

## THE BUILDING UP OF LIVELY STONES

As long as God permits, wise men will be found thus at the table of the Lord, recalling to mind the great and wise matters that centre in the symbols on the table. These matters lay hold of every aspect of life, deal with every problem, supply every need, minister to every hope and aspiration. It may not seem so at the moment: but it will be found to be so in the long run by every man, positively or negatively.

The institution itself is a fact, memorialising a fact, with reference to a world wide fact affecting us all. Why have we spread this table? Is it of our own device? Is it not because it was commanded? Commanded by whom? Is there any other answer but one? Is it the command of the British Government, or the Archbishop of Canterbury or the Pope of Rome? Trace the institution backwards. We are not the first to do this. It has been done generation after generation. Trace the practice backwards, and you are bound to land in the first company that broke this bread and drank this cup, in the presence of Him who said,

*“Do this in remembrance of Me.”*

We are bound to find ourselves also with Paul, who said,

*“I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed, took bread.”*

We look back and see the Lord *“the same night in which he was betrayed.”* Why on such a night did he institute such an ordinance? Paul gives us the answer! That we might *“show forth the Lord’s death until He come.”* Is the Lord’s death, a fact then? Aye, indeed. We call the whole world to witness. Crosses and churches everywhere are evidence of that. Jews, infidels, and Mohammedans are ready to bear testimony to that. But why should we show forth the Lord’s death? Death is not a thing to commemorate. No, not ordinary death; but this was not ordinary death. This was a death followed by resurrection. We call upon the same world as witnesses to this in a certain important way,—for how come many nations today in a certain way to profess the name of one crucified as a felon? Examining that, there is but one answer. Of a merely crucified Christ, the world would never have heard more. It required his resurrection to establish His name.

When Robespierre tried to establish a new faith in France, in the times of the great upheaval, at the end of the last century, complaints were made that it made no headway with the people. Talleyrand said, “I will tell you, gentleman, how to make it go: Let one of you be crucified and rise again the third day.”

We are not dealing with cunningly devised fables. We are dealing with facts: and wise men have to do with facts. Does the time seem long? It is the fact that the time will run out at last. We have only been here so many years. We can only be here so many years more. The time will certainly come when we shall do this for the last time. Let us not abandon well-doing from weariness. We must weary in something: for it belongs to human nature to weary of everything at last; and we may as well be weary in that which has some promise in it. Some years back we were babies in our cradles; now, we are grown men and women: very soon, we shall be old: soon, we must die: and what is there for us, as sinners before God, if we are not the faithful servants of Christ, whom *“He hath made unto us righteousness, and wisdom, and sanctification, and redemption?”* Let us never forget, too, that we living at the time of the end, when a glad message may run through the earth, that He who was crucified and raised, and who departed from the earth in the presence of His disciples, has come again, to perform the great and glorious work which He said He would come and do.

Does it seem monotonous and superfluous this giving of thanks and offering praise day after day, year after year? Let us remember that it has been revealed that it is well pleasing to God—well pleasing to Christ. Can the children of God be indifferent to this? Judge even by ourselves. If we love to be remembered and to be praised, do we not love to be always remembered and always praised? Who tires of the incense of admiration if it is reasonable and sincere? If we, who have no particular right to thanks and praise, appreciate their repetition on the part of true friends, does not reason enable us to realise that our perseverance in this line of service to God must be acceptable to Him? and if acceptable to Him, have we not in this a powerful help to continue perseveringly in the same?

Can we think it useless as regards ourselves? It is far from it. It is the most improving exercise it is possible for human beings to go through. The general sterility of human character is due as much as anything to the absence of reverence and gratitude to the Eternal. This, of course, is due to the absence of enlightenment; and the absence of enlightenment is due to the unhappy situation of things among men, in which ecclesiastical superstition is mistaken for Bible truth, and natural truth is supposed to be incompatible with Bible truth. We are happy in having come to see that the prevalent theology is the uttermost darkness; and that the authenticated teaching of the Bible, is confirmed instead of being discredited by the scientific reading of nature. It is the highest privilege possible to man in the present unhappy state of things, and we ought to gladly put up with any of the drawbacks that belong to it.

There are drawbacks. We are insulated from the two great parties of which the world is composed—have the favour of neither, and the kicks of both. The theological part look upon us as “worse than infidels;” and the unbelieving part regard us as pitiable fanatics. Cut off from both, we are without the usual field of human ambition. It is a position of hardship, and often pinches extremely. What then? We have the opportunity of sharing in a certain form the position of the early believers, whose sufferings were great for Christ’s sake, but who were able with Paul to say

*“Our light affliction which is but for a moment, worketh out for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.”*

Do we think it a mistake on the part of divine wisdom to subject the friends of God to a position of disadvantage and suffering? Do we think it would have been better for the truth to be a popular thing, and its profession a source of present honour and emolument? Wisdom will cast the suggestion aside. If we were to judge by human feeling, we would no doubt have many things different from what they are—much pleasanter for the time being every way. But would the result in the end be better? The very reverse. What is the end being accomplished by the means adopted?

When we see this, we are silent and resigned. Look at the typical building of Solomon’s temple for the answer. The stones were all prepared at the quarry, far from the scene of building operations. The hammer and chisel did their work before the stones were brought to their place. We are informed that the house was built of stone *“made ready before it was brought thither, so that there was neither hammer nor axe nor any tool of iron heard in the house while it was in building.”* The stones were made ready for their place before they were brought. The process of making ready would be a disagreeable one to the stones if the stones could feel; but it would be nice when they were fitly trimmed, and found, to exactly fit their place when brought to the noiseless building.

We are declared to be stones—living stones—being got ready for the great antitypical temple in which God will dwell on the earth—a temple consisting of an enlightened and obedient and grateful multitude. Shall we begrudge the process by which we are being got ready for our places? The process is now, in the quarries and sheds of natural life. The judge of our state is the author of the future building. The choice of the tools needed to give us the right shape lies with Him. Is the shaping process painful? It cannot be otherwise. Consider what is aimed at—that we may be *“made fit”* for the kingdom of God. Jesus spoke of some who were *“not fit for the kingdom of God.”* This is the state with all of us naturally. We are naturally taken up with our own pleasure, and not with those things in which God takes pleasure. We are naturally prone to our own wills instead of the doing of His will. It is an unreasonable, and in the long run, an unhappy state: but it is the state in which the faculty of free volition left to itself, in the circumstances now upon earth, lands all men. Could men in that state—men indifferent to God’s pleasure, and given to their own wills, be *“fit for the kingdom of God?”* It is manifestly otherwise. How, then, are we to be got out of this state into that other state, in which we can say with David,

*“I delight to do Thy will, O my God”—*

a state in which the supremest human delight is to be found when the lesson is learnt—a state in which both God and man are a mutual joy. How are we to be brought into that happy state? God’s method of developing His children, as revealed in the Word is the answer.

First of all, we have to be enlightened as to God’s existence, God’s rights, God’s purpose; man’s nature, man’s state, man’s natural destiny; and the means by which God proposes to reconcile man to Himself, and bring him into final well-being. The knowledge of the truth does this. But knowledge is not all. Knowledge by itself *“puffeth up.”* We have to be brought into a perfectly pliable adjustment to the truth which we know. We have to be made to feel how inferior and dependent we

are of ourselves; how transient and unreal is the life we now live in the flesh, and how truly and only great and eternal is the Invisible Fountain and Upholder of life. Can we acquire this ennobling sense in circumstances of pleasure? Let universal experience answer. Let God's way of teaching wisdom declare:

*"Through much tribulation we must enter the Kingdom of God."*

Is this an accident? Far from it. It is divine contrivance. So it is revealed: that

*"Whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth."*

Are we in trouble? —deep, scathing, hopeless trouble? Let us recognise the meaning. It is love and not anger that afflicts the sons and daughters of the Lord God Almighty. It is the blow of the hammer; the bite of the chisel preparing the stone for its place in the everlasting temple. We would have it a little less severe, perhaps: a little easier to bear. God may grant this if the case admit of it, of which He alone is judge. If not what then? We can at the least say with Christ,

*"The cup which my Father hath given me to drink, shall I not drink it?"*

The stone must be squared. The protuberances must be struck off: the roughness must be smoothed. The work cannot be done softly. We would choose trouble that was no trouble, or that was at least only a little trouble. Trouble is trouble, and we must have it, if we are to have the everlasting place that is being prepared; and we shall all yet in glad acclaim praise and justify the wisdom of God that has prepared us for a place in the age of perfection and joy, when we find ourselves sweetly and gladly there.

But there may be times and cases where no great affliction is experienced. Let there be no dissatisfaction on this account. If you are a child of God and have little trouble, it is because you do not need it. There is no uniform rule of treatment, because there is no uniform nature in the cases. Some blocks when they come from the quarry are nearly in fit shape, while others are all out of form. But if there is no great trouble, there is one thing in which all cases are alike,—all are called upon to "deny" ourselves, and to stand apart from the evil world in which we dwell:

*"Come out from among them, and be ye separate."*

All are called upon to pass the time of our present sojourn as pilgrims, in preparation for the land of promise. And this to all is more or less irksome; worse—it is often galling to the point of crucifixion. Which of us would not prefer to be at liberty to live in pleasure? —to be at one with the world in all its friendships and diversions? Which of us does not grow weary under what might be called the monotones of the truth?

We may be helped by the study of another phase of Israel's experience. (All their experiences were recorded for the instruction of those who should come after.) After their rescue from Egypt, they were taken through the wilderness where there was no food for the assembly. God provided them with food. We know what sort of food He provided. It was not a rich or varied diet. It was good, but it was plain, and always the same—manna. The people could cook and serve it in various ways: but still it was always manna; and the people grew tired of it, so tired that they grew vexed; and so vexed, that they cried like children in their tent doors when they remembered the fish, the cucumbers, the leeks, and the garlic that they had in Egypt.

*"Our soul loatheth this light bread."*

God was angry with the people because of their murmuring on this head. Was it not natural that the people should tire of always eating the same thing? We cannot but feel that it certainly was natural, and we cannot help feeling sorry for them, as they stand crying in their tent doors. But was it quite excusable? Here is another question. They had evidence of a very palpable kind that they were in God's hands; they ought, therefore, to have submitted cheerfully to whatever He required of them, knowing His power and His wisdom and goodness. They ought to have received with contentment the form of food provided for them, even if it had been quite objectionable, which it was not. There was in fact an object in subjecting them to this disciplinary diet. Moses explained it afterwards in the rehearsal on the plains of Moab.

*"The Lord thy God...humbled thee and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know: that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord."*

The effect of the prolonged and practical lesson of the manna was visible in the character of the host that entered the land under Joshua. There has been no such docile and godly and circumcised generation of Israel from that day to this; and will not be till their children have been put through a similar experience prior to their reinstatement in the land at the coming of Christ.

We have the spiritual counterpart of this episode in the experience of the saints in probation. They have been delivered from an Egypt: They are going through a great and terrible wilderness: They have received a law for their guidance: and they have their food appointed. It is manna—manna from heaven—Christ eaten by faith—eaten daily and richly; and there is an interdict on the rich foods of Egypt:

*“the cares, the riches, the pleasures of this world.”*

It is rigorous regimen. It is a course of self-denial to which no man would submit without a reason. But there is a reason, though the command is itself sufficient of a reason. We are being prepared for Divine use afterwards. We are being *“made fit”* for the kingdom of God.

Thus we are landed in the same result in another way. The stones of the temple prepared in advance, the restricted diet of the travelling Israelites in the wilderness, combine to tell us that in probation, it is preparation that is aimed at—preparation for something coming after. Let us recognise the fact. It will help us to walk wisely and walk patiently. If our way is restricted, if our lives are dull, if our principles are inconvenient, if our pleasures are shut up to the things connected with the truth, it is only for a time, and it is for a well-defined purpose. The time will soon be over: the purpose will be served. We shall stand in the joyous assembly of the first-born to thank God for His kindness to us in hedging our way to life eternal; and we shall see and applaud the perfect goodness and His wisdom when invited into possession of the boundless good things for which we shall have been prepared by the self-denials of the present evil time.

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