

SHALL WE KNOW ONE ANOTHER?

AND OTHER PAPERS.

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“CERTAINLY I WILL BE WITH THEE.”

EXODUS III. 10–12.

THE words which head this paper are well known to all Bible readers. They were spoken by God to Moses in the day when he appeared to him in the burning bush.

At the time when they were spoken, the children of Israel were suffering hard bondage in Egypt. They were slaves under the tyrannical dominion of Pharaoh, King of Egypt—oppressed, afflicted, and trampled in the dust. Yet the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had not forgotten his people. At the time appointed, he summoned Moses in the wilderness of Horeb to go back to Egypt and deliver his brethren from captivity. “Behold,” he said, “the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me: and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them. Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt.”

But Moses was a man of like passions with ourselves. He saw the immense difficulties of the work proposed to him, and his first thought was to flinch and draw back. Forty years before he had been only too forward. He had thought to relieve his brethren by carnal weapons, and in his zeal had killed an Egyptian. At the end of forty years he is ready to go into the other extreme. Age has cooled down that fiery heart, and in solitary communion with God he has learned his own weakness, and distrusts himself. “Who am I,” he cries, “that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?” At once he is cheered by a gracious promise, which deserves to be written in letters of gold, and remembered by all God’s people—“Certainly I will be with thee.” That promise turned the scale.

Now there are three lessons contained in the passage, which all who desire to be true Christians will do well to remember. Let me try in a few words to explain what these lessons are.

(1.) We learn, first of all, *what weak instruments* God sometimes uses to carry on his work in the world.

The children of Israel had to be delivered from the land of Egypt—redeemed from the hand of Pharaoh, and brought into the land of Canaan. This was a mighty work; indeed, a work surrounded with such immense difficulties, that to the eye of man it might well seem impossible. Six hundred thousand men, beside women and children, with all their goods and possessions, were to be led through a howling wilderness, and planted in a country full of enemies. These men were a company of weak and timid serfs, without arms or money, and ground down to the dust by two centuries of most oppressive

slavery. They were held in subjection by the most powerful king in the world, with an army prepared at a moment's notice to put down any attempt at insurrection. Such was the work to be done. Now what were the means that God used to do it?

He chooses for an instrument an old Hebrew, eighty years of age, who was keeping sheep in the wilderness. He suddenly gives him his commission, as he is feeding his flock on Mount Horeb, and bids him go back to Egypt, to deliver Israel from Pharaoh. He gives him no money, no army, no weapon of war; no, not so much as a servant to accompany him. Alone he sends him forth on this astounding errand. "Come now," he says to Moses, "and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people."

It almost takes away our breath to think on the apparent impossibility of the work laid upon Moses. To the eye of man it seems like folly and madness. One single shepherd pitted against Pharaoh and the armies of the Egyptians! The very idea of such an unequal conflict sounds ridiculous and absurd. Yet this is GOD'S way. He loves to carry out his purposes in this marvellous fashion. Look over the history of his dealings with the world in all times, and you can hardly fail to see many like things.

Mark what he did when the proud giant, Goliath, was to be slain, and Israel to be delivered from the Philistines. He sent forth young David, without arms or armour—a shepherd youth, with nothing but a sling and five stones in his hand. Yet before that youth the haughty giant fell, and in a single day the power of the Philistines was broken.

Mark what he did when the time arrived for planting Christianity in the midst of the heathen world. He sent forth from a despised corner of the earth twelve poor and unlearned Jews—fishermen, publicans, and men of like occupation. He bids them preach a religion which to the Jews was a stumbling-block, and to the Greeks foolishness. And yet, before the preaching of these men idolatry fell to the ground and melted away.

Mark what he did when he began the Protestant Reformation three hundred years ago. He raised up a solitary German monk, without money, rank, or friends, and put it into his heart to denounce popish error, and teach scriptural truth. Alone, and without carnal weapons, that monk proved more than a match for pope, cardinals, bishops, and all the hierarchy of Rome. Armed with the sword of the Spirit, that monk defied the thunder of the Vatican, and lighted a candle which is burning even to the present day.

Now why does God carry on his work in this fashion? He does it to hide pride from man, and to prevent man glorying in his own strength. He makes it impossible for man to say, "Our own wisdom and our own might have given us success." When the huge host of the Emperor Napoleon was stopped in its career of victory, not by earthquakes, thunder, and lightning, but by silent frost and snow, all Europe was obliged to confess it was God's hand.

And when the world sees the weak things confounding the things that are mighty, the world is forced to acknowledge, "This is God's doing." It is the glory of a good workman to show his skill by making excellent work with bad tools. Just so it is the glory of God's wisdom and power that he employs weak instruments to perform great exploits. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit," is God's eternal principle of doing. He puts the treasure of the Gospel into earthly vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of man.

We must beware lest a sense of our own weakness become a positive snare to us, keeping us back from attempting anything for God. There is a false humility in some men, which is only another name for laziness and cowardice. "Who am I, that I should do anything?" is their constant cry, when the real truth is that they are idle and afraid. What though you are weak as water and feeble as a child? yet the Almighty God is on your side. What though you stand alone comparatively—few with you, many against you? yet the Lord Jesus has said, "I am with you always." Then fear not, but arise and try what you can do. There is much to be done for your own soul, and much for the souls of others. Try in the name of Christ, and you may yet find that nothing is impossible. Try in dependence on Christ's help, and you shall find that he who sent Moses from Midian to Egypt is one who never changes. He says himself, "my strength is made perfect in weakness." The Apostle Paul said, "I can do all things through Christ that strengtheneth me." In sending missionaries to the heathen world, in evangelising overgrown parishes at home, in gathering congregations, in building schools, in aggressive measures on drunkenness and immorality, in bold opposition to false doctrine, in steady maintenance of pure truth, in speaking to sinners privately, in public preaching in season and out of season—in all these things try on, try on, and hold not your hand. Look not to your own feeble force. Wait not for ever, counting up allies and numbering supporters. Look away to Jesus, and go forward in his might.—"When I am weak," said a mighty man of God, "then am I strong."—Think of the plagues of Egypt. Frogs, and flies, and lice, and locusts were not too small and insignificant to bring the wealth of Egypt to nothing. Moses, the solitary shepherd of Midian, was not too weak to bring Israel out of the hand of Pharaoh and the house of bondage. And you, even you, weak as you are, by God's help, may do great things for God, if you will only try.

(2.) We learn, in the second place, *what doubts and fears* even a good man may feel.

We cannot doubt that Moses was a good man, and had the grace of God in his heart. It is recorded of him by the Holy Ghost that forty years before this time, "by faith he refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the

pleasures of sin for a season; esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward.” Yet see how this man of faith shrinks and draws back when God proposes that he shall go back to Egypt. Great was the honour laid on him! glorious were the prospects before him! mighty was the God speaking to him! but, behold, even then this man of God doubts! “Who am I,” he cries, “that I should go?”

He thought of *himself*. Who was he that, at the age of eighty, he should go from keeping sheep in Midian to address the King of Egypt, and demand the freedom of his people? Who was he that he should undertake to manage a nation of three million serfs, and lead them forth from Egypt to Canaan? And as he thought of these things he doubted.

He thought of *Pharaoh*. Was it likely that a proud, self-willed tyrant like him would listen to the demand of an old Israelitish shepherd? Would the ruler of majestic Thebes, and the builder of enormous pyramids, pay the slightest attention to a sudden summons to give up all his slaves? He thought of these things, and he doubted.

He thought of his brethren the *children of Israel*. Was it probable that they would believe his mission, and trust him as their leader? Would they, after being mentally and bodily crushed down by centuries of captivity, suddenly arise and venture all on the hope of an unseen promised land? Once more, I say, Moses thought of these things, and he doubted.

Now can I excuse him for his doubts? I cannot for a moment. I believe that the simple fact that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was speaking to him, ought to have silenced every fear. The simple fact, that with God nothing is impossible, ought to have checked any feeling of hesitation. All I say is, that a man may be a child of God and yet be tossed about with inward conflicts. A man may have the faith of God’s elect, as Moses had, and yet be brought low occasionally by a spasmodic fit of unbelief. The doubting spirit of Moses is not an example to be followed, but a landmark to instruct us, and a beacon to show us what we must avoid.

I am sure the lesson is one of vast importance. I suspect that scores of Christians go mourning all their days because they are ignorant of their own inward nature, and know not what they must expect to find in their hearts. They are apt to fancy they have no grace, because they see in themselves much remaining wickedness; and to think they have no faith, because they feel within a root of unbelief. And then comes the devil, and bids them give up God’s service altogether. “You will never be able to serve Christ,” he whispers; “you had better go back to the world.”

Now I ask all such Christians to look at the case of Moses, and to take comfort. I do not tell them that their doubts and fears are to be commended; but I do tell them that they must not make them give way to despair. Painful

and annoying as they unquestionably are, they are an ailment by which the best of saints have often been troubled. Like a broken tooth, or a foot out of joint, they may make your journey toward heaven very uncomfortable; but they are no proof that God has forgotten you, or that you will die in the wilderness. They are a humbling evidence that you are yet in the body, and need Christ's mercy every day; but they are no sign that your heart is wrong in the sight of God. Nay, rather, I am bold to say, that where there are no fears there is no grace; and where there are no doubts there is no faith. So long as the world, the flesh, and the devil are what they are, God's children must expect to feel inward warfare, as well as inward peace.

But what are you to do with these doubts and fears? You must expect to meet with them but of course you must not encourage them. They are Canaanites, that will dwell in the land; but they must not be tolerated, countenanced, nor spared. You must resist them manfully, and watch and pray against them every day. You must not be thrown into confusion, like a raw recruit, at the first sight of the enemy; but be always on the look-out for him, and always ready to fight. You must form a settled habit of contending with unbelief, as a foe that never dies; and the longer you keep up the habit, the easier will the path of duty appear. The first steps toward heaven are, undoubtedly, always the hardest. When Moses stood on Pisgah, at the end of forty years, and saw Canaan spreading out before him in all its glory and beauty, I daresay he wondered that he could ever have cried, "Who am I?" When you and I find ourselves in heaven at last, we shall marvel that we ever gave way to doubts and fears.

(3.) We learn, lastly, *what kind of encouragement* God gives to doubting people. He answered the fears and questionings of Moses with one broad gracious promise—"Certainly I will be with thee." The wisdom and fulness of that sentence are alike admirable. The more we look at it—like the cloud which Elijah's servant saw rising from the sea—the greater and more satisfying shall we find it to be.

God did not promise Moses that he should have no cross or trouble. He did not say that Pharaoh would prove gentle and kind, and at once grant everything that was wanted. He did not undertake that the path to Canaan would present no difficulties, and that Israel would be faithful and obedient throughout the journey. He simply declared, "I will be with thee." In every time, in every circumstance, in every place, in every company, in every condition, I will be at thy side.

It was a promise of *companionship*. When thou standest alone before Pharaoh and all his courtiers, despised, insulted, and scorned,—when thou goest forth toward the Red Sea, not knowing how thy people are to cross over,—when thou findest thy people faithless and idolatrous in the

wilderness, and even Aaron timid and vacillating,—even then thou shalt not be alone, I will be with thee!

It was, a promise of *protection*. When the fierce Egyptian army pursues thee, and all hope of escape seems cut off,—when Amalek, and Moab, and the Amorite oppose thee, and the way to Canaan seems barred—even then I will be thy shield and defender. I will be with thee!

It was a promise of *advice and counsel*. When thou standest by the shore of the Red Sea, not knowing what to do for the timid multitude around thee—when there seems neither bread to eat nor water to drink in the wilderness,—when even thine own people murmur against thee, and are ready to cast off thine authority—even then I will not leave thee destitute of counsel. I will be with thee!

What a glorious promise was this! How admirably it suited the occasion! Well did that all-wise God who spoke it know the want and necessities of man's heart. Well did he know that nothing cheers and supports us in trial like companionship, that nothing so nerves and sustains us in the hour of darkness as the society of a strong friend. Over and over again I find the same promise given to God's children. It seems as if God had nothing better and nothing greater to bestow on them than his own company. When Jacob was ordered to go back to his father's country, the Lord said, "Return, and I will be with thee." When Joshua was appointed leader of Israel, in place of Moses, the Lord said, "As I was with Moses, so I will be with thee." When Paul was preaching the Gospel almost alone at Corinth, the Lord said, "I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee." When Jesus was about to leave his apostles alone in the world, the parting words of encouragement he spoke were simply these: "I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."

What, after all, can a Christian desire better than the company of God and his Christ? Where he is, there must be safety. Where he is, his people can take no harm. What does an infant care for house, or rooms, or climate, or furniture, so long as it feels its loving mother's arm around it? And what can a Christian possibly lack that is for his good, so long as Jesus Christ is by his side? He may be called to go to the farthest corner of the earth; but he will not go alone. He may be placed in the most difficult post of duty; but he has near him a helper. He may have a heavy cross to bear; but he has by his side a friend. Live for the world, and sin, and pleasure, and you are sure one day to find yourself alone, helpless, friendless, desolate, none to comfort, and none to cheer. But live for God and for Christ, and you are never alone. You have always the best of companions. You are always guarded, kept, watched over, and cared for by love that passeth knowledge.

Reader, I leave the subject here: I only ask you, as we part, to remember that whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning.

That glorious promise, “Certainly I will be with thee,” was not meant for Moses only, but for every true Christian. Lay hold on this promise, and go forward in God’s name, and be bold in God’s service. Lay hold on it, and be not afraid. None ever laid their weight on it and found it fail. Is it not written by Him that cannot lie, “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away?”

THE END.