief Shepherd: "*Feed My lambs.*" It is pleasant to hear such a voice. We need comfort. We are in a world of evil, in which are many hindrances. The Father is little thought of; the Son largely forgotten; and the children (such few as there are) despised. This makes the situation bleak enough for the lambs; but there are other trials; false brethren, wolves in sheep's clothing, biting—"winds of doctrine," and poor weak failings in all of us that make us self chidden and condemned. We need to be comforted, and the Lord commands it for such as are broken and contrite in heart, trembling at His word.

Peter addresses himself to "*the strangers scattered.*" In Peter's day, they were scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, etc. Today they are scattered throughout England, Wales, Scotland, America, Australia, etc.; and though differently situated in many respects, their spiritual needs are the same. They are strangers and not strangers. The truth has made them at home where they were strange, and strange where they were at home. They are no longer strangers and foreigners to the commonwealth of Israel with its all-glorious covenants of promise, with which in the days of their darkness they had no connection. They have received the adoption of sons, and rejoice in being fellow-citizens with the Lord Jesus, with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets and saints of that splendid polity that will one day fill the world with light, and life, and love, and joy, and glory to God in the highest; in this, they are at home where they were strange. But this has more of the future than the present in it. We rejoice in the hope it is true; but we walk by faith and not by sight, and this is burdensome to the natural man.

In the things that are seen, we have been turned just the other way about. We once belonged to the world, and the world loved its own, and we were at home in it, but now we are strangers and sojourners, as all the fathers were. We look not at the things which are seen. We await the day of the manifestation of the sons of God. In this attitude we need the exhortation of this chapter: "*Gird up the loins of your mind; be sober, and hope to the end, for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.*" Without the continual girding of the loins of the mind (in the continual adjustment of our mental relation to the things that are and shall be, in the unfailing study of the holy oracles) we shall grow weary and faint in our minds, and hope will die instead of continuing, and we ourselves become cast away on the great ocean. We must train ourselves to accept the position of strangers and sojourners. "***If ye call on the Father,***" says Peter: that is if ye really mean to be children of the Father, who, without respect of persons, judgeth according to every man's work, "*pass the time of your sojourning here in fear.*" Our salvation is not otherwise to be wrought out than in fear and trembling. There is no time for pleasure hunting. The service of Christ is now, as it always has been, a course of self-denial. Analyse most men's hearts, and self-comfort, self-prosperity, self-honour, self-pleasure, in some form or other, will be found the directing motive. Christ is made to wait on Mr. Self's convenience. It is a dangerous policy; for, without respect of persons, the Father, who judgeth every one's work, will shortly ask of the whole programme, "Did ye it for Me?" Christ stands now at the door and knocks. If we open to him and take him in as our friend and counsellor, dwelling in our heart by faith, he will become Captain, and will direct the whole course of things for us, and enable us to

render a good account in the day when the great question is put. But if we listen to other voices rather, and neglect the reading of the Word, giving heed only to the demands of business, the love of money, the claims of kindred, the wants of the flesh in houses, lands, clothes, eating, drinking, marriage, etc., Christ, after awhile, turns away from the door, and the Christless house, joined to its idols, is given over, at last, to desolation. Christ means to bestow immortality and a kingdom, and, therefore, he asks a high price, even the whole heart and life. He is patient; but he will not, in the day of his glory, accept the homage of an eye-servant. Many, no doubt, in that day, will prostrate themselves eagerly before him, and claim kinship, as he himself tells us; but his favours will be reserved for those who faithfully serve him in his absence, declining association with a world that knew him not, taking part in the testimony of him which the world despises, and diligently observing his precepts, while all is untoward, self-crucifying, and silent. He will be to us what we are to him. In this he is like the Father, who to the pure shows Himself pure; to the righteous shows Himself righteous, etc. (Psalm 18: 25). Deny him, and he will deny us, confess him, and he will confess us; neglect him, and he will neglect us; serve him, and he will gird himself and make us sit down to meat and come forth and serve us.

His great rule is, *"He that doeth the will of my Father, the same is mine."* Often did he enforce this rule when on earth. He comes soon again to enforce it as he never has enforced it before. Of how great consequence, then, it is to place ourselves in the right relation to this rule while opportunity continues. The Father's will is many a time and clearly expressed in these holy oracles which it is our privilege to read from day to day. It is expressed thus in the chapter before us. As obedient children, fashion not yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance. But as He that hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation. Because it is written, *"Be ye holy for I am holy."* This is the Spirit's own standard. To reach it we must continually strive, for we are assured on the same authority of the Spirit, that *"without holiness no man shall see the Lord."* Let there be no talk of this standard being too high; this is the language of the unwise. We must rather accustom ourselves to the thought and the language of the Spirit, and labour to conform to that statute of the kingdom which requires us to *"deny ungodliness, worldly lusts, and live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world."*

We shall be greatly helped in this if we remember and in daily prayer realise that lovely aspect of the Eternal Mind presented by Peter when he says, *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, according to His abundant mercy, has begotten us again to a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."* Our salvation is of God. Christ is of God. It is of His abundant mercy that we have hope. He is kind. He is love. He is not willing that any should perish. In Christ He invites all to come, saying, *"Him that cometh unto Me, I will in no wise cast out."* In this we have strong consolation which comes like dew on the parched ground. Christ's resurrection was the Father's act, not by any rule of commercial satisfaction or equivalent, but of His *"abundant mercy,"* the obstacle being removed in the condemnation of sin in the flesh: sin having been nailed to the tree in the body of His beloved one. According to His abundant mercy, which He was not compelled to show, He raised His beloved from the dead for our justification, that we who were dead in trespasses and sins might have hope who had none. The Father begat us again to this lively hope by the resurrection of His Son. The resurrection is everything, without which the condemnation of sin in the flesh would have been nothing. The apostasy destroys this by making the condemnation everything and the resurrection of Christ a thing of which no reasonable account can be given so far as effecting our salvation is concerned. It errs also in making the condemnation bear on the—soul "so-called"—the immaterial principle of life—

instead of on the flesh—that *"body of His flesh"* in which through death we are reconciled (Colossians 1: 20). Certain good words and fair speeches have been sounded in our ears which would drag us in the same fatal direction. Let us be on our guard. There is need for the apostolic exhortation that we take heed that we lose not those things which we have wrought.

The comfort is to realise the whole arrangement as the Father's love. It is His way for His own honour and our salvation. We have but to learn what that way is and worship. The love that has devised it is a love passing knowledge. The goodness that will come of it eludes the highest effort of imagination. We are begotten *"to AN INHERITANCE"* such as no mortal ever possessed. The highest state to which man can attain in this life is disfigured by the moth and rust that doth corrupt, and exposed to various kinds of thieves, including death, the most formidable of them—that break through and steal. The fine houses take much keeping in order; the fine ways of life bring much labour; this vile body wants much tending in bath room and laundry to keep it even tolerable. All tends to decay and dissolution; but *"the inheritance is incorruptible, undefiled, and fadeth not away."* These characteristics apply to all its elements.

Bodies spiritual, delivered from the tendency to decomposition inherent in all animal organizations; faculties exalted; emancipated from the heaviness and cloud that haze over the most brilliant of mortal powers; life immortalised by the transmutation of our substance from the frail fibre of animal being to the indestructible tissues of spirit-body; the society of impeccable immortals, radiant with life, light, and praise; dominion secured in all the earth; honour, wealth, joy, and renown our portion in the high places on earth when the voice of the scorner has ceased; the earth a smiling paradise; its valleys jubilant with righteous mirth; *"glory to God in the highest; goodwill toward men;"* health, blessing and plenty crowning all lands with joy; time not dimming the glory or weakening the zest; the advent of an enemy or an end to salvation impossible; *"an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, that fadeth not away."*

But, meanwhile, *"it is reserved in heaven."* The Lord is there; therefore, all is there: for all this will come of him. We are not of those who make the mistake of supposing that because it is reserved in heaven, therefore we must go there to obtain it. We have listened to the exhortation which, in the same chapter, tells us to hope to the end *"for the grace that is to be brought unto us at the revelation of Jesus Christ."* We are of those who look for his appearing in the love of it, knowing that the kingdom, which is the inheritance, will, at that time, appear also. Its being out of sight makes a demand on our faith and patience; but we wait, knowing that He who hath promised is faithful, and that he who shall come will come, and will not tarry.

But to whom will his coming be a joy? To all? Nay, verily, to them *"who are kept by the power of God through faith."* The Gospel is the power (Romans 1: 16), and faith cometh by hearing it (Romans 10: 17). Those who keep it in memory (1 Corinthians 15: 2), are kept by the power of God through faith, if their memory be of the earnest sort recommended by Paul to the Hebrews, *"giving the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time they slip."* This memory depends upon compliance with another apostolic recommendation: *"Give attendance to reading;" "as new-born babes, desire the sincere milk of the Word that ye may grow thereby."* A constant and diligent attendance upon this will include us among those *"who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation, ready to be revealed in the last time."*

"Wherein we greatly rejoice;" yet our experience is that of those to whom Peter wrote "for a season we are in heaviness, through manifold temptation." Our "temptation" may not be of precisely the same order as that of our brothers in the first century, but its operation and effects are the same. It is not joyous; it presses on us unto weariness and groaning, and, perhaps, tears; but it is not accidental. It is part of the Father's programme "that the trial of our faith " may yield joyous results in the day of glory. If it be found unto "praise, and honour, and glory, at the appearing of Christ," we shall not have suffered in vain. This will be if we come through trial-proof. Peter mentions gold in the furnace as an illustration. Our faith must not disappear in the process of trial. The gold may dissolve, but it is gold for all that, and is visible. Let us see to it that our faith fail not in the heaviness that comes with manifold temptations. There is great joy, at last, if we overcome; "and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith!"

*"Whom having not seen, ye love," says Peter. He does not say "we," because he was among those who had seen him. But thousands, in the first century, believed who had not seen. They believed on the same principle that men believe in anything they have not seen with their eyes. They believed on the evidence of credible eye- witnesses. This is the solid foundation of our faith. The apostles make a strong point of this always: "We have not followed cunningly-devised fables," says Peter, "when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were EYE-WITNESSES of his majesty" (2 Peter 1: 16). "We cannot but speak the things which we have **seen and heard**" (Acts 4: 20). "That which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, and handled with our hands" (I John 1: 1). The men of the first century not only heard the testimony of eye-witnesses, of whose integrity they had a guarantee, in the steadfastness with which they declared their testimony, in the face of evil consequences, but they saw their word attested with wonders and signs. Our foundation is the same, but we, being on a higher stratum, get down to it by excavation. By the exercise of reason upon the facts of history, we are enabled to get to the same point of belief in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. We have not seen him, but we believe he exists. We have not seen him, but we love him. How could we do otherwise than love him? And this love constrains us as it constrained Paul, to do those things which he has required at our hands; in much weakness, it may be; in much sorrow and travail of soul, because of the hardness of the way; but yet, in love, in hope, in faith, and in a certain sense, in joy unspeakable. We contemplate him as our High Priest, and are comforted; we think of him as our Elder Brother, and we are drawn towards him. We remember him as God manifest, and bow before him in great awe. We remember him as our coming deliverer, and our hearts rise and our hearts fill with great joy. We recollect him as the Lamb slain, and, with all our hearts, we yearn for the opportunity of joining our song to those who, surrounding him in the day of his glory, will sing, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and honour, and glory, and blessing. Amen, and Amen."*

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