

The Ephesians

We have been reading some beautiful things that were said by Paul to the brethren in Ephesus 1,800 years ago. These things are applicable to us in so far as we stand in the same position as the Ephesian brethren stood in. We live further away from the promulgation of the Divine message to the Gentiles than they did, and have not had the opportunity of beholding the direct evidences of the divinity of that message that the Ephesian brethren had. But otherwise, our position is the same. Originally strangers and foreigners, we have become related to the commonwealth of Israel by the belief and obedience of the gospel, and have become prospective beneficiaries under the great and precious privileges associated with that position. These are summed up in the declaration that “in the ages to come, God will show unto us the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness towards us in Christ Jesus.”

The question for our more immediate consideration this morning is the question how this change in our position affects our relations with the world in which we dwell, and the course we have hitherto pursued. Is it intended that we should enjoy the privileges of our change merely as a man enjoys the privileges that may be conferred upon him by some legal instrument?” Are we to be “legally” brethren of Christ and sons of God without any corresponding change in our character, sentiments, and actions?” We shall make a great mistake if we act on such a supposition. Those who know the Scriptures know that a man may have “believed the things concerning the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ,” and thereupon have been baptised, as Simon Magus was, and yet, like him, be “in the gall of bitterness and the bond of iniquity,” having “neither part nor lot in the matter” (Acts 8:13–21). His “heart was not right in the sight of God,” as Peter declared (verse 21). We know that “if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his ” (Rom. 8:9). “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus,” exclaims Paul. Consequently, our legal privileges will wither to nothing, if we do not conform to the mind and spirit and heart that belong to the high calling to which we have been called.

What this mind and spirit and heart are we learn, and learn only, from the Scriptures, and from them only by the reading of them—the daily, attentive, loving reading of them. There is constant need for insistence on this. The mind of God is in the Bible, and we cannot come under its power except by daily traffic there. We easily persuade ourselves in our own creature satisfactions that a little Bible is enough, and many of us perhaps take this little at a time when it does us little good—at the end of the day, perhaps, when our force is spent, and the brain retains little susceptibility to impression. Let us get away from this delusion. Let us realise that our warfare against the natural mind, which is native to us all, must, if it is to be a successful warfare, be an unremitting warfare. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly,” is Paul’s exhortation. Oh, let us obey this sound advice. The rich in-dwelling of the word of Christ will be a constant antidote to the foolish thoughts and words of man, which are a natural heritage with us all. It will enable us to overcome in the good fight against folly and inanity. We shall find the daily reading of the word to be “mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds, bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.”

But it will be the result of determination and plan. No man ever stumbled accidentally into wisdom. It is the result of keeping wisdom company. "Blessed is the man that standeth daily at my gates, waiting at the post of my door." Literally, in our day, this means the determined adoption of the plan of daily reading the Bible. We easily slip out of it. The only way is to give it an iron place in the day's programme. Some think they haven't the time to spare. I am sure this is a self-deception. I am certain there is not a man upon earth, however menial his position, but who could manage 20 minutes a day for talk with God in the quiet reading of the Bible. The circumstances may not be favourable, but they can be arranged if the enlightened determination exists. They will be coerced by wise men. All men find place for that which is imperative. Bible reading is imperative. Man cannot live by bread alone. His mental well-being now—his material well-being ultimately—demands that he take in the knowledge of God so cunningly woven into the structure of all Bible writing. A man recognising this will find place for it. If he recognise not this, he is a foolish man, however much he may know of current life's affairs.

The information we get from the Bible as to the will of God concerning us, is so "wrapped up" (as a friend well expressed it the other day) that it cannot be got at except by loving, patient, and constant intimacy. It yields not its secrets to the flippant, or the careless, or the scorner. "The wise shall understand: none of the wicked shall understand:" this is true in all directions. It requires more than mere "intelligence" to penetrate the myriad significances concealed in the Divine word. It requires the docile disposition of true and pure reason: expressed by Jesus as the humility of a little child. Even in science that other department of the truth of God—the same qualities are essential to successful achievement. Jesus says: "If any man will do His will —(that is, desires truly and intends to do his will), he shall know of the doctrine." This is the first condition of successful accomplishment in the things of the Spirit. Those who "stumble at the word" are the "disobedient," according to Peter's definition.

Now, in all parts of the Bible at the last, when we are in the right attitude, we get access to the mind of God as to "what manner of people we ought to be," and must be—in places sometimes where people think it is not to be found. We have been reading from Proverbs this morning. Some people think these are obsolete maxims—intended only for Israel under the law. That they were suitable for Israel under the law, and written primarily for that use, is true: but it is not true that their use is exhausted in that direction. They form part of that "all Scripture" which Paul declares to be profitable to the man of God, furnishing him to all good works" (2 Tim. 3:15). And the Proverbs are expressly described by Paul as "the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children" (Heb. 12:5). Consequently, we are safe in looking in the Proverbs for that guidance as children, which we so much and constantly require.

Let us look at a few points in the chapter read. "By humility and the fear of the Lord are riches and honour and life." This is one of the sayings of the Bible that cause the scornful reader to stumble. First of all, he says it is not true: that he does not find it so: that it is only by pride and pushfulness, and laying religion on one side, that a man gets on. Secondly, he says it contradicts Paul, who says, "If in this life only we have hope, we are, of all men, most miserable;" and Christ, who says, "Ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake," and "Blessed are ye that weep now." The muddle in this case is due to lack of penetration, and the lack of penetration is due to a lack of taste and liking for truth in this direction. People are generally sharp in the direction of

their loves. Even animals are wonderfully knowing where appetite or the love of their young is concerned. Men who love God can understand His ways and His sayings, where the class who love themselves only find, or profess to find great difficulty. The statement before us is in perfect harmony with manifest truth. The working of Divine truth is far-reaching. We must give it long enough time to see its final operations. Who are to be the possessors of “riches and honour and life” in the finish of things on the earth on which we dwell? The servants of God, and they alone. “Glory, honour, and immortality to every soul of man that worketh good” (Rom. 2.) “Behold my servants shall eat, shall drink, shall rejoice, shall sing for joy of heart, shall bless themselves in the God of truth, when the former troubles shall be forgotten, whereas ye, who forsake the Lord, shall be hungry and thirsty, and shall cry for sorrow of heart and howl for vexation of spirit” (Isa. 65:13–16). For them that mourn in Zion—at present the meek, the broken-hearted, the captives, the bound—the Lord has appointed gladness, praise, glory, and wealth, in the finish of things. The old wastes built again, the desolations repaired. “Ye shall eat the riches of the Gentiles: in their glory shall ye boast yourselves” (Isa. 61:3–6). Now who are they that are thus to finally and permanently attain to the possession of “riches, honour, and life?” Why, those who are now characterised by “humility and the fear of the Lord.” It is because of these mental qualities that they are to be so promoted—therefore, “by” those qualities. Those qualities may be inconvenient now, in a world conducted on the principles of pride and God-forgetfulness; but they are the certain passport to even the things the world likes. The world may taste these things, but it is but for a moment. It is a feverish and unsatisfactory joy while they have them, and in every case it ends in the grave, which waits them all. If it be said the grave waits the humble and God-fearing as well, the answer is the grave cannot hold them. They belong to Christ, who has the keys, and they are out before they know they are in: and when they come out, it is to take “the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven.” With the wicked who are responsible by their wilful rejection of God, it is far different. They drop into the grave in the midst of their wealth, as into a trapdoor, from which they instantly emerge (as it seems to them) to find themselves dispossessed of everything they valued, and face to face with the dispensation of God’s righteous retribution, in which (in the midst of much tribulation and anguish, indignation and wrath) they will be made to realise the enormity of their crime in casting God behind their backs.

Realising, meanwhile, that “by humility and the fear of the Lord are riches and honour and life,” be it ours to cultivate these excellent graces which bring peace now and salvation afterwards.

Then we notice in this chapter something about the training of children. There is a good deal in the Proverbs about the training of children. It is a subject pressed also upon the attention of believers in the apostolic epistles. It is an important subject. Children are the men and women of the next generation, and all depends upon how they are managed in the first stage of life as to how they will turn out in the end. Solomon says, “Train up a child in the way that he should go.” This implies both that there is a right way and that the child left to itself will not take this way. This is most true, but much repudiated in the principles of most people. Solomon says, “A child left to itself bringeth its mother to shame.” Many work against this principle of Solomon’s, and tacitly avow that the best way to train children is to leave them alone and let them unfold themselves. All experience shows Solomon to be right, and the

Solomon contradiction to be wrong. When a child comes into the world, he brings no knowledge with him. His little brain is barbarism closely packed in little space. It is the material out of which a beautiful mentality can be fabricated by manipulation, just as coal, iron, and water become a beautiful useful engine in the hands of an operative mechanic. "Left to itself," the child will certainly grow up a curse to itself, and a nuisance to all around. It has to be taught and to be properly taught, it has to be made to listen. How is this to be accomplished? The chapter gives a hint before it closes. "Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child: but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him." This is a recommendation of corporal punishment—at the right moment. The world is going away from this, as it is from a great many other inculcations of wisdom. They even suggest that Solomon did not mean this, but that by the "rod" he meant the law of the parents orally enjoined. This extraordinary suggestion is sufficiently disposed of by the words of Solomon in the next chapter: "Withhold not correction from the child, for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die." And again, "Chasten thy son while there is hope; let not thy soul spare for his crying." A child does not cry for the wise instructions of its parents. Solomon meant flagellation, of course. In this, there may appear to be a brutalising element. It all depends upon how it is employed. It is like every other good thing: it becomes evil if extremely or unskilfully used. But the cure for its wrong use is not its disuse. Its disuse will produce many more evils than its wrong use. The strongest and most useful men in history have all been men brought up under the coercion of parental authority. Spoiled children are a crying shame: an affliction and a disgrace both to themselves and their parents. Just as there is nothing more beautiful under the sun than an obedient and intelligent and well-trained family, so there is nothing uglier than to see wilful, whimpering youngsters whose only law is their own likes and their parents' weakness. It was not without a reason that Paul made wise government in the house the test of a man's fitness for public service: "If a man know not how to rule his own house, how should he take care of the church of God?" (1 Tim. 3:5). The rule of family government is simple if parents are enlightened and firm with the due flexibility. While there are many things in which parents will take their children into confidence almost as equals, there are two things in which they should never hesitate to punish: if children disobey them or do flagrant wrong (as lying, stealing, cruelty, &c.) It is mistaken kindness to let them off with a reprimand: it will pay to make them suffer. It may be painful at the moment, but afterwards it will yield sweetness and satisfaction beyond measure. It ought to be a law that the child should not be allowed to cry because its wishes are thwarted. Crying for such a cause should be a crime, and should be punished. The rule would work infallibly. Firmly, consistently, and kindly applied, such a method of treatment would banish the ugly phenomenon of whimpering children from every house, and changes nuisances into sources of comfort, interest and joy. Parents are afraid to use the whip for fear of alienating the affections of their children. It is a mistake. Things work the other way. No parents are loved so well as those who are not afraid to enforce the law of righteousness. No parents are despised and slighted so much, at last by their children, as those who are afraid to whip them. Their methods breed tyrants, and louts and boors. Enlightened and firm government produces men and women fit to be sons and daughters of God. "Train up a child in the way that he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it." Try it. Never mind the scornful and shallow philosophy of street fools. The wisdom of God shall come forth justified in everything at last. The saints are "called" that they may govern the world at last. Part of their preparation lies in present

experience. How are they going to be able to enforce God's authority on public communities, if they do not now do it in their own families?

It is, therefore, in place that we listen to the function of the Spirit of wisdom in this same chapter of Proverbs, which says: "Bow down thine ear and hear the words of the wise and apply thine heart to my knowledge. . . Have I not written to thee excellent things in counsels and knowledge?" The obedience of this precept makes the difference between wise men and fools. The number who obey at present is small indeed: but they are precious to God and man. There are no lovelier people upon earth than those who, in the fulness of a true enlightenment, bow down the ear submissively to the voice of Divine wisdom as embodied in the Scriptures. The drift of popular sentiment is all against this attitude, but this makes no difference to the nature of things. A knowledge of the Bible, and a knowledge of human history will fortify a man against the drift of popular sentiment. Popular sentiment has always been against wisdom, even in common matters. Who does not know that the true knowledge of nature in almost all departments of science has had to struggle against popular obstruction and odium, and conquer recognition in defiance of popular opposition? If this be so in natural knowledge, what can we look for in matters of Divine knowledge for which the public have so much less taste—to which indeed they have a fundamental aversion? In spite of all feelings to the contrary, whether of vulgar barbarian or polished scientist, or refined exacting man, the Bible remains "the word of the wise" and "the knowledge of God," which will steer a man safely through the wilderness of mortal life and give an abiding place in the glorious life beyond; and apart from which all is fatuity, emptiness, darkness, and death.

The Proverbs are particularly rich in this respect. They have been aptly called "a string of pearls." Their avowed object is "to give sublety to the simple, to the young man knowledge and simplicity": their practical effect is to equip the mental man effectually in this way. Wise are those who make their children acquainted with them. Unblessed is the generation which, with this matchless product and power of wisdom in their midst, bring up their children in ignorance of it, leaving their minds to be stuffed with the husky materials of an irreligious education, or worse still, suffer them to run at large in the impoverishing wastes of sport, fiction, and folly.

A further pearl or two we extract before concluding. "He that soweth iniquity shall reap vanity." This rule may not seem to work out always in the present state, though it does so in some measure. For its full illustration, we must extend our view to the day when "God shall bring every work into judgment, whether it be good or whether it be evil." In this age, it may often seem that iniquity-sowing escapes its vanity-harvest. We may often feel tempted to say with Job and Jeremiah: "Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? Wherefore are they all happy that deal very treacherously? They live, become old, and are mighty in power. Their seed is established in their sight, and their offspring before their eyes." But there is an answer. "Woe unto the wicked: it shall be ill with him, for the reward of his hands shall be given him" (Isaiah 4:11). "Though a sinner do evil a hundred times and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God" (Ecc. 8:12). Let us never lose this faith in the midst of all life's storms and troubles. Let us hold fast our integrity, cleaving to wisdom, however bitter: following the path of obedience, however difficult sometimes. The end will justify our course. Though darkness appear to reign, "light is sown for the righteous and gladness for the upright in heart." They are no

vain words which tell us that when the good fight is over, the course finished, the faith kept enduringly to the end, there remains a crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to all them that love his appearing.

“He that hath a bountiful eye shall be blessed.” It may not be so now. Such a man rather seems a goose to be plucked by the sly foxes: sheep to be devoured by prowling wolves. But appearance is not always reality. It steadily remains an appointed truth that blessedness and nothing but blessedness awaits the merciful men who are bountiful for God’s sake. Such were his servants the prophets, “of whom the world was not worthy, who wandered about in sheep skins, in dens and caves of the earth, destitute, tormented, afflicted.” How will they appear when “the time of the dead” has come, when God in anger rises in judgment against angry nations, and deals out bountiful “reward to his servants, the prophets, and to them that fear His name, small and great?” It will then be apparent to all the world that this statute of the sanctuary is invulnerable in the strength of truth, and that, however much God’s bountiful children may be prevailed against in this age of confusion and sin, their blessedness stands like a rock awaiting them at their awaking, and will prevail, like Jacob’s blessing on Joseph, “unto the utmost bound of the everlasting hills.” Let not the bountiful man lose heart: let not his love wax cold because iniquity may abound among those who have a name to live and are dead. Let him persevere faithfully unto death, remembering that he to whom our service is dedicated is an observant watcher amid all the darkness, contemporary with all its times, and waiting to chase it away with His everlasting presence.

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