

MODERN SERMONS BY WORLD SCHOLARS

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IN TEN VOLUMES
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JESUS CHRIST, THE SAME YESTERDAY
AND TO-DAY, AND FOREVER

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JESUS CHRIST, THE SAME YESTERDAY AND TO-DAY, AND FOREVER

PRES. ETHELBERT D. WARFIELD, D.D., LL.D.

“Jesus Christ, the same yesterday and to-day, and forever.”—Heb. 13 : 8.

THE books of the Bible are full of one of the peculiar marks of all true literature; brief passages of great and inexhaustible import. It is a commonplace that the conversation of educated men is full of quotations of these gems of thought. Many of them are unconsciously used, having passed into the common speech of the people to such a degree that, like the familiar names of men and things, no one stops to inquire whence they were derived. But familiar as they are these phrases possess an unfailing influence and bear up generation after generation on the broad pinions of their soaring imagery.

Among such passages our text may well be assigned a high place. It has long enjoyed great popularity. It has all the charm of epigram. It possesses the sustained strength of spiritual significance. It trips lightly upon the lips of the superficial and imaginative, and dwells fruitfully in the mind of the scholar.

It is full of satisfaction to the tenderly pious, and rich in suggestion to the devoutly speculative. It speaks primarily only of the permanence of character of Jesus Christ, but the context forces upon us at once a broader outlook. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews had in mind a much greater theme than the unity, perfection and permanence of the character of the man Christ Jesus. His purpose was nothing less than to prove to the Hebrews in Judea and to the farthest limits of their world-wide dispersion that Jesus Christ was the Messiah; and being the Messiah, was the hope of Israel and the Savior of mankind. Hence this finely fashioned phrase embodies a tremendous truth. It declares the permanence of character of Jesus Christ indeed, the continuance of His personality also; but it links these in an unbroken existence utterly incompatible with mere humanity. The enunciation of this doctrine is not new. It had been already set forth in not less striking language in the first chapter of the epistle. There, however, he is rather leading up to the assertion contained in our text and is setting forth the prophecies concerning the Messiah, who is referred to as the Son and as already come. There he says:

“Thou Lord in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the work of thy hands; they shall perish but thou remainest, they shall all wax old as doth

a garment; and as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed: . . . but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail."

This is the one, then, to whom John refers in similar language in the opening words of the Revelation as "He which is, and which was, and which is to come." The only other possible parallel is to be found in that beautiful psalm (the 90th), which is given the title, "A prayer of Moses the Servant of God," where it is said of God the Creator:

. . . "from everlasting to everlasting thou art God." This parallel is not merely a parallel, but an identification. We see in this psalm the work of the creative Word, so beautifully described in the first chapter of John's Gospel:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, the same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him and without him was not anything made that was made."

The identification intended by the writer of the epistle is thus evident. Jesus Christ is to him something more than man. Eternity is a part of His being; changelessness, an attribute of His nature. He not only shall endure to all eternity, He is from everlasting.

Such in brief is the conception of the writer of these words. Let us for a little season expand them that we may enjoy the same great

picture that they presented to the writer as he penned them.

It is easy to gather from the preceeding chapters of this book that the writer circumscribed his vision by no narrow bounds. His yesterday was conceived in the same sense as Moses thought of it in the beautiful song already quoted when he said: "A thousand years are in thy sight but as yesterday." The yesterday of Jesus Christ extends back to the dawning of the creative day when the morning stars sang together, before the mountains were brought forth or the earth was formed. But our writer is not content to view Him in some dim abstraction. While he rises to the sublime thought that He was, indeed, the brightness of God's glory and the express image of His person, upholding all things by the word of His power and worshiped of angels, he deals with Him definitely as the Promised One. He sees in Him the One foretold by many a prophet of old and destined to make good the covenant of God with Abraham. There are few historical summaries so picturesque and perfect as that in the eleventh chapter in which the heroes of faith are set before us, heroes of the faith of old in the coming of One mighty to save. We do not need to follow the long line of the unfolding purpose of God. Let us only mark that the occasion of the promise was man's sin and his consequent fall from his estate of inno-

cency; that the cause of the promise was the love of God for His erring children; that the necessity of the promise was God's justice which could not suffer its violation to pass unpunished lest wickedness should prevail and goodness be disowned; that the end of the promise was the reconciliation of men to God; that the fulfilment of the promise was Jesus Christ Himself, His person, His incarnation, His atonement, His resurrection, His mediatorial intercession.

Through the ages one increasing purpose ran till at length Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem and cradled in the manger there. Let us not mystify ourselves with vague images. This Child, was the very Son of God. He was conceived by the Holy Ghost. He was born of the virgin Mary. He was not the Son of God in the same sense that we are, or may be, sons of God. He was of the same nature with God, begotten not made. We share but the creative sonship lost in the fall, and the adoptive right granted by Christ Himself. Of whom of us can it be said as the Holy Spirit said of Jesus: "Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners." We come not hither with any purpose. He alone came of His own will, to do His own work.

To that manger-cradle came the waiting shepherds of the Judean hills, and the wise men of the not less expectant and sin-saddened Gentiles. Round that cradle-manger,

uncovered by the hands of the evangelists, after ages have stood in silent worship or rejoicing praise. No rare genius was cradled there, that thus the homage of the ages is rendered to His infant resting-place. This child is the very Son of God, and this cradle is the fountain head of a stream of history.

We know but little of the years that followed the birth of Jesus till His active ministry began. One or two bright flashes of His passing life lighten the pages of the gospels. We are left to imagine the quiet happiness of the home in Nazareth, the sweet content of Mary's mother heart, the growing trust and friendliness of His fellow-men. We are simply permitted to carry on the words: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man," until at length His hour was come and He set vigorously to work about His Father's business.

There is no kind of writing so interesting as biography, and scarcely any is so difficult. The world has a few great biographies and autobiographies and treasures them wisely. The notable defect of this kind of composition is that it usually dwells too much upon the external side of life, or if it treats of thoughts rather than deeds, it is likely to descend to trivialities. Of the life and death of Jesus Christ we have the most perfect of records. It is not complete in the sense of being exhaustive, but it gives us in the most simple,

yet noble language the most sublime picture of Him whose life it is meant to portray. From a merely literary point of view we cannot but marvel at the skill with which we are led to the cattle shed of Bethlehem, presented with the contrast between the hideous debauchee, Herod, the Great as men hailed him, on the throne and Jesus in the manger, thence by many a scene of city and of country, of lake and river and mountain, where teaching His high doctrines, healing the sick and afflicted, He made His way steadily towards the overpowering sorrow and the overwhelming triumph of Calvary.

Men from the first have found it hard to grasp all that the few simple records of the gospels relate. To some Jesus has been and must ever be the great teacher; to others the great physician; to yet others the great preacher. Some have even refused to see in Him anything for which they should desire Him, some have seen in Him only one of the prophets, but thousands of others have seen in Him the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world and have devoutly cried with the aroused and eager Thomas: "My Lord and my God."

Much depends upon our being His true disciples; that is upon our giving ourselves up to His guidance. If we do we shall not be content to hear Him by the side of sleeping Galilee, or to walk with Him on the storm-tossed

waves; to see Him heal the leper, or raise the dead Lazarus from the grave. We must go with Him to Calvary. We must know Him not only as the Lord of Life, we must know Him also as the "sacrifice for sin." We must behold Him on the cross not as the victim of Jewish wrath and blindness but of our own sins. When we can realize that He bore our sins upon the cross; that He was made a sacrifice for us; we begin to appreciate Him. Then we begin to understand the purpose of the long gone yesterday which brightened the gloom that blotted out Paradise, and dimly to realize the divine nature of Him who is our Savior.

To the cross succeeds the sepulcher—the sepulcher empty on the morning of the third day; to the dying Savior succeeds the risen Lord—once more we see Him as the Lord of life; but we can never forget that He died—even tho He rose again—that He died to give us life, that He rose again because He had power to lose His life and power to take it again.

Such to the writer of the letter to the Hebrews was the Jesus Christ of yesterday; the promised Messiah, the babe of Bethlehem, the crucified Savior, the risen Lord. This is the historic Jesus, the Jesus of all true history. Men may not always see the essential features of this biography in the same light. But no real student of biography ever neglects the

ancestry and other formative influences of the subjects of his study. To neglect the stories of Genesis, the songs of the Psalms, the prophecies of Isaiah and the rest of the prophets, in their bearing upon the life of Jesus of Nazareth, is like neglecting the sources of any man or nation. Jesus Christ was the child of prophecy and in Him the sure words of prophecy are plainly fulfilled.

But it is also true that the real meaning of a man's life can only be understood by a knowledge of the influence of his life upon after times. If Jesus Christ was indeed the Son of God His sojourning upon earth could not fail to be a source of deep influence upon succeeding centuries. The great question that confronted the apostles was, How was that influence to be exercised. The Jews were not unnaturally circumscribed in vision by their knowledge and experience. They had looked forward to the coming of a grander Moses and a larger Solomon. They had learned lessons of worldly pomp and power from the Greek Alexander and the Roman commanders and they had formed their ideals from the antique sages and recent conquerors. Even the more devoutly minded could scarcely keep their thoughts, even after His ascension, away from the captivating splendor of His second coming. It was only the more consecrated who were content to dwell upon the Lord's kingdom upon earth as a growing empire over

the minds and hearts of men. But such was the promise of prophecy, such was destined to be the fulfilment of history. He is the same to-day as yesterday, Lord of the hearts and minds of men, not the ruler over an outward kingdom on earth.

The greatest fact of history is the conquest of this world by the Church of Jesus Christ. To justify such a phrase we must not think of the Church as an institution so much as a spiritual force. From the little handful of men who gathered in Jerusalem in fearful secrecy after their Master's crucifixion, there came forth a world force. They were unlearned and ignorant, they belonged to a despised people and were outcast even from it. But in them burned a fire of fervent faith which was justified by its object and has been sustained by its results. The power that lay in this faith was as far as possible from the strength to be found in many of the rich philosophies and cults of human origin. Men love still to sit at the feet of Socrates because of the vigor of his dissection of the human mind in action, to learn from Aristotle because of the keenness of his logical analysis, to hearken to Cicero because of his gentle friendliness. But tho Plato lifted the ideals of Socrates to the gates of heaven he could not open them, and tho Cicero taught men forbearance he did not rise to the conception of brotherly love. So in the modern world those

who teach a broad humanity and those who prattle of "sweetness and light," fail alike in opening to man the deeper things of his own heart and the higher things of heaven.

The power that lies in the Gospel of Jesus Christ lies in the personality and sacrifice of Christ; in the fact that He, "being the eternal Son of God, became man, and continueth to be God and man in two distinct natures and one person forever." He is and ever will be the same. As the writer of this epistle says, He is still touched with the feeling of our infirmities—He who was made sin for us, tho He Himself knew no sin. As He loved us from the foundation of the earth, so He loves us still and as an high priest in heaven makes intercession for us. For this man, because He continueth ever, "hath an unchangeable priesthood."

This indeed is for all of us the Jesus Christ of our to-day. He ever liveth to make intercession for the sins of His people. This continued existence in the same character is the justification of all our prayers. We know whom we have believed. We know His nature and His work, we know that He hears us when we pray and by His continued intercession speeds the gracious answer to our prayers.

This I have said is far removed from human philosophies and cults, both as a philosophical conception and a practical ideal.

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Human systems are invariably self-centered. Do thus and so, and thereby justify your highest nature, is their appeal. We hear Socrates urging men to hear the voice of conscience in the heart, and Cicero speaking of right reason, and modern sentimentalists of sweet reasonableness. But Jesus Christ justifies the stern mandate of eternal justice with its mighty call to duty by bowing before it; and breathes the blessing of love by showing how His love has bridged the chasm which man's sin had opened between the justice of God and His goodness and mercy, and how love for Him can lead us through lives of purity and peace to the rest prepared for those who love Him.

This is not the kind of ideal for men proud of mental and moral powers to produce. But it is the kind of ideal that lifts poor sinful men and women up to God. How often have men tried to pollute the pure stream of gospel truth. In the very earliest age Greek philosophy began to muddy the stream, then Roman absolutism, then medieval ignorance, then feudal force, and finally modern worldly mindedness, each working in myriad forms physically formidable and intellectually enticing. But through it all the hearts of simple men and women have remained true to the Christ of the gospel. We who are students of intellectual movements exaggerate the importance of the Gnosticism of the early cen-

turies; the formalism of the Middle Ages, and the rationalism of to-day. The Church was threatened by Gnosticism but the plain and pregnant sentences of the Apostles' Creed are a continuing memorial of the real spiritual soundness of the Church of that age; the Roman hierarchy did harm to the Church it ruled with worldly pride, but that Church bred not only Augustine, and Ambrose, Savonarola and Gottschalk, Wyclif and Huss, Luther and Calvin, Latimer and Knox, but thousands of devoted parish priests untouched by pride and unsmirched by simony, and millions of men who were partakers of Christ's sacrifice; the deistic deadness of the English Church in the eighteenth century is proved to have been more among the higher ranks of society than of faith by the life and work of John Wesley; and to-day when men are boasting themselves of the acumen which they are exhibiting in uncritically critical assaults upon the impregnable rock of holy Scripture the blessed Bible grows year by year better known and more deeply venerated by millions of those who know that in it, and it alone, they have a part in everlasting life.

To the Church, the true Church of simple believing men and women, Jesus Christ has ever been the same through the long ages. Men may speculate, men may distinguish and discuss, as they will, but the world has never lost its recognition of Jesus Christ mighty

to save since the fulness of the truth burst on the waiting disciples in the upper room in Jerusalem. And if, as Paul tells us, God in ages past "left not himself without a witness," so in the time to come we can confidently believe that the very truth of God shall never fade, but grow brighter and brighter in the ever growing knowledge of Jesus Christ, the wisdom of God, and the power of God.

If such is the Jesus Christ of yesterday and to-day, what shall we say of Him in the to-morrow?

First, clearly enough, that He will be the same that He has ever been. We are told by John in the beginning of his wonderful transcript of Jesus' heavenly discourse after the last supper, that "having loved his own which were in the world he loved them unto the end." And we have many assurances in the beautiful words that follow that that love was not confined to that little company, nor limited to the end of His earthly life of sacrifice. That love infinitely tender, ineffable, sublime, was a love broad enough to embrace all men, deep enough to wring even the heart of the Son of God, lasting enough to continue from creation's dawn till the last trump shall sound above a vacant earth and beside a shoreless sea; that love is the warrant for our every hope and our exceeding great reward.

Nor pen, nor voice, can ever depict the fullness of reward of them who share the joy of

the redeemed with their risen Lord in heaven. The Holy Spirit has drawn by the hand of the apostle in the book of Revelation visions of that happy time, and those images have long haunted the minds of those who with eager expectation await the coming of their Lord. One promise among the many which crowd these wonderful pages must be the crowning joy. It is not the prospect of the city of God coming down out of the heaven, with its gates of pearl, its foundation of jewels, and its streets of gold. Infinitely above all splendors known and unknown rises the word of the promise to them who enter in: "And they shall see his face." What speechless bliss will it be to behold at last the desired of every age—to see the King in His beauty!

There is another promise to which we may well take heed, and in taking heed find hope and help. It is written on the last page of the closing scroll of the Old Testament, where Malachi writes: "they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts in that day when I make up my jewels, and I shall spare them as a man spareth his own son." And again John says: "Beloved now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that when he shall appear we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is."

"We shall be like him!"

We shall be like the King in His beauty; not the beauty of face, or form, or raiment,

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beautiful as they shall be, but the beauty of holiness—like Jesus Christ in mind, in heart, in soul. O blessed transformation! It was for this that He hung upon the cross on Calvary. It is through that sacrifice alone that we can put off our own righteousness, and be clothed upon with His spirit, and be made like Him.