

IN PRISON FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS' SAKE

We have been reading a short letter written a long time ago by Paul. That we should be doing so is an extraordinary circumstance if we could but see the circumstance as it is in itself, and not as it appears through the hazy atmosphere of custom. How comes it that a private letter written so long ago should be in public hands everywhere at so late a day as this and should possess for those who read it as powerful an interest and as great a value as for those to whom it was addressed in the first instance? When that question is truly answered, we are in the presence of matters of very mighty moment. Let us get into their presence. It is the very object of our assembling this morning to do so, to call to remembrance and see with the vivid eye of enlightened memory the facts related to Paul's work, which did not die when Paul died, and which remain to this hour *"the power of God unto salvation to every one which believeth."*

We require to make an effort to achieve this mental feat, because we live at a time when it has become quite unfashionable to have Paul and his message in remembrance, and also because our own affairs always make demands upon our attention which make the achievement difficult. The achievement is not impossible, because we are commanded to perform it—to *"have these things always in remembrance."* We have the means of its performance in our hands. We are not dealing with vapours and shadows. We are in contact with facts in the case in tangible shape. Here we have Paul's actual letter, *"the salutation of me Paul with mine own hand, which is the token in every epistle,"* that is, it was his habit to subscribe every epistle with his actual sign-manual as a guarantee of its authenticity. Why he did not write the whole epistle with his own actual hand, instead of dictating it to an amanuensis, we may gather from the brief apologetic remark he adds in another case:

"Remember my bonds."

He was a manacled prisoner in most cases and therefore incapable of extended literary effort. The little bit he wrote with his manacled hand, after dictating the letter to another, would be poorly written as compared with the body of the letter. He would not be able to bring his hand flat on the table, and therefore the writing would be clumsy which made him add, *"Remember my bonds"*—as much as to say, "Excuse a bad pen." Was that inspiration? Enquires a short-visioned friend. My friend, inspiration did not leave Paul while he wrote that bit. It was even a bit that the wisdom of God might require him to add, as a living lineament of reality for those who should come after Paul, and who would only have the written words of Paul and not the living apostle to lean on.

Consider this other extraordinary fact that the letter which we have read and profited by this morning, and which is printed and in every city all over Europe at the present day, is the letter of a prisoner. We know what prisoners are as a rule, and what prisoner's letters are like; was there ever a prisoner who wrote from prison like this:

"I endure all things for the elect's sake that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory . . . wherein I suffer trouble as an evil doer even unto bonds, but the Word of God is not bound . . . follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience . . . with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart."

How came he to be a prisoner, a man who could pen such communications? This is an urgent question because it touches momentous facts. The history is clear and authentic. We have it in Paul's own letters and speeches;

"I am appointed a preacher and an apostle and a teacher of the Gentiles, for the which cause I also suffer these things; nevertheless, I am not ashamed . . . Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord nor of me his prisoner."

He was arrested at the instigation of the Jews because of his assertion that Christ had risen from the dead and had commissioned him to proclaim the forgiveness of sins in his name.

"For these causes the Jews caught me in the temple and went about to kill me."

Now this assertion of Paul's, which gave such offence to the Jews, did not rest on a mere conviction on his part. He was not argued into an opinion on the subject by some one else for reasons however good. This would be a very poor foundation for us to build on. The matter was communicated to him by revelation. He is careful to put the matter on this footing—

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

It is not only that Paul alleges this, but his account of the mode in which the revelation was communicated is such as to bring proof with it that his statement is true. As he said to Agrippa, when arraigned as a prisoner before him,

“This thing was not done in a corner.”

It was a public transaction in the presence of witnesses. Christ showed himself to Paul in the open air in bright noon day on the public highway as he and his retinue were approaching Damascus to put Christians under arrest by authority. The light of the vision was *“above the brightness of the sun.”* All saw it, all were felled to the earth by it: Paul was blinded by it and remained blind till cured by the principal believer in Damascus. He had to be helplessly led the rest of the journey. The communication made to him was of a character that could leave no doubt as to its origin.

“I am Jesus whom thou persecutest . . . Rise and stand on thy feet, for this cause I have appeared unto thee to make thee a minister and a witness . . . to the Gentiles to whom I now send thee, to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and inheritance among all them that are sanctified through the faith that is in me.”

It is therefore no mere pious flourish of words that Paul employs when he describes himself so frequently in his epistles as *“an apostle of Jesus Christ by the commandment of God our Saviour.”* It is a sober, literal, legal fact; and his apostolic work is only truly and precisely defined when he says it is—

“In hope of eternal life which God who cannot lie promised before the world began, but hath in due times manifested His Word through preaching, which is committed unto me according to the commandment of God our Saviour”

(Titus 1:3).

The whole matter is therefore rooted in God. Paul's whole work is divine. The modern disposition to humanise—to Paulise it—is treason against the Truth. He might well exclaim now, as he said to the Corinthians—

“If any man among you think himself to be spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord.”

Let us then, brethren, get as close to Paul's mind and Paul's ways as possible, for they are according to the mind and will of the Lord. He said to Timothy,

“Thou hast fully known my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, long-suffering, charity, patience.”

We cannot so fully know these things as Timothy who had the advantage of personal intercourse; but we may know them with wonderful fulness if we act on the advice he gave to Timothy.

“Give attendance to reading—meditate on these things; give thyself wholly to them.”

What we have to do is to transfer the ideas that are enshrined in Paul's letters to our own minds. This is what he enjoins:

“Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly.”

“Put on the new man which is renewed in knowledge after the image of Him that created him.”

We shall have to be very determined in following this bent, for we shall have very little help from the people around—even from many who are called brethren. We shall even encounter obstacles. It is not only that our own minds need dragooning, as it were, in spiritual directions, because of the native aversion of the ignorant mind of the flesh to divine thoughts, but among many with whom we may be thrown in contact, we shall have to fight against the passive resistance of friends which is sometimes more chilling and obstructive to spiritual life than contradiction. On what is this passive resistance founded—this want of relish for divine things? It is founded on unbelief. No man heartily believing the testimony of Paul could show the indifference and aversion that are prevalent in modern society towards the mighty matters he had in hand. Belief always produces its logical effect in minds not absolutely insane. We have therefore to resist the influence of all manner of people who are dead towards Paul's matters, but who are wonderfully alive to the "things that are seen." They would drag us to worship at their carnal shrines. We say, No; we believe in Jesus who appeared to Paul, and therefore accept the manner and aims of life growing out of that, which are totally different from those that are congenial to the children of the flesh. Jesus had to ask the question: "Who is my mother and my brethren?" when his natural mother and brethren were pressed upon his attention. He had to define the relationship that he would own:

"Whosoever shall do the will of my Father, the same is my mother and sister and brother."

So Paul had to say,

"I know no man after the flesh."

Like causes produce like effects. The Truth that reigned in Jesus and Paul, when reigning in men in the 19th century, will render them equally independent of the relationship of the flesh, and equally unintelligible to those who judge after the flesh.

To those who "*judge after the flesh*," whether they profess the Truth or not, the principles exemplified in Jesus and Paul, will always appear impracticable and inapplicable to modern life. We must not consider this class too much. If we cannot take them with us, we must leave them, as Lot did his married daughters. We must not go with them. If we do, we shall get into their state of mind, in which the words of Paul will have so little meaning, that they might as well have never been written. We must beware of that most inconsistent state in which while professing to accept the gospel, some live in total alienation from its principles. To some, the gospel is a mere affair of futurity. The gospel is an affair of futurity truly, but it is much more than this. It is an affair of present actual life from day to day. No one can read the epistles of Paul without feeling this. They are mainly directed to pointing out "*what manner of persons ought we to be in all holy conversation and godliness*," to use Peter's expression. This goes much deeper than most people recognise. It extends to the affections as well as to the manners. It means more than amiability, a great deal, though it includes that. We might be amiable towards man without being zealous towards God. We might be correct according to the human code, and far from godliness in divine estimation. Ponder Paul's definitions:

"Ye are not your own."

"Glorify God in your body and your spirit which are His."

"Ye are the temple of God."

"He gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify unto himself a peculiar people: zealous of good works."

Hear Peter to whom Christ said "*feed my sheep*;"

"Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people that ye should show forth the praises of Him who hath called you out of darkness into His marvellous light."

These things have to do with our life from hour to hour. "*Follow after*," is Paul's injunction, "*give thyself wholly to them*," is another of his expressions. Follow after what? "*Righteousness*" is his first item always. But what is this? Our acquaintances have a very inadequate idea on this head.

They have a dim idea that it means just dealing and truthful speaking. It comprehends these, but it goes as much higher than these as God is higher than man. It is what Paul calls "*God's righteousness*." He elsewhere says of the Jews that—

"Being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, they had not submitted to the righteousness of God."

This righteousness, he says, is revealed in the gospel (Rom. 1:17) "*even the righteousness of God, which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe;*" in illustration of which he says (Rom. 4:3) that—

"Abraham believed God and it was counted unto him for righteousness."

Here is a righteousness consisting of an act and attitude towards God. There is no true righteousness, according to divine reckoning, where God is not before the mind and heart.

"Seek ye first the Kingdom of God," says Jesus, *"and His righteousness."*

Seek the state of mind and life that is acceptable to Him. To do this is to "*follow after righteousness*" in the sense of Paul's exhortation. Here there is a daily quest. How is it to be conducted? Not by listening to sermons or reading religious books, which are all the diluted thoughts of men, but by bathing the mind in God's mind, as brought within reach for us in the Bible. Here is a matter in which we shall have to part company with our secular friends. They have no relish for this. "*Righteousness*," in this connection, is an unknown word to them; but to those who are circumcised in Christ, it is far otherwise. These are all of David's mind,

"How sweet unto my taste, O Yahweh, are all Thy words of truth; Yea, I do find them sweeter far than honey to my mouth."

So with the other items of Paul's exhortation:

"Follow after . . . godliness, faith, love," etc. Godliness is a thing of God—a thing of daily state and daily habit. It is the affiliation of the mind to God in all His ways, as revealed. It not only gives employment to the mind, but congenial employment—pleasant employment—daily employment. Paul tells us that—

"Those who are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh, and those that are after the Spirit, the things of the Spirit."

This is the palpable distinction between the two classes.

"The natural mind is enmity against God."

This was the secret of the enmity shown to Christ. Christ was all for God, while the people around him were mere hunters after their own gratification, in mutual honour-seeking, and otherwise. Therefore they could not coalesce. Those who loved God loved him, and those who loved God did what God commanded. These he claimed as his friends.

"He that doeth the will of my Father, is my brother and sister and mother."

Here is another simple rule of judgment in the case. What is the Father's will? It is amply revealed in all the Scriptures. He wills that men first of all know Him, and love Him, and worship Him, and give thanks to Him in everything, and do these other things as between man and man that are pleasing in His sight. Now, in these things, the common run of men have no delight, whereas to the friends of God, they are as their meat and their drink. They afford them a daily delight, so far as their opportunities allow of their exercise. They "*follow after faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart.*" To the other class, these things are an aversion, to which they may submit out of accommodation to friends, but with no heart. It is a pure sadness that this should be so, but so it is, and it only remains for us to make the best of an evil time. It is better that the children of the flesh should accommodate themselves to the ways of God for the sake of peace, than that the friends of God should forget their calling and strike their colours to please father, mother, husband, wife or friend.

It is a battle, but it is a winning one. It will soon be over. We shall be in the Father's house of light and holiness and love, by and by. We shall not have much longer to trudge in this dreary wilderness of unreason and unfaith, and all manner of moral and intellectual ugliness. The tokens increase of the coming of the day when the darkness that covers the earth will flee before the manifested glory of the Lord. If men could but see things as they are, they would see that there is absolutely nothing to attract us from the way of godliness, which is the only way of life and well-being. We look into the earth, and behold darkness and sorrow in all its ways. Vanity and death are written on its very lineament. There is more joy and peace even now for those who follow after godliness, than for all the children of pride with all their radiance and their glee. Death which waits to quench their glory has no terror for those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. Rather is it to them, if it come, an angel of peace to guide them to glory by a swift short cut, from the darkness of this suffering time to the glad general assembly and ecclesia of the firstborn. This happiness belongs to the saints . . . the Lord is waiting them not far off, to receive them with open arms, and to say—

“Enter into the joy of thy Lord.”

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