

1 John - Commentaries by Alfred Henry Burton

Christian's Library: Volume 8, From the Beginning (2:1-2)

(NOTES OF AN ADDRESS ON 1 John 1:1-5; 2:1,2)

OUR attention has been drawn, beloved brethren, to what grace brings us into — the sovereign grace of God — and what it presents for our enjoyment. There is not only receiving and blessing us (the best robe was put on the prodigal), but what we are introduced into. The apostle speaks of what was "from the beginning," not the same as "in the beginning" in Genesis. There was a beginning in God's creative power, but what John takes up is another thing — the beginning of a new history, the manifestation of Christ down here, life in the midst of death, a new order of things into which we are introduced. In general, we are more occupied with what we are brought out of than what we are introduced into. But when we are brought out, and when we are recipients of grace, there is that which grace brings us into that we may be happy, and enjoy communion with the Father and the Son. "Our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ."

We get, in the beginning of this chapter, Christ presented to us objectively; it is heaven brought down to earth. Paul takes us up, and gives us a divine standing before God. But in John it is life, Christ personally. I suppose no one present will have any objection to its being said that Christ was personally the Life, the Eternal Life always with the Father; then, the apostle says, "He was manifested, and we have seen, heard, and touched Him."

"Whatsoever doth make manifest is light." The Light was manifested and seen here, the expression of the thing in its entirety, because He was it. Then he goes on, "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ." He writes it that persons may be brought into the fellowship of what they had seen and heard.

In Psalms 22 The Lord says, "I will declare Thy name unto My brethren; in the midst of the church I will sing praise unto Thee." In John 20 He says, "I ascend unto My Father and your Father; and to My God and your God" as though He said, "I will introduce you into the very highest possible blessing into which a soul can be introduced" — "I will declare Thy name unto My brethren." And the apostle says, "Truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ."

What a marvelous thing it is! How feebly we have entered into this wonderful blessing which is ours! Suppose all the distance is removed, and we find the One with whom we had questions is in our favor. We are introduced into fellowship with the Father, and that in connection with the Person of Christ. The voice from heaven said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased," and this voice was heard. That is what the Father thinks about the Son. The Father, when the Son was on earth, had an object that could perfectly satisfy His heart; and that is the Son. He trod the path on this earth of obedience and dependence. He delighted to be in the pathway of testimony He was set in on the earth, and delighting to do God's will. We have no other path to walk in. We have the revelation of God's mind and the Spirit, and He puts us down on this earth to enjoy fellowship with His thoughts. He writes these things that our joy may be full, that is where we are found when we are simple, and the more simple the better. What greater happiness can we have in heaven? What is there to make us unhappy now? Only the allowance of sin.

I read the second chapter. We are introduced into the light, our fellowship is with the Father and the Son, and now, how is it sometimes we are not in the enjoyment of God, we are not happy? Sin has come in. I would say one thing, as there are young ones here, we have to learn, that having been introduced into the light, brought to God, accepted in the Beloved, if sin is allowed, it does not change our relationship with God at all. Our standing and relationship depend on what God is to us in grace. We are in the relationship of children, we have received the Holy Ghost, and this all stands unchanged. Have you sinned? "Yes," you say, "and being in the light I am not happy." Sin has come in. What is to be done? Christ cannot die again. Here is the provision of divine love, "These things I write unto you that ye sin not. And if any man sin" — there is confession — "we have an Advocate with the Father." There is that blessed One who is our righteousness, our Advocate with the Father.

It is not to make light of sin. The One who is our Advocate by the Spirit and the Word, brings our consciences into the light to have to do with Him. There is the application of the Word which gives us to see what sin is in God's sight, how sin reduced Christ to ashes. It is the red heifer (Num. 19); the sorrow produced in our souls. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins." This is confession, and confession produced in the Christian is the effect of the advocacy of Christ. It leads to confession, and you never find an individual Christian or a company that has done wrong going on with God, unless there is full confession.

T. H. T.

Things New and Old: Volume 31, Spiritualism, A Few Remarks on (4:1)

Dear Mr. Editor,—

Should you deem the following brief remarks suitable for your pages, a few details as to what gave rise to them may be of interest to your readers; and that all should be on their guard against this soul-destroying delusion of Satan's is the earnest prayer of the writer.

One Sunday night, at the close of a gospel meeting of unusual interest, I was told by a friend that three young ladies were waiting outside, and were wishing to ask me what my views were as to spiritualism. On being introduced, their question was put—my answer was, that while much, no doubt, was mere trickery, there was nevertheless, some that was real, and that part I looked upon as Satanic.

They asked if that was my honest conviction, to which I replied that it was; and then followed a conversation, in which some of the points in the accompanying “remarks” were gone into.

It was their habit to meet together once a week, and consult the spirits as to the explanation of any passage in scripture that presented a difficulty, &c, opening their meeting with prayer and the reading of the Bible.

They seemed to have some difficulty in accepting that it was Satanic, because the advice given them by the spirits was so good, and they were never afraid of the scriptures.

At the close of the interview, I urged upon them, if they still persisted in going on with it, to apply the tests that the word enjoins in 1 Cor. 12:2, and 1 John 4:1, &c. They promised that they would, at the same time saying that they had no doubt but that the spirits would give them a perfectly satisfactory answer.

The following evening they had their usual weekly séance, which led to the giving up of the whole thing. The details of that night's interview with the spirits were terrible, and I believe positively of Satan. At its close they bade the spirits farewell, saying, “We have done with you forever.” The reply was, “You think you have, but we shall torment you forever and ever.”

It appears that these young ladies only got to the hall that Sunday night when the address was nearly finished, and just as they entered they heard the words, “If your sins are not forgiven before you die, they never will be forgiven at all.”

They said to one another, “Either that man is telling us a lie, or the spirits have deceived us.” Through infinite mercy they were led to the discovery that Satan had been deceiving them, and was leading them on to eternal ruin, holding out the false hope of salvation after death.

May every reader of these and the following lines take to heart the solemn words which first led to their awakening, and with the same blessed result!

From Lev. 19:31; 20:27; Deut. 18:10-12, we learn what God's thoughts are as to consulting the spirits or the dead—all that do so are an abomination unto Him. This in itself ought to be sufficient for every child of God, and should make all such shrink from having any connection with that which professes to have dealings with the spirits, and that quite apart from the question of whether those spirits are good or bad—“a consulter with spirits,” “a consulter of the dead (necromancer),” says Deut. 18; and we are not here told that good spirits are an exception.

That the consulting of the spirits and the dead, &c, was common among the heathen, is clear from such a passage as Deut. 18 Having lost the true knowledge of God, they sought to make up for the loss in this way, by bringing in a supernatural power, which was really that of Satan, the god of this world. (2 Cor. 4:4.)

But as for the people of God, they were “not suffered so to do.” (Deut. 18:14.) Hence Saul, on coming to the throne of Israel, had exterminated, or nearly so, all in Israel; God having provided for His people a better way, or better ways, of learning His mind.

God spoke in times past in dreams, through prophets directly inspired by His Spirit, also in the priesthood by Urim and Thummim. And it was the failure of all these means, owing to Saul's own sin, that led him to seek for a woman with a familiar spirit (one that evokes the spirits) in 1 Sam. 28, the resorting to which was also one of the grounds of his death, as a judgment at the hands of God. “For asking counsel of one that had a familiar spirit, to inquire of it.” (1 Chron. 10:13.)

Evidently the witch of Endor was not accustomed to bring up the dead, from her surprise at the appearance of Samuel: the spirit which she and all of her class professed to consult was a demon which personated the one desired. Her alarm at seeing Samuel, whom she herself does not appear to recognize, makes it clear that something unusual had taken place. It was God who interposed in this case to bring up Samuel in reality from the dead, who pronounces from Jehovah (the Lord) the solemn judgment about to fall upon Saul. It is noteworthy that Saul in verse 15 says, “God is departed from me,” with no sense of relationship, which is, as we all know, contained in the appellation (the Lord) used by Samuel in the verses that follow. To Saul it was simply God,: In another passage, Isa. 8:19, 20, we are told that a people should seek unto their God, and the question is put (as though in surprise that any should be so foolish) for the living to the dead? That a people should seek unto their God was right enough, but for the living to seek unto the dead was inexcusable folly; and then we are referred to the law and the testimony, which contain the revealed mind of God, and by which we can measure all other pretended communications from Him or any other source.

Coming now to the New Testament, we find abundant proof of people being possessed with unclean spirits, who in many places are called demons; see for example Mark 5:1-21; Matt. 8:16, 28-34.

Furthermore, lest any should imagine that these demons are only the spirits of the departed, such a passage as Mark 3:22-30 makes it plain that these demons were directly Satanic, for when the scribes say, He casteth out demons by the prince of demons, the Lord asks, How can Satan cast out Satan?

This is of importance to note, because some affirm that these demons or spirits were the spirits of departed people; the Lord, however, distinctly tells us that they were Satanic We may add that the use of the expression “spirits” proves nothing as to their being the spirits of the departed dead, because scripture uses the term in reference to angels (Heb. 1:7) and demons (Mark 3:11, &c), as well as to men, whether the just (Heb. 12:23) or the wicked. (1 Pet. 3:19.) And herein lies the distinction between these and mere brute beasts. The beast, besides having a material body, is said to be or to have a living soul (Gen. 1:20, margin), in other words, it has animal life, but has no intelligent relationship with God, which latter belongs to all those who possess a spirit.

Eccles. 3:21 is no exception, the word there translated "spirit" being the merely general one signifying "breath" (ver. 19); but even here, without going further into the passage, the distinction is drawn between the breath of the beast, which goeth downward to the earth, and is mere breath, and that of man, which goeth upward, and which, though outwardly only the same breath, is in reality much more, and returns to God who gave it (Eccles. 12:7), instead of to the earth.

That these demons of which we have spoken had power is also evident, for it required power to cast them out, a power which of course the Lord Himself possessed, and was able to confer upon His disciples (Mark 3:15; Luke 9:1; Matt. 10:8), that power being divine. (Matt. 12:28.) We are little aware of the power of Satan; he is called the prince of the power of the air. (Eph. ii. 2.) True Christians are delivered from the power of darkness (Col. 1. 13), an expression used by the blessed Lord in Luke 22:53, when all the power of the enemy, the prince of this world, was gathering and being concentrated against Him, heading and leading on to the enmity of wicked men against Himself at those closing moments of His life.

When sinners are converted they are turned from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God. (Acts 26:18.) May every child of God have an increased sense of the great adversary in whose grasp he once was held so tightly, and against whose wiles he always requires to be on the watch to the end of his earthly path, and for which he has to put on the whole armor of God! And may this increase to the sense of how great the grace and mighty the power that could, and that did deliver from such an adversary, and that is still needed to carry us safely to the scene where all trace of that adversary's presence will have gone forever.

As regards the spirits of the dead, nowhere in scripture do we find such a thought as the possibility of man in his present material form holding any intercourse with them; on the contrary, the Lord is said to have the keys of hades and of death; it is therefore in His power, and His alone, to release the spirits, and if scripture is to be our guide, He uses the keys on two occasions, and on two occasions only, namely, at the first resurrection for the saints, and at the second, just before the great white throne, for the wicked. Meanwhile, the spirit of the saint is with the Lord (2 Cor. 5), and so far as we as alive on the earth are concerned, is "departed" (Phil. 1:23), while that of the wicked is "in prison" (1 Pet. 3:19), and hence not at liberty to be called up when required.

But in those days, even as in our own, people professed to get and to give communications from the spirits, and the children of God are put on their guard against any such thing—they are to try the spirits, not by consulting them, but by putting them to the test as to whether they would confess Jesus Christ come in flesh, not merely confess that He is come in the flesh, but confess or own Him as come in flesh. In each of these verses (1 John 4:2, 3 John 1:7) the words should run, "confess Jesus Christ come in flesh," and not confess that Jesus Christ is come in flesh. Demons will not voluntarily own that Jesus is Lord, though this confession will be wrung from them at the end in judgment. (Phil. 2:10.)

There were false prophets then who were under Satanic influence, even as there were true prophets, who spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of God (2 Pet. 1:21 Cor. 12:10, 11); but notice that whenever it is a divinely inspired prophet it is always spoken of as the Spirit of God, and not the spirits. There may be diversities of gifts but the same Spirit, that is, the Spirit of God. This is of great importance for the true child of God to remember, for he is indwelt by the Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19, &c), led of the Spirit (Rom. 8:14), taught of the Spirit (John 14:26; 16:13 Cor. 2:9-16); and hence is independent of all spiritualistic revelations, pretended or real.

We are satisfied that the whole system of spiritualism is anti-scriptural, and a snare of Satan's, from which every Christian ought to turn away. Its revival in these closing days of the history of Christendom is no surprise, but an actual fulfillment of the scriptures, for "the Spirit speaketh expressly that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of demons." (1 Tim. 4:1.)

We are aware that many in these days have gone in for the thing in an apparently pious and religious manner, opening their meetings with prayer and interrogating the spirits on scripture subjects, and we have been told by some that the advice given by the spirits was so good as to preclude the possibility of its being Satanic. To all such we would say, Be not deceived, "for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14), and he could come to the Lord with an "it is written" at the temptation in the wilderness, to be exposed and defeated again by the selfsame word which he had handled deceitfully.

Many have been drawn into this snare of Satan's through tampering with it as a sort of pastime—possibly not even at first believing in it as a reality, until convinced by unmistakable proofs, they have given themselves up to its power; but instead of this being of God, we are convinced that it is but the forerunner of those Satanic signs, or lying wonders, which will accompany the presence of the Antichrist at possibly no very distant period. (See 2 Thess. 2:9, 10.) Their object is to deceive, and the awful end for all those who abandon themselves to it will be judgment and perdition. (2 Thess. 2:11, 12.)

Let no one suppose that spiritualism is all sham and trickery—no doubt much that professes to be real can be easily exposed and accounted for; but, on the other hand, we have come in contact with not a few, on whose word we can thoroughly rely, and who had been completely under its power for a time, but through grace were afterward delivered from it, and their testimony leaves no doubt on our mind of its solemn reality and Satanic origin.

One word more, and not the least important, the spirits hold out a hope of salvation after death for those who have died rejecters of Christ—indeed, they teach universal salvation, and this, in common with all the other forms of error in these last days, strikes a blow at the atoning work of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. In scripture we read that "by one offering he hath perfected forever" &c. (Heb. 10:14), whereas the spirits say that after death even the wicked will be perfected by passing through various stages, occupying a longer or shorter period according to circumstances. "To the law and to the testimony; if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isa. 8:20.)

A. H. B.

Christian's Library: Volume 7, Overcoming the World. (5:6)

RECOLLECTION OF ADDRESS ON 1 John 5:6.

I HAVE just been thinking what a place this is — no other like it. It is our need that brought us to Christ — it is very mean — but the link that binds you to Christ is forged out of the hard metal of your own necessities. Nothing but this can separate us from the world, not the world in its grossness and wickedness that we were in before we were converted, but the best part of the world. The world is nothing to a young convert, how is it that it is not so with us? Look at the verse that precedes this — “Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?” It is a present thing, “believeth;” nothing else will give us the victory over the world. “I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” It goes right against the current of the world’s thoughts. A Messiah that would give riches and glory it would have (and He will make happiness), but He is not going to have you in wealth and riches, beloved, with an unhappy conscience. He came by water and blood, not only by blood. Water is the purifying power of the Word of God.

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