

SELF-EXAMINATION

It is probable that every one now present feels as Peter expressed himself on a different and much more interesting occasion—

“Lord, it is good for us to be here.”

It is refreshing, it is tranquillising, it is improving, to come together and surround the Lord’s table and break bread in memory of him, and to unite our thanksgivings and prayers and praises to Him who is not only creator of heaven and earth, but the God of Israel and the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This appointed assembly on the first day of the week is always an occasion for renewing strength for the conflict in which we are engaged. Let us this morning complete its edifying and purifying power by making it an occasion of self-examination.

We may take the interval since our last breaking of bread as the basis of the process. We have had a six day’s battle—six days of experience common to man in his present evil state—six days of mortal occupation mixed with care and watchfulness and endurance. These six days are all gone, never to return; and we are here to look back upon them and sit in judgment upon them. How do they look? Each man must make the survey for himself. There will come a moment when the whole of our life will lie in the rear in the same way. There will come a gathering much larger and very different from this, when the aspect and character of the past will be the very question for consideration, as affecting the standing and destiny of thousands upon thousands there assembled in the presence of the presiding brother into whose hands God has committed all judgment. The present occasion differs from that in this, that while on that occasion, the account will be closed and the die cast, and the review serviceable only for a decision, on this occasion the review may be useful in helping us to change the position of the account if need be.

How then do the past six days appear in our eyes? Have they been all we could have wished them to be? There is a short answer to this. It is impossible at present that our days can ever be entirely what we should desire; it is impossible in the nature of things. It is well to know this. Some failing to recognise or remember it, may carry a heavier burden than they need. They may feel as if the amount of earth-cleaving they experience is inconsistent with the relationship of a child of God; and under this feeling they may abandon effort and give themselves up to despair.

The impossibility arises from the fact stated by Paul in the chapter read this morning (Rom. 7) that in the flesh dwelleth no good thing; that there is an ever-present law in our members warring against the law of the mind and bringing us into captivity to the law of sin (verse 23), resulting in a distinctly developed conflict in which the man of God has to say (yea, with a feeling of wretchedness—v. 24) that he cannot do the things that he would, and that things that he disowns in his mind, he finds himself compelled to do. Let us realise what this means; for a good deal of our comfort, and perhaps to some extent, our success in the struggle, depends upon being able to discriminate between constitutional sin (or sin that dwelleth in us—verse 17) and that overt and wilful sin which will exclude from the Kingdom of God. Many illustrations might be given of the thing Paul means when he says,

“What I would, that I do not; but what I hate, that do I” (verse 15).

Let one suffice for all.

It is the will of God that we be in a state of continual memory and love towards Himself. It is contrary to His desires concerning us that He should ever be out of our mind, or that we should ever abandon the attitude of adoration and thanksgiving and dependence. It is not to His mind that there should ever be cloud or dimness. Now bearing in mind that whatever is opposed to His mind is sin, how do we find ourselves in this matter? Is it not according to our utmost and strongest desire that we should always have God before us? That the vision of His Being should never fade a moment from our eyes? That His praise should be continually in our heart and lip? And that His will should at all times be the potent and delightful magnet of our wills? There can be but one answer to these questions

on the part of those who have been begotten of the Word. David's declaration will be the declaration will be the declaration of all who have become with him members of the family of the Lord God Almighty. And what is that?

"As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee."

The love of Yahweh and the love of Yahweh's testimonies will be in every true brother and sister (when fully developed at all events) as it was in David. But can we realise the aspirations of our hearts in this matter? Are we always in the sunshine of his full memory and love? Are there never times of exhaustion and blank? What about tired nature at the end of the day? What about the irritating and perhaps exasperating pre-occupations of the rough-and-tumble business life many of us are compelled to lead? Is it not the case that oftentimes, we are ashamed of our own weakness and disown the moral chaos to which we find ourselves reduced in the struggle? There is probably not one brother or sister present in whom these questions do not evoke a painful response.

You look back upon the last six days, and perhaps you are distressed at the amount of this kind of experience you have had. Well, do not be too much distressed. If you are wretched on account of it, Paul felt the same, saying,

"O, wretched man that I am: who shall deliver me?"

He was able to thank God at the prospect of deliverance through the Lord Jesus Christ, and you must fall back on the same consolation. So long as you disown that which is inseparable from the weakness of this sin-clogged nature, you will not be responsible for it; that is, it will be forgiven you if you ask—that is, if your prayer is backed by the Lord Jesus, *"who ever liveth to make intercession for us."* And as to whether he will back our prayers, that rests with him. It is a question depending upon our state with regard to that other department of sin which relates to our deliberate acts. All men are alike with regard to certain constitutional incapacities; they differ in those states and actions that depend upon volition. No man, for example, can keep awake all the time. Saints and sinners are the same when asleep; but let them awake and you see the difference. There are other matters like sleep; they affect our fitness for divine service, but they do not affect our responsibility, because God is just. The things that in this sense we do which we would not do *"are no more I, but sin that dwelleth in me,"* and for this we shall be forgiven; but if our actions—and action depends upon affection—if our actions are contrary to what God desires, then none of our sins will be forgiven, and an unforgiven man cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

Each intelligent mind will be able to supply the other matters and cases to which Paul's rule of no-will sin applies. Wherein the last six days have been beclouded by these, make confession and supplication to the God of all grace through our Lord Jesus, and he will hear and forgive and help. Peter was forgiven because Christ prayed for him because his denial was a sin of weakness and not of will. His affection and his will were all towards the lord. He was sincere when he said, *"Lord, I will follow thee to prison and to death,"* as was shown by the fact that he did so follow Christ to prison and to death afterwards. But when, after a night without sleep (except the few minutes snatched in the garden of Gethsemane), in the darkness and in the cold, he saw Christ, whom he thought invincible, given up to the will of his enemies, it was not wonderful that in the presence of a challenge which meant possible arrest and death, he denied that he knew the Lord. It was only for a moment. At the third challenge, *"he went out and wept bitterly."* He disowned his act, and took the attitude to receive forgiveness. It was very different with the case of Judas. He deliberately planned his Lord's betrayal for the sake of making money. When his plan succeeded, and he saw the Lord in the hands of his adversaries, he likewise experienced a revulsion of feeling; but it was the revulsion of despair. He went and hanged himself. He knew the justice of the words of Christ:

"It were good for that man if he had not been born."

The two cases may stand for an illustration of the two classes of sin—the one that may be forgiven, and the other that cannot. The important question to consider in our self-examination is: How stand we with regard to the department of will and purpose?

Let us look at the past six days in this light. In the midst of the weakness and the gloom, what points of light are there? Upon what things can we place our finger which we did deliberately with a view to the Lord's will? Some may say, "Well, the fact is, I cannot put my finger upon any such points. I have been so worried and perplexed with matters pertaining to the present life that I cannot remember one thing that I can say was deliberately done with a view to the Lord's will." It is doubtless distressing where a brother feels like this. Still, even in this case, matters may not be so bad as such a brother may feel. Has such an one not refrained from evil at least? Has he not behaved justly and honourably in his transactions? Has he not withheld himself from malice and retaliation of evil? Has he not preserved his mouth from the taint of blasphemy and evil speaking? And has not all this "*eschewing evil*" been the result of "*the fear of God before his eyes*"? It is something for a man to "*cease to do evil*" even if he have not yet as thoroughly as he desires learnt to do well. Of course, it is not enough to refrain from doing evil; we are likewise commanded to "*do good*"; but there are degrees of attainment, and if a man cannot yet show so large an account as he would desire under the latter head, let him thank God for having been enabled to attain so high a point under the former. Perhaps the man in question may rejoin, "But I have not refrained from evil; I have been hasty and unkind of speech, and my actions have not been without spot." What is to be said in the case? The Scriptures have only one kind of advice for such:

"Confess your sins and forsake them."

Such are promised mercy. "*Repent*," in the sense of "Reform," is the standing exhortation of Christ to the seven ecclesias of the lesser Asia, which stood for all in every place and age having ears to hear. Return not like a dog to its vomit. Yield not to the evil environment of the present world. Overcome the world. "*He that overcometh*" is the man to whom the promises are made. And how are we to overcome? John, the beloved disciple, supplies the answer.

*"This is the victory that overcometh the world, even **our faith**"* (1 John 5:4).

And whence derive we this faith? Another apostle, even our beloved brother Paul, answers:

"Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17).

Hence, the most valuable advice that can be given to everyone feeling specially beset by the difficulties of life is to give themselves to the reading of the word. Let it be daily, for our need requires this: let it be methodical, otherwise it will not continue daily, but will by and by die off before the power of circumstances. Let it be by the **Bible Companion**, because hundreds upon hundreds in all parts of the world are reading on this plan, and because it has been found in the experience of a quarter of a century to be practicable and advantageous for the purpose in view. If the experience of the past six days leads you to resolve to give the daily reading of the Scriptures a compulsory place in the coming six days and all that are to follow, your experience will not have been in vain.

And obeying this apostolic exhortation to "*desire the sincere* (that is, the unadulterated) *milk of the word, that we may grow thereby*," you will come by and by to be able to indulge in a better retrospect than the mere regret of things done that you would not, and the omission of things that you would. By and by you will be able to think of this and that which you did distinctly for Christ's sake; that is, of things done from that sense of duty to Christ and the Father which you have derived from your daily and prayer-accompanied readings of the holy oracles. Even if it is nothing better than the giving away of a poor piece of paper like a **Finger Post**, or a pamphlet, you will be able to say to yourself, "Well, I cannot do much, but I have done what I could; and what I have done, I have done with a view to the duty which I owe Christ; for what other object can I have in inviting my neighbour's attention to the glorious truth concerning him?" But you will go higher than this as you make progress. You will remember the commands which say:

"Do good unto all men as you have opportunity."

"As ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so to them."

"Be kind to the unthankful."

“Avenge not yourselves.”

“Cleanse yourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord.”

“Abstain from every form of evil.”

“Keep yourselves unspotted from the world.”

“Hate even the garment spotted by the flesh.”

“Walk in wisdom towards them that are without.”

“Be followers of God.”

“Walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called.”

“Be ye holy.”

“Whatsoever ye do (even to matters of eating and drinking), do all to the glory of God.”

Under the power of these commandments, you will be able to look back upon any six days, and say: “Such and such a thing I did purely out of consideration for my neighbour. If I had followed my own feelings, I would not have done it. Such and such a thing I did purely because I would be kind to the undeserving. Such and such injury I refrained from resenting because and only because Christ has forbidden it. Such and such a habit I did not indulge in, though the world thinks it all right, because I could not reconcile it with the Lord’s command to be clean from all defilement of the flesh and spirit. Such and such a public pleasure I refrained from because, and only because, I would practise, and help my brethren to practise, that non-conformity to the world which Christ enjoins, and to lead that life of sobriety and godliness and denial of pleasure, and separation from the world which he commands.”

These things you will be able to rehearse to yourself without Pharisaic complacency. The recollection of them thus will be but that answer of a good conscience towards God, without which in some measure, no man will be able to stand without shame before Christ at his coming. It is those who in these things serve Christ that will have all those other things forgiven which are due to their constitutional weakness—both things done and things omitted. A man who allows “*sin to reign in his mortal body, that he should obey it in the lusts thereof*” (Rom. 6:12), is without hope: for the end of these things is death (verse 21). Forgiveness is not for those who are reprobate to every good work, but for those only who, by obedience, seek to work out their own salvation amid the fear and trembling of this whole clouded state. It is only “*if we walk in the light*” that the “*blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin*” (1 John 1:7).

We cannot recall or alter the six days that are gone. They have taken their place in the archives of the ages. But the six days to come are ours in a certain sense. To a certain extent, we have the making of them. What is the decision of wisdom in the case but to “*redeem the time because the days are evil*.” Turn away your ear from those who would counsel slackness in this matter. No good was ever done by this class of counsel. The writings of the prophets and apostles are our patterns.

“If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God.”

If the prophets and apostles counsel slackness, if they say, “Beware of being too strait laced,” if they are on the side of taking it easy and indulging in pleasures and conforming to the world, then we shall be safe in the same line of precept. But if we find that they always (without exception) advise men to take heed—to fear lest they come short—to be in the fear of the Lord all the day long—to be as Christ was—to be as God—to pass the time of our sojourning in fear—to crucify the old man—to walk in the narrow way—to follow after holiness—to agonise to be saved—I say if that be the style of scriptural precept (and who shall deny it?), then our wisdom as ephemeral earth-borns, invited to the mighty emancipation purposed in Christ, is to reject all contrary counsel from whomsoever proceeding, and to walk in the narrow way that leadeth unto life. Many are in danger of missing this way through supposing it consists of “doctrines” merely. “Doctrines” in this sense are in their place

indispensable, but there are other doctrines without which the doctrines of man's mortality and the earth-location of the kingdom are of no use whatever. "Doctrine" means teaching; and apostolic teaching comprises more than a teaching as to what man is, and what God purposes to do. "*The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared*" not only teaching that Christ is coming and that man is subject to death, but "*teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly and righteously and godly in this present world*" while looking for the coming (Titus 2:11-13). The teaching that deals only with the mortality of man and the coming of Christ, and omits, and still worse opposes, the teaching that "*we should be holy in all manner of conversation,*" will be found at last to be valueless as the sounding brass and the tinkling cymbal. It is of course pleasanter to be easy; it is more agreeable to wait on inclination and encounter as little self-denial as possible in the process of trying to be saved; but to what is the favour sometimes shown to such a policy, traceable? Distinctly to the mind of the flesh. The carnal mind is enmity against God; it is not subject to the law of God; and yet it likes to contemplate the idea of salvation. This is why Moody-and-Sankeyism is so popular. As a sister recently observed with reference to the oppositions of this class to the truth: "They don't like the doctrine of obedience: they like to be told they have only to believe, and may follow their own desires until they are sent for to heaven."

But we have not so learnt Christ. Christ has called us to obedience—to a stringent obedience—even to the extent of "*purifying us unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.*" And what if the path is narrow and the discipline severe? Is not the country beyond broad and beautiful? Is not the freedom for which the discipline is preparing us great and glorious and everlasting? In many senses, we can say with Paul,

"The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us."

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