

Acts - Commentaries by Frederick George Patterson

Words of Truth: Volume 8, Christ - God's Power, God's Rest (8:1-25)

It is a striking fact which is found in this Scripture, and is true at all times, and in all places in the world, that the displays of God's power are always manifested in delivering from the active positive power of evil, which has been working beforehand. No matter what the circumstances may be, God's power is ever thus displayed. It is the coming in of God into a scene, where the power of evil and Satan are, to deliver from it.

Now this putting forth of power is not rest; for God cannot rest where there is evil. The time will come when we shall enter the heavenly Jerusalem, and then we shall have rest; because then the glory of God and the Lamb will be displayed in a scene, where nothing that worketh abomination or maketh a lie can ever possibly enter. This is rest. There will never be rest till then. The power we read of in this Scripture is not rest, for it is exercised in a scene where evil is. In the heavenly Jerusalem evil is forever put away. In the Church we find lie-makers; Ananias and Sapphira arise, and lie to the Holy Ghost. That is not rest. In the heavenly Jerusalem there will be no lie; or, as it is expressed in other words, "There shall in no wise enter therein anything that defileth."

It is not a question whether there may not be joy where God's power is working: The power that overcame Satan in Samaria caused great joy in that city, but Simon Magus was there. It was power where evil was, giving joy, but not rest.

And then, too, we have the sorrowful side—that where God's power works, there is in man the principles and roots of decay. This is always true, whether we speak of the Church, which, alas! is so striking an example of the decay of the power which is in this chapter, or whether we speak of the individual soul.

The power of God is working in a sphere of evil, and where the roots of decay are sapping the power that has been displayed. Thus, we see, it is not rest. We may get discouraged by the evil. That is all wrong. We are not to be "weary in well-doing," so that it becomes a question of patience in a scene of failure and decay, and of grace to overcome as the evil goes on. We see it thus all through the Word. Wherever God set up anything this principle of decay appeared. God made this earth, and saw it "very good," and rested from His work, but man never entered into that rest. He sinned,—evil came in, and the rest was gone. Look, too, at all the distinct puttings forth of power, whether in Israel, or in Solomon, or in the Church, and all closes in evil.

We need, then, power to be applied to the evil, that we may overcome. It is never rest here, but overcoming evil to enter into God's rest. I do not deny that there may be seasons when the power of evil is less felt, God in His grace granting us refreshings by the way, just as the Ark in the wilderness went on one occasion a three days' march before the people to seek out a rest for them. There are these mercies in detail. So, in our chapter, after the persecutions, God gave His people a season of quietness, and in the next chapter we read, "Then had the Churches rest throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied" (Acts 9). But these are seasons of occasional rest only. It is not rest in result. It is not the rest that remains for the people of God. Now what we need is the faith that overcomes in the scene of Satan's power, as we read in the Word so often of "Him that overcometh." We need a power superior to the evil through which we have to pass, as in the Psalms, "They go from strength to strength, till everyone in Zion appeareth before God." The secret of this strength is in the heart living with Christ, and growing up into Him, who is above the power of evil which we have to overcome; entering into fellowship with the Father's delight in the Son, which is beyond all the range of the evil that is against us, and carrying this kind of rest through the conflict, however varying the circumstances may be.

Take Israel for an example of this. We know what they went through in the wilderness, learning themselves, and learning what the wilderness was, often murmuring and chastened of God, but under all they never lost the cloud, the token of God's presence, a guide at all times according to God's mind, a witness of God's power with them. It led them on all their way. It could not rest in the wilderness, but it wandered with them; and when, by their unbelief, they were turned back for thirty-eight years, the cloud turned back with them. It could not rest, but it never left them, leading them by day and by night, until in the days of Solomon we find it taking up its abode in the Temple.

Now this is what we need—to have our hearts above the evil and the principles of decay, which are in ourselves, living with Christ, and carrying this rest, where God Himself rests, with us through the world.

There are two things in connection with this presented in our chapter. The disciples preach "Christ," and those who believe have the Holy Ghost. I was very much struck with that verse in reading the chapter through. "Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them." He "preached Christ." It does not say he preached to poor sinners, though we know he did; but the Spirit of God puts before us what is before all other objects. "He preached Christ"; his primary object was not "sinners" but "Christ," the delight of God before ever the world or evil was.

Let us see the sphere of blessing this opens out to us, The Gospel is the proclamation of One, who is God's own eternal delight, presented to us as an object for our hearts, the "Wisdom of God," and the "Power of God."

It is just as we carry the secret of the preciousness of Christ by faith through the wilderness, that our hearts will have an object superior to all the circumstances of sorrow and evil that we are in. In the wilderness we need God's wisdom to guide, and His power to overcome. Christ is both. This spirit of faith makes all the difference which we find in Israel on the one hand, and Caleb and Joshua on the other. They all went through the same trials, and were in the same sphere of evil, but the grapes of Eschol brought out the murmurings of the people; they thought of the children of Anak, and were in their own sight as grasshoppers—they lacked faith to connect the power of God with themselves,

so that it was only a question of what their enemies were, and what they were in their own sight; whereas Caleb and Joshua, bringing in by faith God's power and love, found the report good, the grapes of Eschol strengthened their faith, they thought of God's promise to them, and said, "Let us go up at once and possess the land, for we are well able to overcome it." What were the walls of Jericho to faith, though they were builded up to heaven? Because God was with them, they could not stand against the blast of ram's horns!

But it is well for us to remember also, that if God was with them, one Achan in that camp is detected, and the power is withdrawn. It is not that He forsakes them, but He teaches them that He cannot go on with evil. So it is with us. God will not go on with evil. We must have all brought to light. These inward exercises are humbling, but most profitable. We get broken down and humbled by them. God cannot fail, we know, but if I take a wrong way He will not go with me in it. I shall find that there is no strength. But I will suppose that the soul is walking with God; and as Joshua and Caleb replied in faith, "If the Lord delight in us, he will bring us into this land and give it us, a land which floweth with milk and honey;" so with us, we find what God's thoughts about us are, in His delight in Christ, which lifts us above the evil we are passing through. Our strength is that the Lord has delighted in us, and is leading us on through all the evil, to bring us out of it all to Himself.

Now, what do we find that the testimony of Philip was "He preached Christ unto them." That which the Holy Ghost ever ministers is Christ. Philip preached this wondrous fact of Christ: who was God's delight before ever the world was. We thus get at God's mind about Christ before ever the scene of evil began. It is Christ, the object of the Father's delight, and the world is only a scene come in, "by the bye"—an important thing it is true, because the platform on which God's, eternal thoughts about Christ were to be displayed; but we go back to God's counsels, and see His delight in Christ before ever the world or evil were.

Now all depends, dear friends, upon knowing this blessed object of the Father's delight, living in Christ as He is in the thoughts of God from all eternity, seeing Him "Set up from everlasting," God's eternal delight! When I begin to look at myself, it is a perfect contrast to Christ; but before ever evil was, this blessed object of the heart of God was. After the world is over, He will still be the delight of God's heart.

Our strength is in this blessed fact, that God has brought into our hearts One, who was a sufficient delight to Himself before ever the world was—equal with God, the "brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person." This is the immense fact, that this blessed object of God's eternal satisfaction and delight has been revealed to us. It is not a matter of great knowledge, which we can only find in the highest truths of the Word, such as the epistle to the Ephesians. We find it equally in the 2nd epistle of Timothy and in Titus, when the brightness of the Church had faded away. He speaks of "the promise of life which is in Christ Jesus." He connects us with Christ in the thoughts and purpose of God before the world or evil were. He can go back to eternity and connect us with Him, according to His own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began. John, too, in his epistle, speaks of having "fellowship with the Father and the Son" in that eternal life "which was with the Father, and has been manifested to us." In the gospel of John, too, we behold Him as the Word of God with God before there was a beginning, and then connected with us, "The life was the light of men." In His divine nature no doubt the light of angels and of all; but He was specially the light suited to man and adapted to man. When manifested in time He was the eternal Person serving us.

In Titus, too, we have "the hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began." That is promised us in Christ Jesus. This is not great knowledge, it is the testimony of Scripture to the Person of Christ as the center and stay of our thoughts, lifting us out of the evil and failure in ourselves, and connecting us with Him, who was the eternal delight of the Father.

Turning now to His coming in time, for I can but present a hasty, and I am sure too, a feeble sketch of this glorious subject, we find ourselves in a world where evil has come in. However, before evil appeared on the scene of creation, its being framed by the Word of God was with reference to the manifestation of the Son of God, Adam himself was only the "image of him that was to come." Everything was made for Him, and bore witness to Him. "Abraham rejoiced to see 'His day,'" and directly evil is manifested, there is the promise to the second Man—the seed of the woman who should overcome the evil, crush the serpent's head, and set its power aside."

This promise was not made to Adam at all, but to Christ, who was what Adam was not, the "seed of the woman." This is immense blessing to us that this Divine Person who was before the evil existed, has come into the scene of evil, has been manifested superior to it all. We have to be in conflict with it, as we read in Romans, looking for the time when God shall "bruise Satan shortly under our feet;" and we know Christ shall put down evil by power, but in our own cage we have not to wait for our blessing until that day. But when it comes we shall be with and like Himself who has gone through all the evil, and been morally superior to it, to deliver us from it, and who will, in the end, entirely set its power aside.

Mark another thing, He was not manifested till evil had run to its full head. Man had been tried every way. Without the law he proved lawless, and under the law a transgressor, so that all the evil of man, as responsible to God, had come out, lawless and law-breaking before Christ came. His hatred to God in rejecting Christ I do not speak of, but his condition as responsible to God, and all the evil of man had come to its head before Christ appeared. "When we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly." But when the evil had run on to its full head, God brought in an entirely new thing. "God was manifest in the flesh;" the eternally blessed object of God's delight was manifested in the midst of the evil, the perfect expression of good in the midst of evil, and as a Man come into the world. I see in Christ not only God's eternal delight before evil was, but I see Him come into the evil that I am in, the perfect expression of the good according to the mind of God.

There were Abrahams before, grace working in the hearts of men; exhibitions of love and kindness from God; but in Christ we find entirely another fact; in the midst of the evil was that which expressed the mind of God. "God manifest in the flesh," "dwelling amongst us, full of grace and truth," and this directly when He was manifested. At His baptism, before He began His ministry, God says, what He never could have said before, there was a man (and much more than a man I grant), but there was a man, in whom He was well pleased! There was not one thing in the world of which God could say, "I am well pleased," but of Christ. What a stay is this to the heart, exercised about good and evil; and learning what there is in man, I see the good come where evil was, and God is well pleased in Him, and as taught of God I can say, if God is well pleased with Him, so am I! What a stay this is to the heart!

If we look at saints we get heart-broken. Even where blessing is, we know the power of Satan can come in, and spoil it all; but if I look at Christ my heart has rest, where God's heart has His. There is complete satisfaction in the object I am looking at, and how near me has He

come! He has dwelt amongst us, full of grace and truth, and in the evil I am. He has manifested the good that God can rest in. These things angels desire to look into. They learn what their God is, as manifested in the flesh,— “seen of angels,” as we read. This is rest for the heart taught of God. I can rest where God is resting.

But there is more than this. Christ has not only perfectly manifested God here in the scene of evil, but He has accomplished a work to deliver us from the evil altogether. We have the Person first, and the work next.

As to His Person, He has manifested a good that nothing can touch, that which was the expression of the mind of God, and this too in a Man tried in every possible way by all the power of Satan, and by drinking the cup of wrath; but He went through all untouched by the evil. He is thus in Himself the center of our hearts, giving them rest in divine good where evil cannot enter.

But then IV has also accomplished a work for us, which takes us completely out of the sphere where the evil is. Man’s hatred and sin brought Him to the Cross as regards means, but He came there by the “determined counsel and fore-knowledge of God.” He was made sin before God. He went through the wondrous question with God, brought out before God, and in His own Person.

In the Cross was manifested all God’s righteousness against the evil, and perfect love above the evil too. All that God was in righteousness, in majesty, and in love came out, when He was “made sin for us.” It is the answer to everything that I can possibly find in the world or in my heart. Evil can never come out again as it did then. It will be displayed in the Man of sin, and gather in battle against the armies of heaven, to be destroyed by power, but it never can be displayed again as it was at the Cross. There is nothing in my heart that was not at the Cross. All the power of Satan, all the sin and hatred of man, all the wrath of God against sin came out there. Nothing more can come out than was found there; and in Christ made sin, and bearing our sins, I behold the triumph of good over the power of evil. I go to the Cross, and say, “It is all settled!” There stood Christ in my place as made sin for me, and I am made the righteousness of God in Him, and in doing it, He has perfectly glorified God about sin. The whole question of sin and of sin-bearing has been settled with God Himself in the Person of Christ, so that I can say, I am reconciled to God, because all that I am has been brought out and dealt with in the Person of His Son.

But not only is the question of sin settled in the Cross: God has raised Him from the dead, out of all the power of evil, all the sin and evil gone for us who believe, and this Blessed One beyond the scene of evil forever in the glory of God. Before the evil was He was the eternal delight of God; when the evil was at its height, He came into it and manifested perfection unassailable by it; and now, by a work that has forever glorified God about it, and put it away for all that believe, He has entered a sphere, and entered there for us in a life in which, through Him, we live to God, where evil cannot come. He is beyond the sorrow forever; and though I am still in it, I can say I belong to One, I live in One—He being Himself my life—who is beyond the evil and the sorrow, at the right hand of God.

I can now see not only what God has done for man, but where He can bring man, for Christ has gone into heaven as Man, and for men. He has not forgotten to feel for me in the sorrow. Though He could say at the grave of Lazarus, “I am the resurrection and the life,” He could weep with them at the presence of death; but while I have His sympathy in the sorrow, by the power of the Holy Ghost I can also say, I am “quickened together with him, and raised up together, and made to sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” I can sit in peace at God’s right hand in Him.

The disciples feared when He told them He was going away, that He would forget them. How graciously does He take away this fear by telling them, that so far from forgetting them in going to the Father, He was going to prepare a place for them. If He could no longer stay with them in the scene of evil, He would wash their defilement from their feet, that they might have a part with Him where He was going. We now belong to Him who is gone up to heaven. Our portion is with Him where He is, that in the ages to come, as well as now, unto angels, and principalities, and powers, God might shew the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness to us by Jesus Christ, and this is according to His eternal purpose, which He purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

He has left us here for a season to exhibit Him, to be as His epistle, “known and read of all men.” But I can only exhibit Him so far as I know Him. All practical walk must spring from the heart’s acquaintance with Himself. It is only as we know Him we can bear witness of Him. He would have us, even in this world, so acquainted with Him, that our knowledge of Him should answer to His knowledge of the Father, not in degree of course, for He had divine knowledge, but in character. He says in John 10:15, “I know my sheep and am known of mine. As the Father knoweth me, and I know the Father;” that is, that as He knew and confided in the Father’s knowledge of Him as a Man on the earth, and knew and trusted in the Father, so He would have us to know and confide in Him, while hidden from our sight, walking in the consciousness that He knows us in all the love in which the Father knew Him, when He was upon earth.

This is what we are called to—entering into the consciousness of His delight in us, and the Father’s delight in us in Him, the heart living with Him in heaven. He strengthens our hearts; draws our hearts up to Himself, while there is nothing we pass through down here into which His heart does not enter.

What do you mean by going to heaven? Every one that goes there will enter heaven as the travail of Christ’s soul. They enter heaven as infinitely precious to God, not in themselves, but for Christ’s sake, because they are the fruit of His soul travail; and in one sense they help to complete His joy: His heart is set upon having us with Himself. “I will come again, and receive you unto myself, that where I am there may ye be also.” Just as a child whose happiness is the entire thought of his father and mother, who are planning his return home, so are we, only after a Divine and perfect love, the objects of the thoughts of the Father and the Son.

Oh, what an infinite blessing it is that we are in Him who is beyond all the evil, has gone through it all for us, and who in power will soon put down all the evil, and have nothing (I do not allude to the wretched souls who reject this love) in heaven or earth that can jar with the blessedness of God’s presence.

It is not only our own and individual blessings, but the Lord so counts upon our interest in Himself, that He wills that we should be with Him where He is, to behold His glory. What a blessed reflection that I shall see Him perfectly glorified, and shall dwell in the presence of God’s glory as my home, entering into God’s delight in Christ, the divine object of His own love forever!

It was this dwelling in the glory of God which was so terrible to the thoughts of a Jew. At the Mount of Transfiguration, when the three disciples saw the cloud of God's presence, which was familiar to their thoughts as the Shekinah, they feared as they saw the glorified saints enter into it with Jesus. It was entirely a new thing for a Jew that man could enter that cloud. Moses had talked with it, but he had never entered into it.

And here we come to another thought—the power of the Holy Ghost to bring us into this position in Christ, and to keep us there, giving us liberty from evil by feeding our minds and hearts on this divine object. If, in conscious weakness and self-renunciation, we lean on Christ, His strength will lift us above all circumstances, as we read, “I can do all things,” not in myself, “but through Christ strengthening me.” No matter what evil comes against us, even if it be to suffer and die for Him, as many have done, we are, through Him, superior to the circumstances. As we see in Paul, where death is before him, he does not know which to choose, for as Christ was everything to him, it would be evidently gain to die, for he would be with Him, whereas in living, he served Christ; so, without troubling himself as to what the Emperor would do with him, he decides his own fate. Christ loved the Church, and as it was good for it that he should remain in the body, he knew that it should be so. (Phil. 1) We see him entirely above all that even death could present by way of terror on his spirit. In Christ, we can say even death is ours.

Thus the power, dear friends, over every circumstance depends on being near Christ. Having Him before us as the object of our hearts, in lowliness of mind, feeling, if He puts us in the lowest place, it is just the one where we should be, walking with Him, and looking for Him, going through the world with every motive different from what governs the heart of the natural man, having our hearts fixed on who has passed through the evil, and is beyond it forever on the right hand of God.

May we, by the Holy Ghost, be continually feeding upon Him— “eating” Him, as Scripture puts it, so that our thoughts and feet may run in the current of His own mind

Lectures on the Church, Our Present Condition and Our Hope* (17:1-7)

“Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews: and Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures, opening and alleging that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ. And some of them believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few.

“But the Jews which believed not, moved with envy, took unto them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort, and gathered a company, and set all the city on an uproar, and assaulted the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. And when they found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren unto the rulers of the city, crying, These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also; whom Jason hath received: and these all do contrary to the decrees of Cesar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus.”

It may seem strange that I have read this account of the ministry of the apostle Paul, during the three sabbath days in Thessalonica. But it is extremely instructive to compare the historic narratives of the Acts with the Epistles afterward written to the saints in the same places.

I have read these verses for the sake of two special thoughts contained in them: — 1st, that there was a crucified, dead, and risen Christ preached by the apostle to them; and, 2nd, that there was to be a reigning Christ by-and-by; “another king, one Jesus.” This we may gather from verse 7. Its suitability too, is apparent when we think of those whom he addressed: namely, Jews who were familiar with the hopes of a glorious reigning Messiah, and who were instructed in the scriptures which so spoke.

The basis then, of the thoughts I desire to present this evening is, as to the past, a suffering, dead and risen Christ; as to the present, the association of the people of God with Him in a pathway of suffering and rejection; and as to the future, His coming again in glory, and taking to Him His great power to reign, and our association with Him in His glory.

Now there is an immense reach between the first and the last of these thoughts; He has suffered, died and risen again, and gone on high, “to receive for Himself a kingdom,” and He will return to take it in power and great glory; you will find that the two Epistles to the Thessalonians fill up the great gap, if we may so term it, between the past sufferings of Christ and His future glory.

You will anticipate from this, that I am about to speak a little about the coming of the Lord, as the great event which will bring about all this glory for which He waits and we wait. It is near, beloved brethren; the heart feels conscious that it is so; and the present action of the Holy Spirit marks it as very close at hand.

You will find that when redemption is accomplished, and the Holy Spirit is dwelling here, there are two thoughts brought before us very prominently in the New Testament; both very different in character, yet very closely allied; that is, the “coming” and the “appearing” of the Lord Jesus.

I may remark as to the expression, the “coming” of the Lord, that it means His presence in contrast with His absence; and it is a large and comprehensive word as so used, reaching from what is known to many of us as the “rapture” of the saints, to be “forever with the Lord,” and continuing through the interval which follows, till His appearing with His saints in glory. The word “coming” (παρουσία) embraces both thoughts; while the “appearing” (ἐπιφάνεια) is the shining forth of His coming when He will be displayed in glory to the world. That word “coming” is often used for this event, the “appearing”; but this last word is never used for the “coming.” His “coming” or presence, in contrast to His absence, embraces many details which He will accomplish in the interval, till His open manifestation to the world, when “every eye shall see Him,” coming with “ten thousands of His saints.”

Many of my brethren whom I address know that Christ is presented in the gospel narratives in four distinct ways. In Matthew He is seen as Jehovah-Messiah, son of David, son of Abraham, presented to His people and rejected, and in consequence passing to His higher glory as “Son of man,” over all the works of God’s hands (Psa. 8), through death and resurrection; then coming back as Son of man, in judgment, with the ensigns of Jehovah — power and great glory.

If you examine Matthew 24, you find the Messiah rejected by His people and cast out, then returning as Son of man in judgment, and delivering His people Israel. First dealing with Jews, in the land of Judea (Matt. 24:5-31), and appearing for their deliverance. Then gathering the “elect” of Israel from the four winds, from amongst the nations of the earth. (Compare Isa. 27:12-13; Zech. 2:6.)

Before that day comes, there is an immense heavenly interval, during which Christians are in relationship with Christ. We have this presented under three parables: The good and the evil servant; the wise and foolish virgins; and the faithful and the unfaithful use of the spiritual gifts of Christ, as ascended and gone away for the time from Israel, until He comes and reckons judicially with His servants. And then, when the time we are passing through is past and gone, you find that after having come and delivered Israel (Matt. 24:15-31), and dealt in the true appraisal of the work and watchfulness of His servants (Matt. 24:44-51; 25:1-30), He sits upon the throne of His glory, and before Him are gathered the Gentiles or nations, and His “brethren” after the flesh, the Jewish remnant of that day; and the former are judged, as to how they had received the message of His coming kingdom and glory through the latter. Believing and bowing to it, constituted them the “sheep,” as the rejection of it, the “goats.” It is the judgment of the “quick,” which introduces the millennial kingdom, the thousand years of earthly blessing. It will be seen that there are three classes of persons in this scene; the sheep, the goats, and His “brethren.”

You must quite set aside the human thought of this scene being a “general judgment” — there is nothing so foreign to scripture. God does not confound together the saved and lost in “that world,” when by the truth He has wrought to separate them here, much as man has blotted out the distinction. In the judgment of the great white throne of Revelation 20, after a thousand years there is not a living man seen; in that of this chapter not a dead man is seen! Besides all this, the ground of judgment in this solemn scene would embrace but a small proportion of the population of the world. Comparatively few will have had the testimony addressed to them, which forms the ground of judgment here, or any testimony from God: they will be judged according to their works — a totally different ground of judgment. This precludes the thought of its being a general judgment. Nothing but most careless reading, or the bias of human thought, could have so interpreted the passage. With this judgment of the living nations, the Jewish mind was, most familiar; with a judgment of the dead but little. To us as Christians, the judgment of the dead is a familiar thought, and the judgment of the “quick” very little known.

In the Gospel of Mark, the Lord Jesus is presented as God’s servant in testimony, in His holy mission of service of love; at the close of it, when ascended and in glory, it is said, even then, “the Lord working with” His servants whom He had left to carry on His heavenly mission here below. He is still the worker as gone up. In chapter 13 you find Him as one who has gone away, and set “every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch,” then He comes back to see if each is at His post of service and watching; whether at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning. Thus, is the Lord’s coming presented in keeping with the gospel of His service — His own work or that of His servants. He comes back to see if each servant is at his post.

Beloved friends, here let me say to you that it is a very solemn thing for every soul to inquire, AM I filling up the little niche of service that He has given me? There are not only great gifts, but joints and bands; and the body of Christ is said to increase by the joints and bands; every joint supplying that which belongs to itself in the mutual and effectual working of the measure of each one part. It is a great thing if each has found out his own path of service for the Lord.

It may be by earnest prayer in one; by the use of his temporal means in another; of the spiritual gifts in a third. In one way or another, He has given us something to do for Him, and He is coming back to ascertain how each is discharging the duty given him, and at an “hour ye think not.” Therefore, after giving to each his work, and commanding the porter to watch, He says, “What I say unto you, I say unto all, Watch.”

Now in Luke, who is the great moralizer, presenting things morally to men’s souls, and looking for a moral state in them, we find another thing. If Matthew gives us the official glory of the Messiah, and Mark the mission of service of One who “went about doing good”; Luke gives us Himself — Jesus, the Son of man — dealing morally with man. What then, will he look for, as he presents to us the Lord’s coming? A moral state of soul in those whose is such a hope. In chapter 12, “Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning” — that is not resting here; “Arise, depart, for this is not your rest, it is polluted.” If you compare every place in scripture where you find girded loins spoken of, you will find the characteristic of the place is toiling and journeying on in a scene where your heart and affections must be braced up, they must not flow out here; it is a place of conflict and toil of some sort or other.

He speaks here of a “little flock.” He says, I have charged myself with your circumstances; you need not be of a “doubtful mind.” “Let your loins be girded, and your lights burning, and ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their Lord.” Notice the word “like”; that the world might take knowledge of them. Nothing tests the heart like it. I say there is nothing in scripture that has such testing power with souls. If the Lord’s coming be the horizon of the soul, see how little you will care for this scene. How little laying up for the future. The world would say, Well, it is plain what the man is doing. His hope is imprinting itself on his life, and acting itself out in all his ways. Of what value is this blessed hope if it be only held as a doctrine?

What is so blessed is, that it brings a divine person before the soul, and the heart is drawn out after Christ: it cultivates intimacy with Christ as we pass through this scene. Your heart is in the very condition that will welcome His return; it enjoys and cultivates a deepening intimacy with the one for whom it waits. Nothing brings Christ so personally before the soul as the hope of His coming.

Now John presents to us the divine Word manifest in flesh; the only begotten Son of the Father, the Son of God. And instead of a coming in power and glory, or in scrutiny of service, or as expecting a moral state of soul and heart to answer His own, He says, “I go”! I must take your heart and affections out of this place and all earthly hopes. I must lead them into the Father’s house, where there are many mansions. David’s kingdom and Messiah’s glory must now fade away in your hopes and hearts. The day will come when all that earthly glory will be consummated. But your hopes are in another sphere. I am about to enter the Father’s house as man. I have wrought out your title to be there, on the cross. I enter it myself in the title by which you will enter into it. Then “I will come again and receive you unto Myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.” Thus His instruction deals with and supersedes the hopes of the Jewish hearts around Him, and, as a

consequence, suits our hearts, which have had no such hopes at all.

How blessed, beloved friends, to find, the moment I am free in heart and conscience before the Father, in the knowledge of His grace, that there was an abode in His house on high for me, before ever the world was. Why is it that we never find any description of the Father's house in scripture? You have the heavenly Jerusalem described in her wondrous glory and displayed as His bride — but never the Father's house. Because you are supposed to be familiar with the Father's Son, the Father is revealed in Him; and then it is sufficient to know that He is there, and the heart rests content in peaceful joy in the sense that where Jesus is, it is enough! "That where I am, there ye may be also!"

There is but one other passage in John that brings you thus into heaven and the Father's house. This is suited to him because he is occupied in unfolding God on earth in Christ — not as Paul, who rather shows us Christ as man gone on high, and our place in Him in glory. The other passage I allude to is John 17:24.

So far as to the general truth of the Lord's coming in the gospel narratives. He had come and presented Himself to bring in, in grace all the glories that the prophets had spoken of, but was rejected. When He comes again He will bring in, in glory, what was refused in grace. We will turn now to the two epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians. In them we shall find that the pathway entailed on the saints, and the circumstances which occur between the two great points I have before named, all come out. These epistles fill up, as it were, the gap between. So needed and suited too, to perfect that which was lacking in the faith of those saints at Thessalonica.

I might remark in passing, as to this chapter (Acts 17) that it illustrates the word of Paul, so frequently misapplied to cover worldliness, and mingling in the world. I allude to, "I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor. 9:22). Acts 17 explains or illustrates his statements. If he goes into a synagogue in Thessalonica to speak to instructed Jews, he takes up the scriptures they knew and profess to believe: if to Athens, amongst the philosophers of that city, noted for learning and human wisdom, he takes his text from one of their altars, on which was the inscription, "To the unknown God," and quotes from one of their own poets a sentence which judged all their idolatry, "For we are also his [God's] offspring" (Acts 17:28). Then, again, when He passed into the cities of Derbe and Lystra, where the grosser and more superstitious forms of idolatry prevailed, he preaches that they should "turn from these vanities unto the living God, which made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein: who in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless he left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:15-17). He adapted himself to the turn of mind and religious thoughts of men — keeping his own liberty with and in Christ all through, and thus becoming all things to all that he might win the more.

Now in Thessalonica he took up in the synagogue their own scriptures, and unfolded what had happened to their Messiah as foretold there — "Opening and alleging that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ" (Acts 17:3). Then, when we examine what he wrote to them afterward, he alludes to the fact that this rejected Jesus, who was their Deliverer from the wrath to come, had not saved them from a path of suffering, but that His path was theirs. "Wherefore, when we could no longer forbear, we thought it good to be left at Athens alone; and sent Timotheus, our brother, and minister of God, and our fellow-laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith; that no man should be moved by these afflictions: for yourselves know that we were appointed there-unto. For verily, when we were with you, we told you before that we should suffer tribulation; even as it came to pass, and ye know" (1 Thess. 3:1-4).

Thus the path of this suffering, dead, and risen Christ was shared with those whom His love had called to inherit with Him His future glory! How sad the mistake the Corinthians made in this. They had "reigned as kings" without Paul. "Would to God," he says, "ye did reign"; for Christ would be reigning too (now He is "expecting"); and Paul then would "reign with you." (See 1 Cor. 4:8.)

You will remark too, how bright and beautiful was the state of these freshly converted saints. "Ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia. For from you sounded out the word of the Lord, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak anything. For they themselves [the heathen] show of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; and to wait for his son from heaven, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess. 1:7-10).

Why was it that their Christianity was so bright? Because, whenever you find Christianity so, depend upon it, it is very objective. That is, Christ, as a living person, is so thoroughly before the heart, that the saints are lifted out of themselves, and every eye and heart is filled with Him.

In the first chapter (vs. 10) we find how this suffering, dead and risen Jesus had gone on high to His Father's house; and how these beloved saints were waiting for God's Son from heaven. It is not as "Son of man" we have thus to do with Him, but as "Son of God." Paul was the first who preached Jesus, "the Son of God" (Acts 9:20). The Father had raised up His Son from the dead; and He is our deliverer from the wrath to come. "To serve" and "to wait." "To serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven" was their blessed occupation here.

Now, while they were thus serving and waiting, some had fallen asleep. You do not find in the doctrinal parts of the New Testament that a saint is said to die. No; he has been laid to sleep. "Death is ours," and Jesus had taken it out of the hands of Satan; it was no more wielded by him who had the power of death, as the "wages of sin," over the saints of God. Some amongst them had "fallen asleep," and those who remained were troubled. They thought those who had thus gone would lose the blessing for which they waited, and they sorrowed for their loved ones who had gone. It was needful, then, to come in and reassure their hearts, and Paul is given an express revelation to do so. Suppose one whom we loved had fallen asleep, what comfort would be given to us now-a-days? Would it be, Be comforted, God will bring them back? Rather would it not be, Ah, you will go to him? Would it not be something like that by which David comforted his soul when the child died: "But now he is dead wherefore should I fast. Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me" (2 Sam. 12:23).

Nay; the hope is for Jesus to come for us, and bring with Him those who have gone before. Now Paul says, at the close of 1 Thessalonians 4, "I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which are laid asleep through Jesus will God bring with him "It is not them

which sleep in Jesus.” Jesus, the true David has taken Goliath’s sword. He has disarmed Satan, who wielded the power of death, by going down into his domain of death. Therefore says Paul, “Death is ours.” It is not now the wages of sin to the believer: that which leads sinful man to the judgment which lies beyond. The Lord has taken it into His hand, and if a saint who has waited for Him here below, has rather to wait with Him on high, he is “laid to sleep through Jesus,” and God will “bring them with him.”

The terms of the last clause of verse 14 would apply, I apprehend, to the saints who have slept from Stephen and onward. Only such are before the apostle’s mind, though not of course excluding any: “Christ the first-fruits, afterward they that are Christ’s at His coming.” Because the Son of God had first to take a personal name — “Jesus.” He did so when He became a man. “Jesus” is His personal name. Then He had to die and rise again, and disarm the enemy, taking death into His own hands. It does not say, Laid to sleep by Christ, but “through Jesus.” It is His action now. He has hushed the saint to sleep, as the mother has hushed her child! The spirit of the departed one is with Him; his body in the dust. When Jesus comes they will be reunited. The power of God in resurrection will glorify the saint who has been fitted for the glory by His blood.

“For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord.” (Paul is about to give a special revelation. When he does this, he marks it strongly, as, “Behold I show you a mystery,” and the like). “That we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord, shall not prevent [that is, anticipate, or, go before] them which are asleep.” If there is any advantage as to time they have it. “For the Lord Himself”; it is not merely “The Lord,” but “Himself shall descend”; as He had said, “I will come again, and receive you unto Myself” (John 14:3). He will leave His Father’s throne and descend from heaven “with a shout.” The shout is one of relationship with His own. His voice once called us out of darkness to Himself. The same voice gave forth the bitter cry, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken Me,” when under the hand of God as made sin for us. It is the same voice which now speaks in the accents of living grace from heaven in the gospel (Heb. 12:25). This voice of the Good Shepherd which we have known in our inmost souls, but which the world discerns not, will speak once more to those who are His, by this shout of relationship. Then the “archangel” carries it on, and the “trump of God” gives its sanction to all. Then the “dead in Christ shall rise first.” If there be a moment of precedence they have the advantage of those who are “alive and remain.” You will mark that it is the “dead in Christ,” for it embraces all the saints of God. When this wondrous rapture takes place there is no distinction between the Old Testament and the Church of God. “In Christ” marks a state or condition; they have not died “in Adam,” but “in Christ.” Just as you cannot speak of a person being in Jesus — that is a personal name — but “in Christ.” “Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up,” [or snatched up] “together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air, and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words.”

This is only one stage. The Father’s house is more than meeting Him “in the air.” “In my Father’s house are many mansions....that where I am, there ye may be also.” That is, the Father’s house. It is there He presents His saints as the fruit of the travail of His soul! This is ever the order, “First children, then heirs.” As in Ephesians 1, “Predestinated to sonship through Jesus” (vs. 5); then “In whom we have obtained an inheritance.” The highest relationship we have is sonship to the Father.

Thus we have (1 Thess. 3:13), “To the end that He may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.”

Now you find that the apostle will unfold the evil that is to be manifested, while the saints are on high, before their shining forth in glory with Christ; before the “Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints.”

This rapture of the saints of God is a positive necessity in the completion of the grace which has taken up our cause. One feels that scripture would be incomplete without it. It is the consummation — the finish of the grace. It is power putting them into the glorious place for which His precious blood has fitted them; the positive result of the meetness in which they now stand.

It has been said, but mistakenly, that it is only those who are actually waiting for Christ who will be caught up when He comes. But scripture; never supposes that a saint is not waiting for Him. It always gives us the normal condition of Christians; our common level as to standing and hopes; though degrees of apprehension and joy are no doubt fully recognized. Consequently you never find in scripture that a saint is not waiting for Christ. Many, alas! have sunk into the abnormal state; many have never had the hope — never have had bridal affections awakened. Does this set aside this blessed hope? Does it change His sovereign grace? No! blessed be God, and the rapture of His saints is the fruit of sovereign grace; and waiting or not, all will be included in that wondrous army — for He must see the fruit of the travail of His soul.

Now the word for “coming” is a large and comprehensive term in scripture as we have seen. It embraces in its scope the interval from the catching up of the saints, till their shining forth in glory — their manifestation with their Lord to every eye. The Lord will do many things during that interval. His first action will be to move from His present seat on His Father’s throne to meet them in the air. His voice is heard, “And the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive [the remaining ones] shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:16-17).

We gather another step from 1 Thessalonians 3:13. He presents them to His Father, in His Father’s house on high. “First children, then heirs” is the divine order. We shall then taste the joys of the Father’s house, already become the home of our hearts, amid its many mansions. In this passage we find the “coming” looks on to a moment beyond their presentation in the Father’s house; and this because he had introduced the thought of responsibility and holiness. Hence it runs on to the moment when they appear with Him; and all responsibility as to their path and ways of holiness has passed under the scrutiny of His eye.

When the saints are thus safely housed on high, the complete unfolding of the evil on earth takes place. These epistles go on to develop that; so you see, we are finding in these scriptures the steps between our two points in Acts 17. The world goes on saying “Peace and safety” on the eve of her “sudden destruction,” out of which “they shall not escape.”

Nothing can be more solemn than the state of things at the present hour. The cry from the infidel heart of many is, The world awaits a man! You, beloved brethren, are informed of what is coming. Like “the prudent man” who “foreseeth the evil, and hideth himself,” while “the simple — the foolish” pass on and are punished” (Prov. 22:3). You are trimming your lamps, and going forth to meet your Lord. People tell

you that the coming of the Lord is death. What folly! Who ever heard of death being our Lord? And His own lips have told us to be "Like men that wait for their Lord." Jesus is this. He is our Lord and Saviour, and He looks that our hearts may indeed, with unworldly joy, wait for Him.

In 2 Thessalonians 2 he recalls their hearts, and exhorts them by their proper hope, "The coming of the Lord, and our gathering together unto Him," not to be shaken by the false letter, "as from us" (vs. 2), that the "day of the Lord had come." The open manifestation, or "day" of the Lord, would not come while they were here, and before that day, the lawless one — the man of sin — would be revealed. The mystery of iniquity was then at work; the apostasy would come, and then he who would sit in God's temple as God, would be there. The Lord would then appear in glory with those heavenly saints, who come with Him from the Father's house on high. The day that would "burn as an oven," when the brightness of the glory of the Sun of Righteousness would consume the wicked to ashes, and bring in healing and refreshment to the now cleansed and prepared millennial earth! This willful king — this lawless man would meet his doom, as those too who were deceived and who willfully followed him, not receiving the love of the truth that they might be saved.

You have often noticed the "wings" of "the Sun of Righteousness," when reading Malachi 3. I believe they allude to the saints previously caught up, who wait for Jesus, the morning star, before the dawn; before He appears as the "Sun" of that day of glory. This is hinted too in Matthew 13:41-43. "The Son of man "cleanses His" world kingdom "from all things that offend and them which do iniquity; and then the glorified saints shine forth as the sun — His wings — in their Father's kingdom on high. When He does arise, to bring in that glorious day, it is with burning as an oven, which consumes to ashes the wicked, and with "healing in His wings" for others. If He consumes the lawless one with the Spirit of His mouth and destroys him with the shining forth of His coming, the glorified church becomes then the channel of grace to the renewed earth. Through her, and out of the throne of God and the Lamb in her midst, comes the living stream of the water of life, to a world where healing of nations is yet the service of His redeemed. (See Mal. 3 and Rev. 22:1-2.)

So here in Thessalonians, He comes to consume some in judgment, and to be admired in those that believe in that day, when the Lord will make good all that has been ruined by the first or responsible man. He takes His great power, and reigns for the thousand years.

Now, beloved brethren, what has been the great sin of the professing church? It has been the giving up of the constant, immediate hope of the Lord's coming. I would beseech you, whenever you find the faintest thought introduced of something yet to be accomplished between this moment and the Lord's coming for His people, treat it as it deserves — as the voice of the evil servant who said in his heart "My Lord delayeth His coming." You may not be able to interpret scripture to any great extent; you may be a plain man, but one whose heart is true to Christ. I pray you hold fast what you do know — that His coming for His saints is your hope; and do not let what you do not know disturb your hope — do not allow the evil servant's voice to find an entrance into your soul. Treat it as His voice, even if it come clothed with all the veneration of antiquity, with the opinions of centuries, the learning of divines — the piety even of men who have lived and died for Christ. Treat it, I say, as the evil servant's teaching, and refuse it, if you would be faithful to an absent Lord.

See what the evil servant's teaching (Matt. 24:45 -51) produced in the ten virgins who had gone forth at the first to meet the Bridegroom (Matt. 25:1). "Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins." At a certain moment then before the eye of Jesus when He uttered the parable, the profession of Christianity about to be set up, would assume a certain character; all who had gone forth would give up the hope, and would go in again to rest; "they all slumbered and slept." The hope of His coming was soon treated as heresy. Then the midnight hour came, and at that solemn moment the cry was revived. His heart desires not to find His people sleeping amongst the dead. He has revived the hope which lay dormant for centuries. He has given His one awakening cry, He never repeats it! It may be louder and louder — God grant it while He tarries. It may find a response in many a heart sunk down in dead formalism: but remember, He never repeats it. Where do we now stand in this time of the breaking up of everything? In the little interval between the midnight cry and the dawning of the day. The exercised eye sees in the confusion of the present moment the action after the midnight hour. But mark the calm and peaceful attitude of those five wise ones. They are beautifully conscious that they have their title to go in. There is no hurry — no hesitancy as to this. Mark, too, their active state. They are trimming their lamps, and there is oil (the Holy Spirit) in their vessels. The foolish, poor things! are on the search for it. See the crowds around you at present. Some deluded into Ritualism; some into Popery, with her pretentious claims; some turning to one thing; some to another. All seeking for the oil which the wise possess. They know not where to procure it. And in their search — in the active state, too, of the wise — they are sundered. God is separating "the precious from the vile!" They had started together some time before, awakened by a cry they may not have understood. But in their search they are parted from the wise. The wise do not follow them; but the foolish have to come and seek counsel from the wise. Mark, too, when the door was shut, the despairing clamor for admittance. But the day of grace was past, and hope was gone forever! I can conceive nothing more deeply solemn than the cry, "Lord, Lord, open unto us." And the calm righteous answer of One whose heart is still open to welcome the lost ones in the day of grace, "Verily, I say unto you, I know you not." Does not this convey to us the thought that a day is coming, when the careless, the procrastinator, and the professor, will awaken to the awful reality that the door is shut, never more to be open to them; and that a cry of despair and conscious ruin will echo through the length and breadth of these lands, so long favored with the light of Christianity? Oh that sinners would be wise — would consider the solemnity of the moment we occupy in the history of things around us. How soon that door may be shut, and hope a thing of the past. How little response too, has the cry found in the hearts of His own; still, before the judgment of the professing body comes, He would warn His people, and awaken them, that their well-trimmed lamp may light Him in, and throw back the darkness which grows more dense, as the moments, precursory of the dawn, speed on their way!

May our hearts watch and wait for Him — the bright and morning star. To be found watching and waiting when He comes, will repay the heart that mourns His absence, and lives here, by, with, and for, an absent Lord!

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