

PRACTICAL RELIGION.

BEING PLAIN PAPERS
ON THE DAILY DUTIES, EXPERIENCE, DANGERS, AND
PRIVILEGES OF PROFESSING CHRISTIANS.

BY

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Third Edition.

LONDON:
WILLIAM HUNT AND COMPANY,
12, PATERNOSTER ROW.
IPSWICH: WILLIAM HUNT, TAVERN STREET.
1883.

XIX.

THE GREAT GATHERING.

“Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto Him.”—2 THESS. ii. 1.

THE text which heads this page contains an expression which deserves no common attention. That expression is,—“Our gathering together.”

“Our gathering together!” Those three words touch a note which ought to find a response in every part of the world. Man is by nature a social being: he does not like to be alone. Go where you will on earth, people generally like meeting together, and seeing one another’s faces. It is the exception, and not the rule, to find children of Adam who do not like “gathering together.”

For example, Christmas is peculiarly a time when English people “gather together.” It is the season when family meetings have become almost a national institution. In town and in country, among rich and among poor, from the palace to the workhouse, Christmas cheer and Christmas parties are proverbial things. It is the one time in the twelvemonth with many for seeing their friends at all. Sons snatch a few days from London business to run down and see their parents; brothers get leave of absence from the desk to spend a week with their sisters; friends accept long-standing invitations, and contrive to pay a visit to their friends; boys rush home from school, and glory in the warmth and comfort of the old house. Business for a little space comes to a standstill: the weary wheels of incessant labour seem almost to cease revolving for a few hours. In short, from the Isle of Wight to Berwick-on-Tweed, and from the Land’s End to the North Foreland, there is a general spirit of “gathering together.”

Happy is the land where such a state of things exists! Long may it last in England, and never may it end! Poor and shallow is that philosophy which sneers at Christmas gatherings. Cold and hard is that religion which pretends to frown at them, and denounces them as wicked. Family affection lies at the very roots of well-ordered society. It is one of the few good things which have survived the fall, and prevent men and women from being mere devils. It is the secret oil on the wheels of our social system which keeps the whole machine going, and without which neither steam nor fire would avail. Anything which helps to keep up family affection and brotherly love is a positive good to a country. May the Christmas day never arrive in England when there are no family meetings and no gatherings together!

But earthly gatherings after all have something about them that is sad and sorrowful. The happiest parties sometimes contain uncongenial members: the merriest meetings are only for a very short time. Moreover, as years roll on, the hand of death makes painful gaps in the family circle. Even in the midst of Christmas merriment we cannot help remembering those who have passed away. The longer we live, the more we feel to stand alone. The old faces will rise before the eyes of our minds, and the old voices will sound in our ears, even in the midst of holiday mirth and laughter. People do not talk much of such things; but there are few that do not feel them. We need not intrude our inmost thoughts on others, and especially when all around us are bright and happy. But there are not many, I suspect, who reach middle age, who would not admit, if they spoke the truth, that there are sorrowful things inseparably mixed up with a Christmas party. In short, there is no unmixed pleasure about any earthly “gathering.”

But is there no better “gathering” yet to come? Is there no bright prospect in our horizon of an assembly which shall far outshine the assemblies of Christmas and New Year,—an assembly in which there shall be joy without sorrow, and mirth without tears? I thank God that I can give a plain answer to these questions; and to give it is the simple object of this paper. I ask my readers to give me their attention for a few minutes, and I will soon show them what I mean.

I. There is a “gathering together” of true Christians which is to come. *What is it, and when shall it be?*

The gathering I speak of shall take place at the end of the world, in the day when Christ returns to earth the second time. As surely as He came the first time, so surely shall He come the second time. In the clouds of heaven He went away, and in the clouds of heaven He shall return. Visibly, in the body, He went away, and visibly, in the body, He will return. And the very first thing that Christ will do will be to “gather together” His people. “He shall send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.” (Matt. xxiv. 31.)

The *manner* of this “gathering together” is plainly revealed in Scripture. The dead saints shall all be raised, and the living saints shall all be changed. It is written, “The sea shall give up the dead which are in it, and death and hell shall give up the dead that are in them.”—“The dead in Christ shall rise first. Those which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air.”—“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.” (Rev. xx. 13; 1 Thess. iv. 16, 17; 1 Cor. xv. 51, 52.) And then, when every member of Christ is found, and not one left behind, when soul and body, those old companions, are once more reunited, then shall be the grand “gathering together.”

The *object* of this “gathering together” is as clearly revealed in Scripture as its manner. It is partly for the final reward of Christ’s people: that their complete justification from all guilt may be declared to all creation; that they may receive the “crown of glory which fadeth not away,” and the “kingdom prepared before the foundation of the world;” that they may be admitted publicly into the joy of their Lord.—It is partly for the safety of Christ’s people, that, like Noah in the ark and Lot in Zoar, they may be hid and covered before the storm of God’s judgment comes down on the wicked; that when the last plagues are falling on the enemies of the Lord, they may be untouched, as Rahab’s family in the fall of Jericho, and unscathed as the three children in the midst of the fire. The saints have no cause to fear the day of gathering, however fearful the signs that may accompany it. Before the final crash of all things begins, they shall be hidden in the secret place of the Most High. The grand gathering is for their safety and their reward. “Fear not ye,” shall the angel-reapers say, “for ye seek Jesus which was crucified.”—“Come, my people,” shall their Master say: “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.” (Matt. xxviii. 5; Isa. xxvi. 20.)

(a) This gathering will be a *great* one. All children of God who have ever lived, from Abel the first saint down to the last born in the day that our Lord comes,—all of every age, and nation, and church, and people, and tongue,—all shall be assembled together. Not one shall be overlooked or forgotten. The weakest and feeblest shall not be left behind. Now, when “scattered,” true Christians seem a little flock; then, when “gathered,” they shall be found a multitude which no man can number.

(b) This gathering will be a *wonderful* one. The saints from distant lands, who never saw each other in the flesh, and could not understand each other’s speech if they met, shall all be brought together in one harmonious company. The dwellers in Australia shall find they are as near heaven, and as soon there, as the dwellers in England. The believers who died five thousand years ago, and whose bones are mere dust, shall find their bodies raised and renewed as quickly as those who are alive when the trumpet sounds. Above all, miracles of grace will be revealed. We shall see some in heaven who we never expected would have been

saved at all. The confusion of tongues shall at length be reversed, and done away. The assembled multitude will cry with one heart and in one language, "What hath God wrought!" (Num. xxiii. 23.)

(c) This gathering shall be a *humbling* one. It shall make an end of bigotry and narrow-mindedness forever. The Christians of one denomination shall find themselves side by side with those of another denomination. If they would not tolerate them on earth, they will be obliged to tolerate them in heaven. Churchmen and Dissenters, who will neither pray together nor worship together now, will discover to their shame that they must praise together hereafter to all eternity. The very people who will not receive us at their ordinances now, and keep us back from their Table, will be obliged to acknowledge us before our Master's face, and to let us sit down by their side. Never will the world have seen such a complete overthrow of sectarianism, party spirit, unbrotherliness, religious jealousy, and religious pride. At last we shall all be completely "clothed with humility." (1 Pet. v. 5.)

This mighty, wonderful "gathering together," is the gathering which ought to be often in men's thoughts. It deserves consideration: it demands attention. Gatherings of other kinds are incessantly occupying our minds, political gatherings, scientific gatherings, gatherings for pleasure, gatherings for gain. But the hour comes, and will soon be here, when gatherings of this kind will be completely forgotten. One thought alone will swallow up men's minds: that thought will be, "Shall I be gathered with Christ's people into a place of safety and honour, or be left behind to everlasting woe?" LET US TAKE CARE THAT WE ARE NOT LEFT BEHIND.

II. *Why is this "gathering together" of true Christians a thing to be desired?* Let us try to get an answer to that question.

St. Paul evidently thought that the gathering at the last day was a cheering object which Christians ought to keep before their eyes. He classes it with that second coming of our Lord, which he says elsewhere believers love and long for. He exalts it in the distant horizon as one of those "good things to come," which should animate the faith of every pilgrim in the narrow way. Not only, he seems to say, will each servant of God have rest, and a kingdom, and a crown; he will have besides a happy "gathering together." Now, where is the peculiar blessedness of this gathering? Why is it a thing that we ought to look forward to with joy, and expect with pleasure? Let us see.

(1) For one thing, the "gathering together" of all true Christians will be a *state of things totally unlike their present condition*.. To be scattered, and not gathered, seems the rule of man's existence now. Of

all the millions who are annually born into the world, how few continue together till they die! Children who draw their first breath under the same roof, and play by the same fireside, are sure to be separated as they grow up, and to draw their last breath far distant from one another.—The same law applies to the people of God. They are spread abroad like salt, one in one place and one in another, and never allowed to continue long side by side. It is doubtless good for the world that it is so. A town would be a very dark place at night if all the lighted candles were crowded together into one room.—But, good as it is for the world, it is no small trial to believers. Many a day they feel desolate and alone; many a day they long for a little more communion with their brethren, and a little more companionship with those who love the Lord! Well, they may look forward with hope and comfort. The hour is coming when they shall have no lack of companions. Let them lift up their heads and rejoice. There will be a “gathering together” by and by.

(2) For another thing, the gathering together of all true Christians will be an *assembly entirely of one mind*. There are no such assemblies now. Mixture, hypocrisy, and false profession, creep in everywhere. Wherever there is wheat there are sure to be tares. Wherever there are good fish there are sure to be bad. Wherever there are wise virgins there are sure to be foolish. There is no such thing as a perfect Church now. There is a Judas Iscariot at every communion table, and a Demas in every Apostolic company; and wherever the “sons of God” come together Satan is sure to appear among them. (Job i. 6.) But all this shall come to an end one day. Our Lord shall at length present to the Father a perfect Church, “having neither spot nor wrinkle, nor any such thing.” (Eph. v. 27.) How glorious such a Church will be! To meet with half-a-dozen believers together now is a rare event in a Christian’s year, and one that cheers him like a sunshiny day in winter; it makes him feel his heart burn within him, as the disciples felt on the way to Emmaus. But how much more joyful will it be to meet a “multitude that no man can number!” To find too, that all we meet are at last of one opinion and one judgment, and see eye to eye,—to discover that all our miserable controversies are buried for ever, and that Calvinists no longer hate Arminians, nor Arminians Calvinists, Churchmen no longer quarrel with Dissenters, nor Dissenters with Churchmen,—to join a company of Christians in which there is neither jarring, squabbling, nor discord,—every man’s graces fully developed, and every man’s besetting sins dropped off like beech-leaves in spring,—all this will be happiness indeed! No wonder that St. Paul bids us look forward.

(3) For another thing, the gathering together of true Christians will be *a meeting at which none shall be absent*. The weakest lamb shall not be

left behind in the wilderness: the youngest babe that ever drew breath shall not be overlooked or forgotten. We shall once more see our beloved friends and relatives who fell asleep in Christ, and left us in sorrow and tears, better, brighter, more beautiful, more pleasant than ever we found them on earth. We shall hold communion with all the saints of God who have fought the good fight before us, from the beginning of the world to the end. Patriarchs and Prophets, Apostles and Fathers, Martyrs and Missionaries, Reformers and Puritans, all the host of God's elect shall be there. If to read their words and works has been pleasant, how much better shall it be to see them! If to hear of them, and be stirred by their example, has been useful, how much more delightful to talk with them, and ask them questions! To sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and hear how they kept the faith without any Bible,—to converse with Moses, and Samuel, and David, and Isaiah, and Daniel, and hear how they could believe in a Christ yet to come, to converse with Peter, and Paul, and Lazarus, and Mary, and Martha, and listen to their wondrous tale of what their Master did for them,—all this will be sweet indeed! No wonder that St. Paul bids us look forward.

(4) In the last place, the gathering of all true Christians shall be *a meeting without a parting*. There are no such meetings now. We seem to live in an endless hurry, and can hardly sit down and take breath before we are off again. "Good-bye" treads on the heels of "How do you do?" The cares of this world, the necessary duties of life, the demands of our families, the work of our various stations and callings,—all these things appear to eat up our days, and to make it impossible to have long quiet times of communion with God's people. But, blessed be God, it shall not always be so. The hour cometh, and shall soon be here, when "good-bye" and "farewell" shall be words that are laid aside and buried for ever. When we meet in a world where the former things have passed away, where there is no more sin and no more sorrow,—no more poverty and no more money,—no more work of body or work of brains,—no more need of anxiety for families,—no more sickness, no more pain, no more old age, no more death, no more change,—when we meet in that endless state of being, calm, and restful, and unhurried,—who can tell what the blessedness of the change will be? I cannot wonder that St. Paul bids us look up and look forward.

I lay these things before all who read this paper, and ask their serious attention to them. If I know anything of a Christian's experience, I am sure they contain food for reflection. This, at least, I say confidently: the man who sees nothing much in the second coming of Christ and the public "gathering" of Christ's people,—nothing happy, nothing joyful,

nothing pleasant, nothing desirable,—such a man may well doubt whether he himself is a true Christian and has got any grace at all.

(1) *I ask you a plain question.* Do not turn away from it and refuse to look it in the face. Shall you be gathered by the angels into God's home when the Lord returns, or shall you be left behind?

One thing, at any rate, is very certain. There will only be two parties of mankind at the last great day: those who are on the right hand of Christ, and those who are on the left;—those who are counted righteous, and those who are wicked;—those who are safe in the ark, and those who are outside;—those who are gathered like wheat into God's barn, and those who are left behind like tares to be burned. Now, what will your portion be?

Perhaps you do not know yet. You cannot say. You are not sure. You hope the best. You trust it will be all right at last: but you won't undertake to give an opinion. Well! I only hope you will never rest till you do know. The Bible will tell you plainly who are they that will be gathered. Your own heart, if you deal honestly, will tell you whether you are one of the number. Rest not, rest not, till you know!

How men can stand the partings and separations of this life if they have no hope of anything better,—how they can bear to say “good-bye” to sons and daughters, and launch them on the troublesome waves of this world, if they have no expectation of a safe “gathering” in Christ at last,—how they can part with beloved members of their families, and let them journey forth to the other side of the globe, not knowing if they shall ever meet happily in this life or a life to come,—how all this can be, completely baffles my understanding. I can only suppose that the many never think, never consider, never look forward. Once let a man begin to think, and he will never be satisfied till he has found Christ and is safe.

(2) *I offer you a plain means of testing your own soul's condition,* if you want to know your own chance of being gathered into God's home. Ask yourself what kind of gatherings you like best here upon earth? Ask yourself whether you really love the assembling together of God's people?

How could that man enjoy the meeting of true Christians in heaven who takes no pleasure in meeting true Christians on earth? How can that heart which is wholly set on balls, and races, and feasts, and amusements, and worldly assemblies, and thinks earthly worship a weariness;—how can such a heart be in tune for the company of saints, and saints alone? The thing is impossible. It cannot be.

Never, never let it be forgotten, that our tastes on earth are a sure evidence of the state of our hearts; and the state of our hearts here is a

sure indication of our position hereafter. Heaven is a prepared place for a prepared people. He that hopes to be gathered with saints in heaven while he only loves the gathering of sinners on earth is deceiving himself. If he lives and dies in that state of mind he will find at last that he had better never have been born.

(3) If you are a true Christian, *I exhort you to be often looking forward*. Your good things are yet to come. Your redemption draweth nigh. The night is far spent. The day is at hand. Yet a little time, and He whom you love and believe on will come, and will not tarry. When He comes, He will bring His dead saints with Him and change His living ones. Look forward! There is a “gathering together” yet to come.

The morning after a shipwreck is a sorrowful time. The joy of half-drowned survivors, who have safely reached the land, is often sadly marred by the recollection of shipmates who have sunk to rise no more. There will be no such sorrow when believers gather together round the throne of the Lamb. Not one of the ship’s company shall be found absent. “Some on boards, and some on broken pieces of the ship,—all will get safe to shore at last.” (Acts xxvii. 44.) The great waters and raging waves shall swallow none of God’s elect. When the sun rises they shall be seen all safe, and “gathered together.”

Even the day after a great victory is a sorrowful time. The triumphant feelings of the conquerors are often mingled with bitter regrets for those who fell in action, and died on the field. The list of “killed, wounded, and missing,” breaks many a heart, fills many a home with mourning, and brings many a grey head sorrowing to the grave. The great Duke of Wellington often said, “there was but one thing worse than a victory, and that was a defeat.” But, thanks be to God, there will be no such sorrow in heaven! The soldiers of the great Captain of our salvation shall all answer to their names at last. The muster-roll shall be as complete after the battle as it was before. Not one believer shall be “missing” in the great “gathering together.”

Does Christmas, for instance, bring with it sorrowful feelings and painful associations? Do tears rise unbidden in your eyes when you mark the empty places round the fireside? Do grave thoughts come sweeping over your mind, even in the midst of your children’s mirth, when you recollect the dear old faces and much loved voices of some that sleep in the churchyard? Well, look up and look forward! The time is short. The world is growing old. The coming of the Lord draweth nigh. There is yet to be a meeting without parting, and a gathering without separation. Those believers whom you laid in the grave with many tears are in good keeping: you will yet see them again with joy. Look up! I say once more. Lay hold by faith on the “coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our

gathering together unto Him.” Believe it, think of it, rest on it. It is all true.

Do you feel lonely and desolate as every December comes round? Do you find few to pray with, few to praise with, few to open your heart to, few to exchange experience with? Do you learn increasingly, that heaven is becoming every year more full and earth more empty? Well, it is an old story. You are only drinking a cup which myriads have drunk before. Look up and look forward. The lonely time will soon be past and over; you will have company enough by and by. “When you wake up after your Lord’s likeness you shall be satisfied.” (Ps. xvii. 15.) Yet a little while and you shall see a congregation that shall never break up, and a sabbath that shall never end. “The coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together unto Him,” shall make amends for all.