

THE GOSPEL MAGAZINE

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Incorporating the Protestant Beacon and The British Protestant

New Series
No. 1573

NOVEMBER — DECEMBER 1993

Old Series
No. 2573

Editorial

To say that we live in a world of change and upheaval is to say the obvious, yet it is nevertheless true. There is a great shaking going on in the world today; on every hand there is chaos and collapse on an unprecedented scale. The very foundations of the faith are being assailed. How comforting and reassuring then to be reminded that there are some things that cannot be shaken.

The Scriptures are emphatic that the throne of God cannot be shaken — “Thou, O Lord, remainest for ever; thy throne from generation to generation” (Lam. 5:19). God Himself is eternal and unchangeable; nothing can shake His throne nor cause Him to change. God declares “I am the Lord, I change not”. Amid a changing world, He remains constant and eternally the same.

The Bible has often been the object of severe attack and criticism but it has survived and its power remains undiminished. The Lord Jesus said “heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away”. The Apostle Peter declared “the Word of God liveth and abideth for ever”. The prophecies of the Bible cannot be shaken; many of them have been fulfilled and the rest will be fulfilled in God’s own time. The promises of the Bible, likewise, cannot be shaken. How thankful we should be for those exceeding great and precious promises.

Further, the true child of God cannot be shaken. The Scriptures teach the eternal security of God’s people. Our Lord said of His own “they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand”. The Apostle Paul was utterly convinced that nothing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Here is strong encouragement in a shaking world.

A Study in Contrasts

An Advent Sermon by the Editor

"The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light." Romans 13:12.

Today marks the beginning of the Christian year, Advent Sunday, and the Christian year begins where the Gospel itself begins, with the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the great turning point in history, the dividing line between B.C. and A.D. and here is the real key to Christianity, the coming into this world of our Lord Jesus Christ and all that it means.

The Advent Collect takes up this theme of our text and develops it and applies it to our own situation. I wonder when we read the Collect a little earlier in the service if the beauty of it really gripped you. It is a wonderful prayer — read it through. It was written by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer and it was written for the first English Prayer Book in the year 1549, and notice how closely that prayer follows the actual words of Scripture, and that is an indication to us regarding our own prayer life, that our prayers should be Scriptural. They should take up the very phrases of Scripture as is possible and to be woven into our own prayers. What a great man was Thomas Cranmer. He, along with two other Bishops, Latimer and Ridley, were burned at the stake in Oxford rather than deny the faith that they professed. So that prayer comes to us from a man who was deeply taught by the Spirit of God and who was prepared to pay the supreme price. Now read the Collect again and you will find it is a study in contrasts. There are no less than three contrasts mentioned in it, the contrast between the works of darkness and the armour of light; there is the contrast between this mortal life and the life immortal, and then there is the contrast between Christ's coming to visit us in great humility and His coming again at the end of time in His glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead.

Let us look, then, at our text and relate it to the Collect because it is so wonderfully amplified.

DARKNESS AND LIGHT

There is first of all, then, the contrast between darkness and light. So we pray, "Give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness and put upon us the armour of light." Here is the direct quotation from the Scripture, from the text that we are looking at, and here is the context. The Apostle Paul is speaking of the christian hope of salvation. Now darkness and light are one of Paul's great favourite themes. You will remember one or two other occurrences of the phrase. When he is writing to the Church in Ephesus he says, "Ye were sometimes darkness but now are ye light in the Lord, walk as children of light". Then as he writes to the Church in Thessalonica he says, "You are not in darkness that that day should overtake you as a thief. You are the children of the light and the children of the day. We are not of the night nor of the darkness." And this emphasis is not just confined to the Apostle Paul. The Apostle John takes up much the same thought in his Letter for he says, "God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth; But if we walk

in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin."

So, to come to our text, "The night is far spent, the day is at hand, let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light." Notice, Paul draws a distinction between the world's dark night and the glorious new day that has dawned for believers with the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. So he says, "We are children of light, we are children of the day. We must therefore take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but live like men who are at home in the daylight."

Now here in this Epistle to the Romans Paul confronts us with the moral demands of the Gospel. He says we must cast off like a soiled garment the dark deeds and habits of the unregenerate life and, having done that, we must not just leave matters there because a negative religion is of very little value indeed. Renunciation of the world by itself is not enough. There must be the positive as well as the negative, and remember how beautifully it is put in Hebrews 12 where the writer says "Let us lay aside every weight and the sin which doth so easily beset us, (there is the negative side) and let us run with patience the race that is set before us. Looking unto Jesus the Author and Finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God." (there is the positive side). So we must not only put off but we must also put on, and we might have expected the Apostle Paul here to have continued the analogy of the discarded garment and say "Clothe yourselves with the robe of light." Not at all. Notice what he does say. "Let us cast off the works of darkness. Let us put on the *armour* of light." You see, there is a sharp reminder that to enlist on the side of Christ is virtually to prepare for battle, and we cannot fight a battle in our own strength, so Paul's final exhortation at the end of the chapter is this, "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to fulfil the lusts thereof", or, as one rendering has it, "Let Christ Jesus Himself be the armour you wear."

Now the phrase 'the christian armour' occurs really throughout Paul's Letters in the New Testament. You have it there in the First Epistle to the Thessalonians, and that is the earliest of all Paul's Letters in the New Testament, and there he mentions, as it were, its undeveloped form, "Let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and the helmet the hope of salvation." There is the first reference to it. Then we get, midstream, as it were here in the Epistle to the Romans, the armour again and then when you come to the end of Paul's life and in Ephesians 6 you have the whole truth so wonderfully worked out. Read it again, the items of the christian armour. So he says We are to "cast off the works of darkness — we are to put on the armour of light." "Cast off" and the picture in Paul's mind seems to have been that of a company of soldiers aroused by the morning bugle call, that Reveille, telling them to cast off their night attire and to buckle on the armour that sparkles in the morning sunlight. "Cast off" he says "Put on the whole armour of God."

So there is the first contrast, the contrast between darkness and light.

MORTALITY AND IMMORTALITY

There is another contrast between mortality and immortality, and the Collect makes it clear that the christian struggle against the kingdom of darkness is something that is going on here and now. Notice the phrase, "Now in the time of this mortal life." There is a wonderful contrast between mortality and immortality. Our mortal life is simply the life we live in the present world which is subject to change and decay and we do not know

how long life will last. We do not know whether our years will be long or short and mercifully the hour of death is hidden from us. There is a lovely hymn we sometimes sing:-

“God holds the key of all unknown
And I am glad.”

Aren't you? We ought to be, that God holds the future in His own hands and He leads and guides us as it seems good to Him, but there is one thing that is certain and that is, that this life will not go on for ever, and therefore it is sensible for us to reflect from time to time on this matter so that we may use our present life to the full whilst it is ours. Do you remember how our Lord said “Work while it is day, the night cometh when no man can work”. On Tuesday last at a funeral we were reading the 90th Psalm and you remember it says there, “So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.” The Scriptures are not simply other worldly in their outlook. They attach tremendous importance to the time of this mortal life and they teach us to face it seriously and responsibly. The Bible says we shall be held responsible for what we make of life. We may use it for the glory of God, for the enrichment of our own spiritual lives and for the help and the service of others, or we may squander it in the passing things of this world, in the self pursuit of money or pleasure or fame or fortune, and the Bible says that it is possible to make the wrong choice and to experience total loss. But it also says there is an alternative, we may deny self, we may take up our cross and follow Christ and then at the last great day exchange this mortal existence for the life that is immortal, the life that death cannot touch. Do you remember how our Lord put a searching question on one occasion to those who were within earshot. He said “What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?” And you know there has been no satisfactory answer given to that question of the Saviour.

Now someone has said that the true end of life is to know the life that never ends. Do you remember how our Lord prayed in the last great prayer recorded in John 17, “This is life eternal, that they might know Thee the only true God and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent” and so there is this contrast here between mortality and immortality. And our belief in the resurrection is the assurance that what is mortal of the believer shall one day be clothed with immortality and death itself shall be swallowed up in victory. And so you remember those magnificent words of the Apostle Paul in 1. Corinthians 15 “Behold I show you a mystery, we shall not all sleep but we shall all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye at the last trump; for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory”.

So we have two of the contrasts between light and darkness and mortality and immortality.

HUMILITY AND MAJESTY

Notice the last contrast in the Collect between humility and majesty. When Christ entered this world and was born of the Virgin Mary He certainly came to visit us in great humility, and the divine condescension is revealed supremely in the incarnation and when the Lord of glory laid aside (as Bishop Lightfoot puts it) “the insignia of His majesty”. He was made in the likeness of men, and oh the grace that came to men through Christ. “We beheld His glory” says John “the glory as of the Only Begotten of the Father full of grace

and truth." Yes, He came in circumstances of great simplicity and great humility. There was not even a bed in the Inn. He was put in a stable. Later on in His life He could say "Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head" and surely Paul rises to great heights when he says, "Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though He was rich yet for our sakes He became poor, that we through His poverty might be made rich."

But there is another side to the picture. He came to visit us in great humility but in the last day He shall come in His glorious majesty to Judge both the quick and the dead. Christ came in weakness, but He will come in power. He came once to save but He will come to judge. He is coming in His majesty as King to establish His reign of righteousness and peace. But He is also coming as the Judge of all mankind, to judge the living and the dead. And He who was once judged of man will at last be the Judge of men, Judgment is an unpopular theme, but it is Scriptural, it is there in the Creed. It is the belief and has been the belief of the Church all down the years and certainly the thought of judgment is one of the key notes of the advent message and it imparts a solemn note. It first of all calls us to examine ourselves whether we are in the faith, whether we are in fact believers in deed and in truth. It calls us to examine our conduct, our motives, our priorities, our ambitions and so to prepare the way of the Lord in our own lives. Paul says "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ." Oh don't pass over the solemn messages of Scripture — they are there and we neglect them at our peril.

So here is the last contrast between humility of the first coming and the majesty of the second coming.

Three Scriptural contrasts, light and darkness, mortality and immortality, humility and majesty, and so we look back with thankfulness to Christ's first coming in the fulness of time and we marvel at the wonder of it all and we say,

"Oh, the love that drew salvation plan,
Oh, the grace that brought it down to man."

But the believer looks forward with anticipation to that great and glorious day when He shall come in majesty and glory when the kingdoms of this world shall have become the kingdoms of our God and of His Christ. "He shall reign for ever and ever." Let that be the hope of each and everyone of us. Let us look back with thankfulness, let us look forward with anticipation, and let us live the present to the glory of God.

M.H.

Chosen in Christ

'Tis not that I did choose Thee, For Lord, that could not be;
This heart would still refuse Thee, Hadst Thou not chosen me.
Thou from the sin that stained me, Hast cleansed and set me free;
Of old Thou hast ordained me, That I should live to Thee.
'Twas sovereign mercy called me And taught my opening mind;
The world had else enthralled me, To heavenly glories behind.
My heart owns none before Thee, For Thy rich grace I thirst;
This knowing, if I love Thee, Thou must have loved me First.

Josiah Conder

For Younger Readers

CARINE MACKENZIE

POTTERY

Have you ever tried making pottery? Or have you every watched a skilled potter making — working at the wheel turning a shapeless lump of clay into a jug or a bowl or a vase?

I recently visited a local pottery where the whole process could be watched. The potter took a piece of dull clay — quite ugly really. He moistened it and threw it on to the spinning potter's wheel. He then worked at it patiently — pulling and shaping — cutting bits out — What was he making? Eventually when the potter was satisfied with his work, the finished vase was removed from the wheel.

It was then left to dry and then fired in a kiln to harden and strengthen it. After glazing and more firing, the vase would be ready for use.

In the skilful hands of the craftsman, an ugly lump of clay has been turned into a beautiful and useful article.

The prophet Jeremiah uses the picture of the potter to teach us a lesson. God is the potter and we are the clay. God can take the rough, ugly raw material of our lives and make something from it that is useful and beautiful. He is our Creator. He is the one who also gives us new life, and this new life is to give service and glory to our Creator and Redeemer.

The potter can decide what he is to make with the lump of clay. He could make an ornamental vase, or a sugar bowl or a vinegar jar each with a different appearance and usefulness. God has control over his creatures. He then placed us in different situations and gave us different work to do. We should not ask God "Why have you made me like this?" Paul says in the letter to the Romans "Hath not the potter, power over the clay?" In the same way God has power over his creation.

The firing of the clay in the kiln is vitally important for making the pot strong.

The fire of testing and trouble makes the Christian stronger. Paul could say that he actually gloried in tribulation because it produced patience, then experience and the hope, which does not make us ashamed. This fire is not to harm the Christian but to make them more useful for the Lord's service.

PUZZLE

We can use pots for many different purposes e.g. to hold sugar, or salt or flowers. Pots were used in Bible times for different purposes too. Find out some of the things that pots were used for.

1. What did the woman of Samaria carry in her pot? John 4:28.
2. What did Moses tell Aaron to put in a pot, to lay up before the Lord? Exodus 16:33.
3. What did Gideon bring in a pot to present to the Lord? Judges 6:19.