

GOD'S SUPREMACY

It is good to be taken out of ourselves. You sometimes hear the doctors say concerning such and such a patient: "He wants taking out of himself." With this in view, they prescribe change. It expands and tones up the mind to have our attention drawn away from our own sensations and feelings, and fixed on external objects. But much of course, depends upon the nature of the objects to which our attention is transferred. There are objects which lead us on a false track while perhaps serving the purpose of diversion. There are books and people and things that will only draw us into the universal stream of vanity that is bearing the world downwards to darkness and death.

Our meeting this morning will take us out of ourselves in the right way. It will not only take us away from the oppressiveness of our daily surroundings and cares and fogs of our own frail feelings, but it will occupy our minds in a manner that will confer lasting benefit. It will present to us scenes the looking at which will renew our connection with coming realities while relieving the demoralising monotony of mortal life. The Table of the Lord is a great centre of objective facts having this power. It is not like a mere class for the learning of moral lessons or the exercise of the philosophic faculties. True, it has a power of moral influence approached by nothing under the sun; but it is more as a focus of practical facts that it appeals to our sympathy. It is not a time to inculcate or exhibit a theory, but a time to remember an event which is the centre of many events. It is always easier to remember events than to digest principles.

The event of events we look at first is the Lord's death. This, Christ has placed in the front of the weekly memorial which he has appointed. It is impossible to break this bread and drink this wine in a scriptural manner without seeing Christ crucified; his body broken, his blood poured out.

It is well that he has thus rescued these facts from the forgetfulness of the fact. They would certainly have dropped out of sight had they not been made the subject of a special and constant memorial. We naturally forget evil when good times prevail. We should have given but small place to the sufferings of Christ, in the presence of the glorious gladness in which he has lived since his resurrection, if Christ himself had not placed those sufferings visibly before us in the only assembly of his brethren which he has made compulsory at their hands.

Why have those sufferings received such a place? Why was Paul made to say,

"God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me and I unto the world?"

Why did he determine to know nothing among the Corinthians but—

"Jesus Christ and him crucified?"

Because of the necessity there is for a right apprehension of our position in relation to God in order to be acceptable to His grace. The cross is the symbol of that relation. Our state of mind—our views—are of the first importance here. Do we see God in His true position of sovereignty? Do we understand and recognise our place in the universe as but permitted forms of His power, whom sin has deprived of all title to continuance? If so, it is well. God has revealed that to such He will look; with such He will dwell—those who are *"humble and broken in heart, and who tremble at His Word."* If we do not, God is patient with us; He is long-suffering, but His view of our position will at last prevail. We shall certainly die out of sight and memory. His point of view is the governing one. The world forgets this—even the world that considers itself not the wicked world—the moral world—the religious world, the broad-minded, charitable, cultured world. They have invented for themselves a doctrine that is not in the Bible—that God is a universal Father and will save men without reference to their attitude to Him. This doctrine is pleasing and convenient, but it is not true. The cross of

Christ contradicts it. Why did Christ die? Because of sin. And why is sin so dreadful as to require such an awful ingredient in the process of remedy? For the very reason that God is so great and terrible a majesty. This is the last thing that men of our generation rise to: yet it is the first lesson in true godliness—the godliness that God will accept (and none else is worth talking about). God is good—God is love: but there is a method in the goodness which is its chiefest glory: This method insists on the indispensable conditions for the effectuality of goodness in wisdom and holiness. Goodness without wisdom and holiness, and the firmness that in ‘consuming fire’ insists on those conditions would not be goodness. The first of those conditions is God’s supremacy:

“I will be exalted.”

“I will be sanctified in them that approach unto me.”

The second is absolute obedience. On these two points there has and cannot be the shadow of compromise in God’s dealings with the earth. They are the two points that men instinctively dislike. Paul’s words are not too strong.

“The carnal mind—the mind of the flesh—the mind that the brain generates left to itself—is enmity against God: it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.”

He further says:

“They that are in the flesh cannot please God”—

that is, men who are animated by the views and principles that the flesh invents for itself, which is the sort of men all the world is composed of, of whatever age, country, or nation.

We have only to allow reason to rule to see how purely reasonable and good are God’s requirements in the matter, and how intrinsically absurd and mischief-working merely natural views are. God is self-subsistently the first. Nothing was before Him or could be. He has contrived all things, and all things subsist in Him. Is it not reasonable, therefore, that His views should prevail? If there is any credit or glory arising out of man, is it not reasonable it should be to God and not to man at all, seeing it is of His hand man holds everything, and man made nothing? Does not common honesty and common gratitude require that all thanks and all praise should be to Him, and that man, while highly gifted, should be humble and thankful? Is it not robbery and barbarism for man to ignore God and take all the glory to himself when in truth none belongs to him? Is it not the programme of the simplest justice that God should aim to fill the earth with His glory?

But there is another side to the question. God’s goodness is seen in nothing more than in this insistence on His own glory and supremacy as the first condition of human fellowship with Him: for how stands the fact? That man seeking his own glory fails by the very constitution of things to attain any good at all. Man living for himself cannot rise to even what possibilities of good lie latent in his organization as a creature formed in the image of the Elohim. He necessarily sinks into all kinds of earth gravitating ignoblenesses: languishes in sluggishness and ennui; spends his fire and his interest, and sinks in a quagmire of vanity and vexation of spirit. For a man to see God and love and worship and serve Him is, on the contrary, to rise to beauties and joys of life even now that are outside the highest experiences or conceptions of the most dashing child of disobedience. How good, then, for God to do that which the poor maudlin, slobbering world of “charitableness” so-called, thinks it is harsh and narrow-minded to think He would do. How good for God to insist that without His exaltation in the way He has appointed there can be no fellowship or wellbeing or life. Then there is another aspect of the case which will commend itself to common sense. Does it not stand to reason for us to believe that the way God appoints must be the best? Even if we could not see the goodness of its exacting character, is it not in this view the most sensible, and in fact only truly sane course for us to be implicitly subject to all He appoints and commands? Reason, if it works correctly, will not only have no fault to find with the cross of Christ, but will

rapturously recognise the glory of eternal wisdom in an institution of salvation which exalts God to the highest and abases man to the uttermost, while securing for man a wellbeing that is *“unspeakable and full of glory.”*

We look back then at the sufferings of Christ. They were real and terrible to him. We have known them so long by report that we may not always realise their dreadfulness. It was no performance he went through when he laid down his life for us. We have only to watch him in the garden of Gethsemane to feel this. See him throw himself on his face—on his face—the most abject posture of entreaty it is possible for man to assume. See him do so three times. Hearken to the petition he offers:

“My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless, not my will but Thine be done!”

Mark the tokens of his mental anguish: he sweats as it were great drops of blood. Behold an angel strengthen him. Does it not all tell us of the terrible reality of his sufferings? The cup did not pass. Therefore it could not. As we behold him drink it in the agony of painful, faithful resolution, let us learn the high and ineffable majesty of God who, though full of lovingkindness and tender mercy, cannot forgive and receive sinners unto life eternal except on the basis of His authority vindicated—His righteousness declared—His law upheld in the person of one entirely acceptable to Him, to whom He can confide the dispensation of His love for all who implicitly and unreservedly, and with the humility of little children, accept and identify themselves with all that has been accomplished in him. It is a truly magnificent arrangement of wisdom that has given us such an one in Christ, *“who”* as Paul with lucid fulness remarks, *“of God, is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.”* At once the Son of God and the Son of Man, David’s Lord and David’s Son, the partaker of our common mortality, and yet the vanquisher thereof by the spotlessness of a perfect obedience and submission to the death passed on all men, he is the central meeting point of all sympathies and all greatness. He appeals to our tenderest love in the laying down of his life; he commands our complete homage in the intimacy of his relation to the Father with whom he declared himself one. He engages our highest admiration as the Master who stooped to be a servant: the Heir who voluntarily submitted to poverty: the most honourable King and Lord who humbled himself to keep the company of the lowly, and endure the insults of the base. And through him, as we gaze upon him as our elder brother, the head of the family, we see shining the greatness and the glory, and the holiness, and the love of the Eternal Father, of whom are all things.

It is a due sense of these things that is preparing us to take part in the mighty anthem that will yet roll in majestic measures around the person of Christ in the day of his manifested glory, when before him will be gathered the countless multitude of lovers and worshippers and servants whom God has been preparing for him in all the ages. What is the leading feature of that anthem, as heard by John in vision in Patmos, and recorded in advance for the knowledge of the redeemed?

“Thou hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred and tongue, and people and nation.”

“Thou hast washed us from our sins in thine own blood.”

How will it be possible for us to take part in this song, and in the everlasting holy service it represents if we are not now in full and living sympathy with the work expressed in the words? It is the work of the Truth to create this full and living sympathy by instructing us in the ways of God. It is the work done now. It is the work of Christ as defined in the language of inspiration, to *“purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.”* Let us never forget this zealousness. Some people talk of *“zeal”* as if it were a peculiarity—a spiritual superfluity. It is far from this. It is the characteristic, the indispensable peculiarity of

acceptable believers. It is a zeal having its basis in the forgiveness of sins. As Jesus said of the woman—

“She is forgiven much, therefore she loveth much.”

People who have no sense of the dreadfulness of sin have no appreciation of the privilege of forgiveness, and are therefore not likely to be called out in love on its account, or to find any pleasure in praising Christ in its behalf. We must be prepared to say with gladness—

“Thou hast washed us from our sins in thine own blood.”

To say it with gladness, we say it with the understanding, of course. The truth in these words is expressed in figure. There are no robes to be made literally white in the literal blood of the Lamb. There are sin-disfigured characters to be cleansed by the double process of forgiveness and reformation.

“God, for Christ’s sake, hath forgiven you.”

This is the literal truth as divinely expressed (Eph. 4:32). *“For Christ’s sake;”* that is, for the sake of what has been effected in Christ. What this is, has also been made plain to us in words of the utmost value, as revealing to us God’s view of the death of Christ:

“Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood to declare His righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God: to declare, I say, at this time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus.”

These words will repay the deepest thought. They deserve—they demand—the utmost consideration. They are a compendium of instructions on the difficult subject of the death of Christ. They hold to the front two features of it which together yield nearly its entire explanation. The first is that it was *“for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God.”* *“Remission”* and *“forbearance”* exclude the popular idea of *“substitution”* and *“payment of debt.”* A sin or debt is not remitted that is discharged to the last farthing. There is no forbearance in allowing a debtor to go free whose debts have been paid by another. It is highly important to have clear views of this. It is, in fact, imperative that we hold no view of the case that obscures the kindness and grace of God in the matter. It is forgiveness He proposes: and to forgive, we all know, is to let go: to pass by: to remember no more against, and to do this freely, and not because of satisfaction received. The second point is that the forgiveness is connected with an event by way of condition. It is not inconsistent with the nature of forgiveness to require a condition, such as when an apology is asked for. The event is the shedding of the blood of Christ *“to declare His righteousness.”* We must be able to see a declaration of the righteousness of God in the shedding of the blood of Christ before we can understand the relation of that event to the kindness which God proposes to show in the forgiveness of our sins *“for Christ’s sake.”* If we look upon Christ as a being separate from the human race—of angelic or other nature in no way under the power of sin—we cannot see the righteousness of God in his death; but the reverse; for it cannot be righteous that he should die on whom death has no claim. It requires that we see him as he is presented in the apostolic writings—

“Of the seed of David according to the flesh” (Rom. 1:3)

“in all things made like unto his brethren”—

a partaker of the identical flesh and blood which belong to them in which death works (Heb. 2:17,14). Seeing him thus, we see a fellow sufferer with us of the death that came by Adam, and therefore one who could righteously suffer on our behalf, as our representative, one who, though without sin himself, was a possessor of the nature that had come righteously under the power of death in the beginning of its history upon the earth. We can therefore understand how his crucifixion was divinely intended to declare the righteousness of God *“for the remission of sins that are past.”* We can understand how God in him thus *“condemned sin in the flesh” (Rom. 8:3)*, publicly, openly, ritually for all time: and thus established a meeting

point for *“propitiation through faith in his blood.”* God asks men to look to Jesus crucified as the serpent-bitten Israelites looked at the elevated serpent of brass—that is, to look in faith; that is, to realise that our common nature was thus in him condemned; to recognise that they were crucified with him; to partake of that death and burial in baptism; and therefore to admit and confess that they are unworthy of approaching to God as sinners of Adam’s race: that in themselves they have no hope, yea, that they are unworthy to live; and that the life that God will permit them to live is by His favour alone which He will extend to them *“for Christ’s sake,”* with whom He was well pleased, in whom there was no sin, though involved in the mortality of a sinful race, and whom He raised from the dead because of his righteousness, and gave him power to raise all who should come to God by him.

With these contemplations, we can understand Paul’s meaning in the words—

“God for Christ’s sake has forgiven you.”

We are prepared to see the love of God in the whole matter, however enveloped in cloud and mystery it may appear at first sight. We can understand the part the love of Christ has played in this laying down his life for his friends. We see how he redeems them by his blood without those terrible confusions that come with the idea that in his sacrifice God accepted the punishment of the innocent as a satisfaction to the crimes of the guilty. Love and light shine through all. Reason, wisdom, and beauty take the place of darkness, confusion and bafflement. We are enabled to rejoice that God forgives—truly forgives—our sin. We are enabled to feel with Paul, that love of Christ constrains us, because judging with him that if one died for all, then did all (with him) die, that they who live should not henceforth live unto themselves but with him who died for them and rose again (2 Cor. 5:15). And realising that the end of it all will be our own assimilation by him and the incorruptibility of joy and holiness of the Spirit nature which he possesses in everlasting fulness and power, we are compelled to say with John the beloved disciple:

“Unto him that loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.”

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