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→ SERMONS ←

THE SUBJECT AND SPIRIT OF THE CHRISTIAN MINISTRY.

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Unto me who am less than the least of all saints is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.—EPH. iii., 8.

THIS epistle is generally and justly considered as the loftiest production of its inspired and gifted author. Opulent in thought and elevated in sentiment, it is throughout the fervid expression of a great loving heart and of a vigorous illumined intellect. Written under the joyous excitement of the grateful tidings of the firm faith and fearless fortitude of the Ephesian brethren, to whom he had long sustained such intimate and endearing relations, its obvious design is not so much to defend as to display "the glorious Gospel of the blessed God." Hence the warm affections of the Apostle's brave and generous heart flow forth with unwonted spontaneity and fulness, and his active and enlarged mind expatiates exultingly in an element delightfully congenial with its spirituality and amplitude. His sentences glow with thought and thrill with emotion. And the frank revelation of his own inner life and personal experience draws us irresistibly into fellowship with his humble, earnest and hopeful spirit, and enkindles in us a desire for the attainment of like sublime faith, and the achievement of similar glorious triumphs.

The passage from which we have selected the text is an humble, grateful and exulting recognition of the sovereign, distinguishing grace of God, which

EXPOSITORY LECTURE

THE LAST GREAT PRAYER MEETING.

BY W. M. BLACKBURN, D.D., IN CENTRAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, CINCINNATI, O.

And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every freeman, hid themselves in the dens and rocks of the mountains ;

And said unto the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of Him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb ;

For the great day of His wrath is come ; and who shall be able to stand.—REV. vi., 15-16.

It is generally thought that none but the penitent really pray. We do not hear of impenitent people holding prayer meetings and conducting the services. Some of them have a sacred respect for the meeting, occasionally attend, and wonder why all good Christians are not present as often as possible. They are told that social, united prayer is a means of grace, a bond of unity and fellowship, and a power that once brought a Pentecostal revival, and they wonder whether we really believe in its efficiency. If absence be an advertisement of a Church's moral weakness, they must think that we are not wise if we encourage the habit of non-attendance. They regard this meeting as the tide-mark of the Church's life and prosperity. When the tide ebbs and falls back into the great sea of worldliness there are shipwrecks of members who lie stranded and convey no benefits of faith to human hearts. Then the Church is not a harbor into which storm-driven souls are coming for refuge and for new supplies of truth and grace. But when the tide of spirituality rises, when the prayer-room is filled, and waves of bliss roll into the hearts of devout people, what life and fervency ! Then these sunken hulks may be lifted and brought into useful activity. How full is the harbor of seekers for anchorage and safety from the tempests of sin ! Thus some non-professors regard the meeting for prayer, and they are right in their view. They expect us to value our privileges. But some others treat it with aversion, speak of it lightly, and resort to places where God is not recognized, and appeals are not made to His throne of grace. And yet the day is coming when even such people will throng together and hold a prayer-meeting—the first ever held by them, the last ever to be held on earth, and, perhaps, the most intensely earnest one ever upon record.

Those crowded meetings held a few years since in our cities, when at the hour of noon men left their stores, their shops, their offices, their counting-rooms, and filled the largest halls and churches, had scarcely more unity of purpose, for at this last meeting the great assembly will be of one heart, one

soul, and have one voice, one ardent petition. Words will be few, but the desire fervent. The circumstances, character and spirit of this final meeting are so striking as to demand our attention.

Notice the time. It is future. It will be after the day of grace has passed, after the privilege for Christian prayer has ceased, after all our devotional meetings have been dissolved, and after human probation has been completed. It will be after the redeemed have lifted their last prayer to God, and are ready for the white robes and the eternal rest. Yes, when the righteous have ceased to pray and are changing prayers on earth to praises in heaven, the impenitent will begin to pray as if they thought of it for the first time in their lives. It will be when divine judgments are falling upon the earth. It seems to be a day associated with our Lord's second coming, when He is to have His complete victory over the earth. The Apostle John has a vision of it. He sees the heaving ground, the trembling forests, the quivering hills, the stars falling, the sun blackening, and the sky parting as if to be rolled up and carried away. Many people will then be in terror, saying, "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." And yet, despite the awfulness of the day, they will rush together, as men never before rushed along in one living mass, and hold a prayer meeting.

Where? In their homes? No, those prayerless houses will be shaking into ruins by an earthquake. In the churches? The day for churches will be gone. Why did they not hasten to them in the time of mercy? They were then easy of access and welcome was at the doors. Why did they not heed the voice, "Come let us go into the house of the Lord?" That kindly invitation will have ceased. And these people will hurry to places very difficult to reach on account of the distance, the storm, the darkness, and the roughness of the ways. They will meet in the dens and caves, and among the rocks of the mountains.

Who will be there? In ages when God's children were hunted down by foes, chiefly the lowly, the poor, the quiet of the land, met in such difficult retreats, but to this last prayer meeting kings will run, noblemen will hasten, courtiers and statesmen will speed, rich men and great captains will rush, and all who thought they could trust in the permanence of earthly things. Many noble, many mighty will be there, for they will lose the supposed dignity which once kept them from the lowly chapel. And the free will not be ashamed to hurry on with the slave to the meeting. The infidel of the time, dropping his volume of errors; the scoffer, ceasing from his flings at the saints; the gay, wishing they had never been godless; the dishonest trader, thinking of the debt he owes to himself; outcasts with their vile company, and profligates with their victims, will all strive to be there. Such a crowd, with such variety of characters, was never at any prayer meeting of Christians. If that day should come now the assembly would be as great, and would any of us be in it?

No real Christians will be there. Mere professors and pretenders, deceived in heart or deceiving the very elect, and prayerless in their lives, may be

expected ; and when there, they will contribute their part for the first time to the interest of a meeting, for they will pray voluntarily and with an earnestness they never knew before. But among them will not be found such leaders of Christian prayer as now often breathe out for us our confessions and thanks, lay our wants before the Father of Mercies and cast our burdens on the Lord, bring fire from heaven into our hearts, and lift us into the mount, where we say, "Lord, it is good to be here." They will not be at that last and only prayer meeting of the impenitent. Therefore the attendants, who never prayed before, never learned in private the language of entreaty so as to know how to express themselves, will find that they must make their first prayer in all the publicity of that vast assembly. And they will be able to do it, driven as they must be by their awful convictions and the demands of their guilty souls. In all our prayers there ought to be the boldness of necessity. Would that we all were now as earnest as they will be in those chilling, cheerless caves and storm-beaten cliffs of the rocks.

What are to be the exercises, the services? No reading of the Word of God, which ought to be very prominent in all Christian meetings for worship, for divine truth is the fuel of devotion. None in that assembly will wish to hear it read or explained. They disowned it once, they dislike it still, for it must expose their sins and neglects, and reveal the justice of the Almighty. The time is too late for them to lay hold of the promises which God has made to the faithful. No preaching, no exhortation, because the day for that has passed. Even if a preacher who had been a hypocrite in the pulpit should be there, he would not dare to counsel others, for he would be in despair concerning himself. Nor would they listen, for they once thought that the preaching of Christ was foolishness, and they are now unwilling to hear of a despised Cross. No psalms nor spiritual songs. None will look back over a blessed experience and sing with emotions of gratitude and courage,

"Jesus, I my cross have taken,
All to leave and follow Thee."

The only service will be prayer—intense pleading. Nothing else will be allowed. And the prayer such a one as was never heard before. No printed liturgy, no collect from the Christian fathers and reformers—no memorized form of words repeated unconsciously. Nor will it be long and wearisome, embracing in its scope the needs of the whole world, but short, pointed, earnest, and meant to be timely, for it will utter just the one desire of troubled and perishing souls. It will be a prayer entirely for themselves, and for a great change to be instantly wrought, not in their hearts and characters, but in their condition and doom. For they will realize, as never before, that they must soon appear before the throne of Christ, and that "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

To what will they pray? Not to God. At sea, when the tempest is raging, and all human control of the ship is lost, when the masts are torn away and the next wave that sweeps the deck may bury the company in the deep, the passengers and crew lift their entreaties, not to the storm, not to the

waves, but to God, their only resort and refuge. But the prayer at this last meeting is not to God, nor is it to men. One will not say to another, as the affrighted mariners said to Jonah in the storm, "Arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not." An anxious soul is often helped to the divine refuge by asking the prayers of God's people. But the attendants at this last prayer meeting will not do even that. None will say, "Pray to God for us." In their fears they call upon the mountains. Unwilling to call upon God in the day of prosperity, and disliking to have friends pray for them, their aversion clings to them as a fixed habit, and they are still determined not to cry unto the Lord. Nothing could once persuade them to do it, and now nothing can force them, for the human will is not converted by force. Rather than submit to God's way they call upon everything else, idolizing the deaf rocks and the dead mountains. These are their gods. Can anything else so portray impenitence and stubbornness of will? I have stood at the bed of a dying man who had despised religion, treated Christ with blasphemy, and denounced all Christians as imbeciles or hypocrites; and yet how he prayed; and not to the Father of Mercies. "O, friends, save me; do not let me die." He clung to our feeble hands, saying, "Don't let me die." He would not lay hold on the arm of Jehovah. We told him that God was the hearer of prayer, and Christ was mighty to save, but when we knelt at his side and began to pray for him he turned his face to the wall and tried not to hear. If such a man be at the last prayer meeting of unbelievers, his despair will not let him entreat men to save his life, but his voice will be among the loudest that call upon the mountains.

What will be the prayer? One for mercy, pardon, salvation, preparation to meet God? No, but for justice on themselves, for death—sudden, calamitous, terrible death and burial. "Fall on us, ye mountains; crush us, ye rocks; hide us from the face of Him who sitteth on the throne. Put an end to our existence." They plead as if they had become so accustomed to the swearer's prayer that they use it still; so in the habit of cursing themselves and asking damnation on their very souls, that they can think of nothing else.

And why such a prayer for destruction? There are three reasons here given.

I. *One is their dread of seeing the face of God.* Once that face was radiant with mercy. Every look was that of the Divine Father urging upon them His holy laws, and inviting them to return to His favor, His home, and the rich inheritance which He offered them. His true children had prayed, "Lift Thou upon us the light of Thy countenance," and, looking onward to the time when they should be forever blessed in His presence, they each could say, "As for me, I shall behold Thy face in righteousness. I shall be satisfied when I awake in Thy likeness." They wanted His face to be hidden from their sins (Psalms, li., 9), but not from themselves. The pure in heart shall be blessed, for they shall see God, and they are not afraid to have

Him see them; but the finally impenitent are not so, and when they have the conviction that He sees their sins in the light of justice, they seek to be covered by the mountains rather than have His eye upon their guilty souls. They might have been forgiven, but they would not seek His pardon. Oh, the lost opportunities, the slighted calls, the rejected mercies! All gone forever. They cannot bear the sight of Him whose offers of grace they so wilfully refused, and they ask the rocks to confer on them a merciless burial.

II. *Another reason for this prayer is a fear of the justice of Christ.* Once He was the Lamb of sacrifice, the atoning Redeemer, the entreating Saviour, ready to save all that would call upon Him for salvation. But they would not call. They lived on as if He had nothing worth offering them, or as if they had no need of the gift which he had bought for them with His death on the cross. But now they begin to know whom they have rejected and what they have refused—the saving Lord and eternal life. Their condition is just what it would have been if He had never come into the world to save sinners. Nay, worse; for they are guilty of resisting His claims and the power of the Holy Spirit. Their day of redemption is past, and Christ is coming as their Judge. They see punishment awaiting them and perdition before them as the just desert of their treatment of Christ. They must be rejected, and thus treated as they have treated Him. Rather than be so humiliated and cast down from the height of their obstinacy, they implore the mountains to cover them with annihilation.

III. A reason for this prayer is the knowledge that they are without excuse. There is for them no apology, no availing plea, no justification, no righteousness, nor hope of future grace. They say in their despair, "The great day of His wrath is come, and who shall be able to stand?" Yes, who? Surely those who were believers in Christ, justified, forgiven, renewed, sanctified and ready to be presented by Him to the Father as the trophies of His victory. And these despairing souls might be among them and stand justified before the throne, if they had only believed Christ and trusted in Him for righteousness. But they would not have Christ for a Saviour. They did not accept Him, and now they know that He will not accept them. They did not stand up for Him when He was enlisting followers, and they know that they cannot stand in His righteousness before His throne. They must be cast down and fall, and be forever falling. Rather than appear at His throne to be judged, they ask the mountains to overwhelm them with destruction. They are angry at themselves, and hence God seems to be angry with them. This is the wrath which they would bring upon their own existence. How they admit God's justice to punish them! If not, they would venture before His throne. But they seek to forestall His judgment, and become their own infuriated judges, as if filled with revenge on themselves. How sin and unbelief cause the wreck of human souls! It makes men their own destroyers. What is the result of this earnest cry? Vain is the call to the mountains. They do not fall. The supplicants are not hidden. They cannot evade the eye and voice of God. They must appear in His presence. They will go

from that last meeting to the bar of divine judgment, and thence whither? Shall we follow them? I have no wish to trace their steps, nor witness their doom. If any of us would shrink from having one glimpse of the future punishment of sin, let us see to it that our feet are not in the treacherous path which thither leads. If you dare not look there, then dare not go in the broad road that leads to destruction. There is no other venture so perilous, no other road so easy, no other progress so delusive, no other end so ruinous. If those who persistently continue in it will one day come to a point where they would rather be annihilated than go farther, let us be forewarned. Why unwilling to go farther? Because they are not prepared to meet God. Not prepared? Will any of us say that? This life prolonged to us, new mercies daily given, Christian homes, churches, the Bible, places of prayer and examples of the faithful ever before us, and yet not prepared? For what else did Christ die, and rise and reign? For what else is the Holy Spirit sent? All these privileges, and yet not ready to appear before our Lord? If not, surely something is deluding us and cheating our weary souls of eternal life. It is such delusion that will one day fill dismal caverns and dingy clefts with despairing people, who will pray in vain to the mountains. Let no such deception keep any of us from accepting the gift of eternal life.

My fellow-Christians, there is one very practical thought which, I suppose, has already come to your minds. It is this: We ought to persuade as many people as possible from going to such a prayer meeting as that of the finally impenitent, and prevent any neighbor of ours from ever offering such a prayer as will be heard there. One way to do that is to make the Christian prayer meeting a real power in the Church and in society.

PAUL'S CUMULATIVE ARGUMENT.

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Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, etc.—ACTS xvii., 29-31.

UP to the twenty-ninth verse Paul has made a general statement respecting God. In the twenty-ninth verse he lays down the groundwork of a true and abiding Christian philosophy. "Forasmuch." The armoury of the Church is in that word. The weapons of our warfare are all kept within the sacred custody of that most simple, but most inexhaustible term. It contains all that is necessary for the completest and sublimest revelations of God. That word throws man back upon himself, and says, "If you want to know what God is, know yourself."

I. "Forasmuch, then," as we ourselves are not "like unto gold, or silver, or stone graven by art and man's device, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto them." We ourselves are limited expressions of God—we are made in the image and likeness of the Creator. God has left His witness within ourselves, and if we would but fairly and honestly and continually