

NOTES OF ADDRESSES

BY THE LATE

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MISSIONARY OF THE ENGLISH PRESBYTERIAN

CHURCH TO CHINA.

EDITED BY

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V.

THE SECRET PLACE.

[*Preached in St Leonard's Church, Perth, February 8. 1842. The visits which Mr Burns paid to Perth, from time to time, were eagerly looked forward to by the converts there and in the neighbourhood. On each of these occasions, the church was crowded long before the time; careless relatives and acquaintances were led by believers to listen to the voice which had been the means of calling themselves to the feet of Jesus. Such was the affection entertained for Mr Burns by the many young men of Perth who had been thus blessed, that, on the night preceding his appearance before the Presbytery of Aberdeen,—the hostile party of which sought to deprive him of license,—they spent the night in prayer, that God would overrule all for His glory, and uphold His young servant.]*

"COME, MY PEOPLE, ENTER THOU INTO THY CHAMBERS, AND SHUT THY DOORS ABOUT THEE: HIDE THYSELF, AS IT WERE, FOR A LITTLE MOMENT, UNTIL THE INDIGNATION BE OVERPAST. FOR BEHOLD, THE LORD COMETH OUT OF HIS PLACE TO PUNISH THE INHABITANTS OF THE EARTH FOR THEIR INIQUITY: THE EARTH ALSO SHALL DISCLOSE HER BLOOD, AND SHALL NO MORE COVER HER SLAIN."—*Isaiah XXVI. 20, 21.*

READ in connection, Exodus xii. 22, 23. Notice here, first, A duty enjoined, and also a particular occasion for this duty, arising from that which God is about to do. Such an exhortation is always suitable; but it is specially so at those times when appearances arise of God's displeasure being poured out against a people and against a kingdom; and when a nation's cup of guilt is so filled up to the brim as to be ready to run over.

"Come, my people, enter into thy chambers." Three views may be taken of this word, one agreeing with that text in Matthew: "And thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet," etc. And, again, it may be understood in the sense of the passage read from Exodus, which tells of the blood being sprinkled on the posts and the lintels of the doors; and also in the light of those passages which speak of God as a hiding-place: "He shall hide them in the secret of his presence;" etc. These views, however, express the same thing. Entering into the closet is only useful in so far as we enter thereby into the secret of God's pavilion; and it is only by entering into the secret of God's pavilion that his people can ever be safe from their enemies.

Now when do we enter into the secret of God's pavilion? How do we enter there? We come to the Holy God, as to one who is a Spirit, possessed of infinite perfections, the just, true, and gracious God. His presence is called *the Holiest of All*. This expression denotes, perhaps, the nearest possible approach to God.

How do we come to Him? By the blood of the covenant; and with all boldness.

Now I fear we often think that we can come without this blood; or rather without any deep sense of our *need* of it. But what is the reason of that? Simply that some of us do not know God at all; and that we never yet have discovered either our enmity to God, or God's contrariety to us.

Now, beloved friends, the very first effect which the knowledge of God has upon a man, is to make him feel that he is full of enmity to God, and that therefore he cannot and dare not come to God. He trembles at the very mention of His name: he never can hear it with joy until he has been sprinkled by the blood. This approach by Christ's blood is clearly shown forth in the passover. The blood on the lintel kept the destroying angel out. This is just a picture of the covenant of grace. Sprinkled with this blood, we can draw near to God. It is not natural to fallen man to come near in this way, and it is only when sin is weakened within us, that we can do so. But when God by his Spirit draws us, *then* we come by his way, and have boldness to enter into the Holiest of All.

But then, remember, that makes us *humble*. No soul that ever entered there remained proud, either toward God or man: and this just belies the approaches to God that some people say they make. If they find it a natural and easy thing to come into the secret of His presence;—if they find that their nature goes quite along with it, and they can enter there at all times, without difficulty,—this proves nothing but their ignorance of God.

The effect of the least knowledge of God's blessed perfections, is to drive a man to the blood of Christ, and to make him set a high value on that precious blood. Now it is that this blood having been applied afresh to the conscience, he comes a poor, rebellious, God-dishonouring sinner, to present on the altar his body and soul a living sacrifice.

Again, when a believer goes into his closet, he requires to have this blood of sprinkling applied to his conscience, and that blood he presents to God. But before he can do this, the enmity must be slain by the power of God's Spirit: and this is one of the tokens of God's eternal covenant with his Son having been ratified, that the believer feels this within him, as one of its glorious fruits.

True, the enmity is only so far slain; it is not yet extinct. Believers know this: and when we come into our closets, do we not often bring with us that awful distance of heart, which dwells even in God's own people? It can never be destroyed while sin remains in them, and it can only be subdued by the sprinkling of the blood of the Lamb.

Now, if there are any present who never have known what enmity is; and who find it quite an easy matter to come before Him in prayer at all times; what does this prove? That they are living near to God? It just proves *this*, that such people know nothing of God.

It is when a man entering into his closet, and from that to the secret place of God, meets for the first time with Him as a righteous God in Christ, and when God at the same time meets with the sinner as a returning and believing child, saying, Abba Father, that the sinner is reconciled to God, and united to the Saviour.

And what follows? Only the same thing again and again till his dying day. The duty of Christ's religion is in fact just this, that the believing sinner cannot help from day to day coming, and coming always newly, and yet always in the same way, to his reconciled God and Father in Christ Jesus.

We have dwelt on this, because it is ever to this same daily duty of coming to Himself in Christ, that God directs men, when He is about to call them to trial and suffering, and would prepare them to endure such.

This is the only preparation that a believer needs when days of persecution are at hand, or when they actually arrive. It is not some new, unheard of thing that they need, some new duty they are called to. Ah, no! blessed be God. Or if you call it new, it is only in this sense, that it is to be performed with new zeal, with new strength, with new desires of attaining to the enjoyments of God. So that when He says to His people, "Come, my people, enter into thy chambers," he is just calling them to closer communion with Himself; to more frequent coming to the blood of Christ than before, that they may become more lively members of a living Head.

If we do not make this blessed use of communion with God; if we do not use God's perfections as a refuge and a hiding-place, then the closet is useless to us; it must be a first step to the secret of God's presence. This has been the refuge of God's people in every age.

We entreat you to cultivate secret prayer. Oh! seek never to enter the closet without going into the presence of the Holy One, to have dealings with the Lord God. Taste the sweetness of casting yourself by faith upon the perfections of God as reconciled in the cross, for your only refuge—with Christ's sinless obedience as your covering in his sight.

And it is just by obedience to this very command that every justified sinner is sanctified and prepared for a state of glory, and perfected by degrees into complete conformity to the image of Emmanuel.

Ah, yes! beloved,—and it is by this very process—humbling as it is—that *you*, believer, are to be strengthened, and emboldened, and prepared for times of trial, of suffering, and of death.

And in the day which is coming—a day of wrath—a day of trouble and distress—"a day of darkness and of gloominess, a day of clouds and of thick darkness;"—What will you need then? When the cup of a nation's sin is filled up, and when "the Lord cometh out of his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity,"—What will you need? Just what

you have been needing all the while: to be hidden in the secret place of the Most High God!

If you wish in that day to be secure, under the covert of your holy, holy, holy God, from the storm of the Lord's anger; then you must be much in the Lord's presence. This must become more precious to you than it is, and then you will better understand the duty, as well as the privilege, of entering into your chamber and shutting to the door, until His indignation be overpast. Alas! when times of trial come, many die away, and fall back, and are burned by the scorching rays of persecution, just because they never got power to come to God, and take refuge in Him from all danger.

But let us not forget to say, that many who do come into the closet, and who are God's children, enter it and leave it just as they entered, without ever so much as realising the presence of God.

And there are some believers who, even when they do obtain a blessing, and get a little quickening of soul, leave the closet without seeking more. They go to their chamber, and there get into the secret place, but then, as soon as they have got near to Him, they think *they* have been peculiarly *blessed*, and leave their chamber, and go back into the world.

Now this is calculated to draw us back again into sin: at least, by this we may lose many glorious advantages that we might otherwise gain over it. It is just by perseverance in prayer that we get the shelter we need.

Fix your minds upon this, that in that Day what will constitute safety will not be the profession of godliness,—though that be good in itself,—not zeal for Christ's cause, not *anything* but the being hid in the *secret* of God, and a more solemn, secret, personal, sensible union, or rather confirming of the union between them and Christ.

We know that in such times many shall be blown away as the chaff, who were not so esteemed before: and the reason will be, that they were not acquainted with the Holy God with whom they have to do. Beware, believers, of this; try yourselves by this balance of the sanctuary, that you be not judged of the Lord.

Oh! how is it that His own people have so little perseverance? How is it that when they do enter into their closets to be alone, they are so easily persuaded to return empty away; instead of wrestling with God to pour out His Spirit, they retire from the closet without the answer, and submit to it as *being God's will*.

We must not let the evil deepen, until we sink into a state of backsliding; or make up our minds to bear it, or withdraw to some believer and *talk* about it, and then rest in a hope that we are living, just because we seem to feel that we are dead.

This is a melancholy view of the case; and yet, believer, can you not bear witness to its truth in your inmost conscience, that there have been times

when your complaining of deadness to others was a real comfort to yourself, and a sort of satisfactory proof to you that you were really alive unto God?

That is a husky, shallow religion, which leads you to be always going to ministers to complain of your deadness, instead of taking it to God, and lying with it all about you before the mercy-seat; casting your dead soul before Him, doing violence to your sloth, and wrestling humbly, but earnestly—till you find an entrance into His holy presence.

Many are active enough in labour, and try to *do* much for God, as they think, but as to their prayers, where are they? Few indeed, and often dead enough. You go through them as a necessity, but they are soon over. But what does God say? “This is the will of God, even your sanctification.”

That blessed work would advance more rapidly, if, instead of laying the case before a friend or minister, you were rather keeping it to yourselves, and lying at God’s feet till you conquer in His strength, and then contending with the pride which is growing out of the victory.

I read lately, in the life of an eminent servant of God, an incident illustrative of this. He was in the ministry, and one day two of his brethren came from a long distance to see him. To their surprise, he received them coldly, and would scarcely speak to them. When they saw this, they took leave, and as they were going, instead of asking them to remain, he bade them farewell, saying, “You will wonder at the reception you have met with today; but I have been two hours this morning seeking access to God, and have not obtained it, and I have much need to be alone.”

This was one of the mighty wrestlers of the last century, who stirred up themselves to lay hold on Jehovah’s strength; like the widow before the unjust judge, taking no denial, but, by their continual importunity, getting power with God, and prevailing.

If you dwelt in His presence you would be pressing forward to gaze on His holy perfections as so many chambers of safety for your souls. You would look on His power as your defence against the enemy. You would hide in His omnipotence, you would repose in His faithfulness, you would live upon His love, and take refuge in His very holiness, made yours in Christ Jesus. Strange refuge this for a guilty sinner! You would not be content with a mere knowledge *about* God. You would know Him as I AM THAT I AM. You would hear a voice say, “Come, my people, come and make my perfections your refuge, and my presence your dwelling-place: make me your fortress, your buckler, your high tower.” You would be found studying His character *as revealed in His Son*; getting fresh discoveries of the glory of Christ, learning the worth of the atoning blood, and the depths of His unchanging love; daily crying out with him of old, “Wash thou me.” And you would be daily going more *out of self* and *into Immanuel*, “in

whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of His grace.”

No man, who is a stranger to the fountain opened for sin, can be a Christian. No one who is a stranger to closet religion can be a Christian. No one who is without communion with the living God can be a Christian. No man who is not forsaking every known sin can be a Christian. No man who refuses to discover to be sin, that which God’s Spirit in His word has discovered to be Christ-dishonouring, can be a Christian. No; sin cannot live in the chambers of God’s people, it cannot be carried into the secret of His presence, it cannot be indulged in the holiest of all. Those who are holding their idols to their hearts, and setting up their sins as stumbling-blocks before their eyes, are not Christians, but hollow professors and self-deceivers. Where will they be in a day of trial; when false refuges are wholly swept away, when all that is not hid in the secret of His pavilion, shall be devoured by the overflowing scourge? Friends, when God’s wrath shall sweep over every place but *one*,—and *that* the secret of His own pavilion,—what will you do *then*, if you are not there,—if you have not obeyed this invitation, “Come, my people, enter into thy chambers, and shut thy doors about thee; hide thyself, as it were, for a little moment, until the indignation be overpast?”

In application of this subject, we call upon all of you who are still strangers to God, to believe that His scourge will soon sweep over this earth. Some of you think you can be safe at a distance, without delight in Him, or communion with Him. Fellow-sinners, what will you feel at the day of judgment, when you find yourself so far from God that when you call He will not answer. Because, when He called you you would not hear, but tried to hide in the darkness of your own mind, in the darkness of a dead world, and a deceitful devil, and so remained a stranger to His love.

Poor formalist! whither will you flee when you see Him face to face? And you who are regarding iniquity in your heart, where will you turn to? Forms and ceremonies won’t screen you from that tempest. They will not make a break-water to the billows of His wrath. Even the most scriptural and sound belief will be worthless to you, if you have not made it *your own*. What would a mere good creed be at the day of judgment? The visible church will be no covert then. What avails the union of a dead member to a living body, if it never was connected with the life-giving head? A profession will not shelter you from the glance of the eye of fire. You may profess Christ till death, as many have done before you, and never know His gospel as the power of God. You may rank among God’s people, you may appear to belong to the sheep, even till the day when the sheep shall be separated from the goats, but no longer; you will be on the left hand then. You may pass for Christians among Christians, among men, and under the

eye of ministers. You may pass for such before the session; the elders may add your name to the communion roll. Yes; sad though this may seem, it is too often the case, that men's hypocrisy eludes the eye of ministers, of elders, and of God's own people; and yet they are hypocrites *still*. Have you met with God who is light, and in whom is no darkness at all? Have you met with God through the sprinkling of the blood? Is His Holy Spirit within you, getting the mastery over sin, and the victory over temptation? Or are you cleaving to that which He is urging you, or once urged you, to cast away, even after you had promised, as in the sight of God, to forsake it?

Yes, you *shun* the light lest your deeds be made manifest, while you make a fair show before men, cleaving to sin in your heart, and yet coming to the people of God, and to the ministers of God, and asking concerning Him. Truly you will have a fearful end: for God says of such, that "every one which separateth himself from Me, and setteth up his idols in his heart, and putteth the stumbling-block of his iniquity before his face, and cometh to a prophet to inquire of him concerning Me; I the LORD will answer him by Myself; and I will set my face against that man, and will make him a sign and a proverb, and I will cut him off from the midst of my people, and ye shall know that I am the Lord."

Not union with the visible church, not a profession of godliness, not a form of religion, not prayers and fastings, not good works, not tears and repentance, will save the soul in the day when earth shall disclose her dead, and shall no more cover her slain. Nothing less than the shelter of Christ's blood, in the secret place of Jehovah, the pavilion of Him who is Almighty, will cover the sinner *then*. But blessed be God, though judgment may overtake us in a false security, and surprise us in an imagined faith, with a hypocrite's hope, it cannot follow us to, or overtake us in, the secret of God's pavilion. Ah! the roaring lion cannot come under that shade; he cannot find you there, feeble believer! Death and hell cannot shoot their arrows within the veil. The law cannot bring its summons into the holiest of all, nor the avenger of blood pursue. And why? Because it is sprinkled with the blood of Jesus.

Death will soon be here. Since last we met, many, many have been summoned to the bar of judgment, and have got their sentence sealed; and we wait to hear the voice that is to call us to Himself. Not knowing when we may again be permitted to entreat you to return to God, we would the more urgently plead with you to be reconciled to Him now by His Son. Are you dealing with the blood of Christ? Do you only make use of it to keep you at a distance from God? or, as some do, to despise God and His law altogether? If so, you have never had it applied to you at all—never. Christ's blood avails nothing except in so far as it brings you near to the Father of your spirits. Christ's blood is just *a holy path to a holy nature*.

We would address a word of caution to God's people, and it is this. Always seek in religion to feel and realise more than you express to others. Do not dwell on past experiences, as it were to comfort yourselves under the want of present grace; or speak of the experience to others, when the grace is almost gone. Ah, beloved! if this be a snare to any of you, you have need to learn to say with Paul, "This one thing I do; forgetting those things which are behind," &c. Press toward the mark, not *your* mark, or any man's mark, but God's mark. And what is God's mark? Perfection: "Be ye also perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect." Have your eye fixed *there*. Some never look so high as God's mark.

Your faith has many a victory to gain. Faith is a battle—a mighty warfare. It is a fight against all that is natural to you, against everything around you—that you may live on *Christ alone*. Faith is a trampling upon all, a despising and hating of all that comes between you and a fully revealed Christ—a suffering the loss of all things to win Christ, and be found in Him.

Be not surprised to find obstructions in the walk of faith. You will find them every hour. It is no slight grasp that must be taken of the kingdom of heaven in order to make a man safe amid the ruin and the wreck of a perishing world. Believe me, it is not with folded hands and drowsy consciences, and hearts full of the cares of this life, but denying ourselves, taking up the cross, bearing the reproach, and by following the Lamb whithersoever He goeth, that we shall enter the kingdom.

Young men! I see multitudes of you around me, and I rejoice at it. Ah, brother! will you not give your heart to Christ now? If you are troubled and kept back by the fear of man, we entreat you to remember for your encouragement, that *God is known in Zion's palaces for a refuge*. These are the words of the royal psalmist, who knew well what it was to need a refuge, and to find it in His God in many a trying hour. Our God cannot be truly known, without becoming a refuge. He is willing this hour to lead you the first step to the secret place of His own pavilion. There, every one of His perfections is pledged to protect you; and if so, what have you to fear? What power can you fear when hidden in Omnipotence? What wisdom or what device of the enemy, when Christ is made unto you wisdom, and sanctification, and complete redemption—when your Counsellor shall be the mighty God?

He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. Come under the covert of the Rock of Ages, get your soul sheltered here, and rejoice at once in the knowledge of this: that the guiltiest creature may dwell in the holiest place without any injury to the character of God. Our Great High Priest entered into the holiest of all, and he carried in with Him His own blood as an eternal sacrifice for sin; and

He hath, by one offering, perfected for ever them that are sanctified. It is high time to get the mark of the blood of the Son of God upon your foreheads.

This is no season to be drawing back, when we see men, in defiance of God's commands, about to lay their hands on our beloved Sabbaths. Ah! who can contemplate such a probability without trembling,—who can see these bulwarks of religion shaken,—who can look to the dismantling of these blessed fortresses, which are truly the strongholds of Scotchmen? Who can see the ungodly, for the gain of a little money, approaching to attack the citadel, and not tremble?—or quietly listen to the iron wheels that in their speed are trampling down the Fourth Commandment? Soon your privileges may pass away. You may yet be under a dead, world-serving ministry, who will sell the truth of God for a pulpit and a place, and sing to you a siren song on the road to the pit. Is the Lord's work going on among you? Are the fishers of men getting fruit of their labour? or are their nets only made heavy by the stones or worthless fish that are drawn up? Plead with the Lord for Scotland. Ask that the length and breadth of the land may receive abundant showers of the Holy Ghost, in answer to the laid-up prayers of our witnessing forefathers. It is encouraging to know that in many places, abroad and at home, God's blessed work is going on still. Glorious work, which has gone on in spite of every opposition for eighteen hundred years, and shall go on till time shall end!

And now, before we close, let us once more entreat you who are unconverted to turn to Jesus. Could ministers but give you some faint idea of Christ's willingness to save you! If any soul here can declare that it is willing to receive Christ, let it know that Christ is yet more willing to save and to bless. He does not wish you to remain an hour longer a stranger to his love. Why did he suffer? Why did he die? Oh! not merely that he might be glorified in your destruction. True, he will yet be so, if you continue to reject and despise him, but that is not what he is seeking *now*. He did not need to leave his throne in glory to seek that. He need not have left the Father's bosom in order to have the glory of this world's condemnation. He could have got that by leaving the world alone in its sins, and under the curse of God. And for what then, did He leave his Father's bosom, and bleed and die on the cross—but just to be able to say, “Come unto me, and I will give you rest.” Is no one going to obey that call tonight, and to come, crying, “Lord, save me, I perish”? Christ is in the offer of every soul in this place, tonight. The Father's unspeakable gift is within the reach of every one now. Blessed be God that a willing people still flee unto Him in the day of His power. Jesus *has* a day of power, even in this lost world. He has “an arm that's full of power.” Believer! can't you set your seal to that? Have you

never felt your soul drawn out after Him, drawn forcibly—drawn irresistibly—drawn by a power that you have not got, a power that man never exerted, and that angel does not possess? Fellow-sinner, seeking salvation! is the devil whispering in your ear, “If you are to be saved, you will be saved; and if not, *your trying will do no good*”? Be sure that *God* is saying to you, “Return.” Oh! is no sinner returning tonight? Are none crying out—“Behold we come unto thee, for thou art the LORD, our God.”