

“WHOLESOME WORDS” FOR PILGRIMS

We have all heard of the “wholesome words of the Lord Jesus.” We may also remember David’s statement, that “*every word of God is pure.*” Who can read the Scriptures without feeling how true these descriptions are? The Bible is a book of health and purity wherever we happen to read. Its whole theme has to do with that which is high and lofty and noble. In the largest sense its theme is God, of whom it informs us that—

“He is light, and in Him is no darkness at all.”

In its smaller sense it is God’s procedure towards man; first towards Israel, and then towards a limited section of the Gentiles, and finally towards all nations. His procedure towards Israel was to make them a holy nation, and His action towards the Gentiles through Paul was to purify to Himself a peculiar people. His action in the largest form in ages to come is to manifest His glory in a commanding form, so that every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess.

Where we are just now is in the valley of humiliation, trudging our weary way towards the time of light and life and healing. We are rightly described as pilgrims. Pilgrims are people on their travels, and therefore without a settled dwelling-place. People in such a position are liable to be tired and dispirited; they need a stimulus for their drooping minds. This stimulus we find in the contemplation of the things brought before us in the various parts of the Word.

The section of the Word before us this morning is peculiarly strengthening; it is not only that it possesses the quality of purity and wholesomeness already referred to, but that it deals with very palpable things of which we can almost lay hold. They were things “*Most surely believed among*” the Christian community in the first century, and this most sure belief becomes ours, when we look at the things that created their most sure belief. They were things of which the writers had personal knowledge, even apart from the guiding help of the Holy Spirit which gave them utterance. They are described by Luke as “*those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word.*” He himself was eye-witness of a portion of the things he narrates, and the other portion grows out of them as their inevitable corollary. He was a travelling companion of Paul, and heard his discourses and saw his miracles. In connection with that work he was introduced to probably all the apostles at different times, who all of them were answerable to the description applied to the successor of Judas,

“Men who companied with the Lord Jesus all the time that he came in and out amongst them.”

From them he would receive many of the particulars he has embodied in his account of the life of Christ. The gifts of the Spirit which he saw in the hands of the apostles, and which he probably possessed himself, were to him the witness of the truth of those particulars, in addition to the strong implication arising out of all that he heard and saw.

These amounted to what he calls “*infallible proofs.*” This is no random expression; it defines accurately the nature of the circumstances that created faith in the Lord Jesus. He says,

“He showed himself alive by many infallible proofs.”

The more we ponder the situation, the more does the statement appear absolutely appropriate. It is impossible to imagine any circumstance to which the description “*infallible proof*” could apply that is not contained in the transactions associated with the intercourse between Christ and his disciples after his resurrection. He showed himself alive in every way in which it is possible for a man to show himself alive—by appearing, by speaking, by acting, by eating and drinking; and all these not once nor twice, all these not on the same day. It would have

been sufficiently powerful if it had not extended beyond 24 hours—that is, as regards the convictions of those privileged to witness the circumstances; but, in point of fact, it extended over many weeks, and embraced a great variety of persons and places. The closing episode was in one sense the most convincing of all; I refer to his ascension, and what he said in connection with it. The disciples did not expect the event; they were not in a state of complete enlightenment with regard to the work of which Christ was the centre. We have that work before us in a complete form in the apostolic writings, and are therefore liable to marvel at the incomplete knowledge of the disciples, but our sense will inform us that had we been in their position we should have been subject to their limited knowledge. They supposed Christ would fulfil his whole work then. They asked him on the very last day they were with him whether he would at that time restore the kingdom to Israel. His answer was, that it did not belong to them to know the time of that event, but this was not all he said. He said, *“Ye shall be my witnesses,”* and this was not all he said, for it would not have been sufficient for them to have been his witnesses in an ordinary sense in view of the result to be aimed at in their witness. The object was to create believers; the unattested testimony of the apostles would not have had this result; how could it? Just imagine twelve or more illiterate fishermen declaring to the public that Jesus, whom the public knew to have been crucified as a felon, was no longer dead, because they had seen him: how could this have wrought conviction? The evidence of their senses was sufficient to convince the apostles, but the mere assertion of the apostles could not have wrought conviction in the multitude. Therefore, said Jesus, ye shall receive power; tarry at Jerusalem until ye receive this power. The nature of the power he made plain:

“Ye shall receive the Holy Spirit, and the works that I have done, ye shall do, and even greater works. Ye shall bear witness, and so also shall the Holy Spirit.”

It was thus that Paul interpreted the matter in his statement in Hebrews,

“God bearing them witness both with signs and wonders and divers miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit.”

Also the statement of Mark,

“They went forth preaching everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the Word with signs.”

Now consider this circumstance, that the apostles were forbidden to begin till the power of God enabled them to work effectually. No greater evidence is possible of the reality of the matter than this interdict; for had there been no reality in it, what could have been the object of this enjoined suspension of operations? If it had been a mere craze of the apostles, would they not have begun at once? They did not begin at once; they waited in Jerusalem until the day of Pentecost, and then they commenced the work that Christ had commanded them to do, and they did that work so effectually that its effects are before us at the present day. The apostles did not find their work an easy work; they were opposed and obstructed and persecuted from the very start. In a sense perhaps this made the work easier, with their knowledge of the case. Men are liable to be very earnest when persecution arises, or else very decided in their unbelief. As Jesus says,

“By-and-by, when persecution arises because of the Word, they are offended.”

A breeze of persecution has a double effect; it blows away the chaff, and it blows the fire of zeal into a redder heat, but not where there is not truth to act on. A fancy, or an invention, or an imposture, disappears before unfavourable circumstances, but a question of fact, in the hands of earnest men, grows into stouter proportions. How many men would hold by the Truth in our age, if it meant the seizure of our property and the deprivation of our liberty and perhaps the taking of our lives? Many would not stand the test; a few doubtless would. Why would those few endure? Because of their conviction of the Truth; the others would give in

because their convictions were superficial. Looking back upon the apostles, and seeing them in prisons and in deaths oft, in hunger and thirst, and cold, and nakedness, counted as the refuse of the earth, we see pledges of those infallible proofs which convinced them of the resurrection of Christ.

It is impossible to disconnect all these circumstances from the future phase of the matter, for it is a thing of that kind that the future is the principal, and in a sense the only remaining phase of it. The past is gone, and will never return; the future remains. The past shows us Christ crucified and Christ raised, and Christ taken away. These events were compressed into a very short period. What does the future show? It shows us Christ for ever; I do not mean Christ living for ever, though that is involved. Christ might live for ever where he is, and the earth know nothing more of him. When I say Christ for ever, you know that I mean Christ in the earth's future for ever. The invitation to sit on the Father's right hand was bounded by the limitation, "*sit thou on My right hand, until.*" The event contemplated in this limitation involves all when properly understood. "*Until I make thine enemies thy footstool,*" that means putting the foes of Christ under him. Who are they? The whole mass of mankind who do not obey him. They are to be destroyed from his presence, as Paul declares and those that are left, bow the knee in complete and cordial homage. And what then? We have it in the words of the Psalm,

"Yet have I set My king on My holy hill of Zion;" and in another Psalm,

"The Lord shall send the rod of thy strength out of Zion;" and in another prophet,

"The Lord shall reign over them in Mount Zion for ever."

Now, to this reigning we know there is no end. His kingly manifestation is not to be a mere episode, like his crucifixion.

"Of his kingdom there shall be no end. His name shall endure as long as the sun;"

And the ascendancy of his name is the ascendancy of pure blessing:

"For men shall be blessed in him; yea, all nations shall call him blessed."

And we also know that this reigning of his does not mean his merely taking the place of the kings that now are. He will do this, but it will be more than a mere substitution of authority. God has enlightened us on many particulars with regard to the state of things that will then exist; and, amongst others, this is the least obscure and the most unquestionable, that there will reign with him in the glory of a renovated nature like his own, all those men and all those women, who, during these ages of probation, please God by their submission and conformity to Christ.

This is where the tremendous power of the whole case comes in. We are not dealing with a theory of things, but with a purpose of God. A purpose of God is a terribly substantial thing, though treated so lightly by our generation. It really is the foundation on which the universe is built, if men only knew; for what was the antecedent to the stupendous framework of heaven and earth but an idea conceived in the Eternal Mind, and executed by the Eternal Energy? The purpose of God can never fail where it depends upon His own creative power. Let Him enunciate a purpose, and men have before them a stupendous and solid thing. This is the position of the Gospel of the Kingdom. God has declared that God Himself shall set up a Kingdom that shall never be destroyed; that in this Kingdom His Son shall be the head, and that confederated under that glorious head, will be a host of kings and priests developed in times of darkness, during which they are allowed, by His grace, to earn a place in that illustrious throng. No member of that host will be there without a history, and without a character, and without desert. No man will enter into the Kingdom of God if he does not deserve it according to God's standard.

Here comes the terrible importance of God's standard as bearing upon our present life. Nothing is more unreal and more insignificant and more unimportant in popular estimation than this. Now, because we are liable to be influenced by popular estimation, we are liable to fail in a reasonable sense of this matter. We are liable to fail to be sufficiently impressed and sufficiently controlled by the Law of God as determining destiny. Here is where it is so important to pursue that line of life that enables us to come under its power, and to avoid all those habits and associations and avocations that have the contrary effect. Men see this very clearly when they come to die. The victory lies in seeing it while we are yet alive, and this victory is only to be achieved by the weapons God has given us to that end.

"Put on the whole armour of God," do not leave off any part.

The Bible is the armoury, we cannot get the means of victory anywhere else. The daily reading will continue to the end of this miserable dispensation to be the course that the ending will show to be the only course of wisdom. It will often have to be done in weakness, sometimes in bitterness, sometimes with apparent failure of spiritual results, but the man of God will be undeterred by these obstacles, he will persevere in the ways of wisdom, though flesh and heart fail, and he will be rewarded, for God is on the side of those who faithfully fight the battle He has appointed to the sons of men; and the nature of things is on their side as well, for no man can bring his mind into habitual contact with the Bible without having his mind insensibly conformed to its ideas and principles.

The victory is indispensable. All the promises are to those that overcome. The battle in which this overcoming has to be achieved, is with diversified foes; we have to fight ourselves, we have to fight the world, and we have often to fight our friends, for sometimes our best friends are our worst foes in spiritual things. We will win, if we keep our eye on Christ. As John says—

"This is the victory that overcometh: our faith."

Faith is the mental discernment and conviction of facts not seen. Christ is a great fact not seen with the natural eye, but to be discerned by the mental eye. This was the position of multitudes of believers in the first century, to whom Peter, therefore, had to say,

"Whom having not seen, ye love."

It seems impossible to know Christ, without loving him, and it is impossible to read the Bible without a clear discernment of what is involved in it, and the resolute determination not to be thwarted by anything under the sun in the effort to secure the unspeakable prize of life everlasting, which Christ has invited us to possess. We shall have failures, but let us not be discouraged by those. We have a merciful and faithful high priest, who, having himself suffered, being tempted, is able to succour those who are tempted. He ever liveth to make intercession for those who are engaged in the battle with weak flesh—a battle to which he has summoned us. The shining heights of victory ahead, and many reassuring voices are encouraging us to be strong, and of a good courage in the conflict, the loudest and sweetest among which are the words of Christ,

"In the world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer: I have overcome the world."

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