EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS

ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,
*And Many Explanatory Notes*.

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LUKE X. 17–20.

17 And the seventy returned again with joy, saying, Lord, even the dev­ils are subject unto us through thy name.

18 And he said unto them, I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven.

19 Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you.

20 Notwithstanding in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice, because your names are written in heaven.

WE learn, from this passage, *how ready Christians are to be puffed up with success.* It is written, that the seventy returned from their first mission with joy, “saying, Lord, even the devils are subject unto us through thy name.” There was much false fire in that joy. There was evidently self-satisfaction in that report of achievements. The whole tenor of the passage leads us to this conclusion. The remarkable expression which our Lord uses about Satan’s fall from heaven, was most probably meant to be a caution. He read the hearts of the young and inex­perienced soldiers before Him. He saw how much they were lifted up by their first victory. He wisely checks them in their undue exultation. He warns them against pride.

The lesson is one which all who work for Christ should mark and remember. Success is what all faithful labourers in the Gospel field desire. The minister at home and the missionary abroad, the district visitor and the city missionary, the tract distributor and the Sunday-school teacher, all alike long for success. All long to see Satan’s kingdom pulled down, and souls converted to God. We cannot wonder. The desire is right and good. Let it, however, never be forgotten, that the time of success is a time of danger to the Christian’s soul. The very hearts that are depressed when all things seem against them, are often unduly exalted in the day of prosperity. Few men are like Samson, and can kill a lion without telling others of it. (Judges xiv. 6.) No wonder that St. Paul says of a bishop, that he ought not to be “a novice, lest being lifted up with pride, he fall into the condemnation of the devil.” (1 Tim. iii. 6.) Most of Christ’s labourers probably have as much success as their souls can bear.

Let us pray much for humility, and especially for humility in our days of peace and success. When everything around us seems to prosper, and all our plans work well,—when family trials and sicknesses are kept from us, and the course of our worldly affairs runs smooth,—when our daily crosses are light, and all within and without like a morning without clouds,—then, then is the time when our souls are in danger! Then is the time when we have need to be doubly watchful over our own hearts. Then is the time when seeds of evil are sown within us by the devil, which may one day astound us by their growth and strength. There are few Christians who can carry a full cup with a steady hand. There are few whose souls prosper in their days of uninterrupted success. We are all inclined to sacrifice to our net, and burn incense to our own drag. (Hab. i. 16.) We are ready to think that our own might and our own wisdom have procured us the victory. The caution of the passage before us ought never to be forgotten. In the midst of our triumphs, let us cry earnestly, “Lord, clothe us with humility.”

We learn, for another thing, from these verses, that *gifts, and power of working miracles, are very inferior to grace.* Itis written that our Lord said to the seventy disciples, “In this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven.” It was doubtless an honour and a privilege to be allowed to cast out devils. The disciples were right to be thankful. But it was a far higher privilege to be converted and pardoned men, and to have their names written in the register of saved souls.

The distinction here drawn between grace and gifts is one of deep importance, and often and sadly overlooked in the present day. Gifts, such as mental vigour, vast memory, striking eloquence, ability in argument, power in reasoning, are often unduly valued by those who possess them, and unduly admired by those who possess them not. These things ought not so to be. Men forget that gifts without grace save no one’s soul, and are the characteristic of Satan himself. Grace, on the contrary, is an everlasting inheritance, and, lowly and despised as its possessor may be, will land him safe in glory. He that has gifts without grace is dead in sins,however splendid his gifts may be. But he that has grace without gifts is alive to God, however unlearned and ignorant he may appear to man. And “a living dog is better than a dead lion.” (Eccles. ix. 4.)

Let the religion which we aim to possess be a religion in which grace is the main thing. Let it not content us to be able to speak eloquently, or preach powerfully, or reason ably, or argue cleverly, or profess loudly, or talk fluently. Let it not satisfy us to know the whole system of Christian doctrines, and to have texts and words at our command. These things are all well in their way. They are not to be undervalued. They have their use. But these things are not the grace of God, and they will not deliver us from hell. Let us never rest until we have the witness of the Spirit within us that we are “washed, and sancti­fied, and justified, in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of God.” (1 Cor. vi. 11.) Let us seek to know that “our names are written in heaven,” and that we are really one with Christ and Christ in us. Let us strive to be “epistles of Christ known and read of all men,” and to show by our meekness, and charity, and faith, and spiritual-mindedness, that we are the children of God. This is true religion. These are the real marks of saving Christianity. Without such marks, a man may have abundance of gifts and turn out nothing better than a fol­lower of Judas Iscariot, the false apostle, and go at last to hell. With such marks, a man may be like Lazarus, poor and despised upon earth, and have no gifts at all. But his name is written in heaven, and Christ shall own him as one of His people at the last day.

NOTES. LUKE X. 17–20.

17*.—*[*The seventy returned again.*]How long the mission of the seventy lasted we do not know. It may be safely conjectured that it was of short duration.

18.—[*I* *beheld Satan as lightning fall, &c.*]There are two mean­ings assigned by Commentators to these remarkable words.

Some think that our Lord is speaking of the effect produced on Satan’s kingdom by the preaching of the seventy disciples:—“I saw in spirit, or with my mind’s eye, Satan’s power declining, and himself rapidly losing his dominion over men in conse­quence of your ministry.” This is the view held by many modern Commentators, but it does not seem satisfactory. The strong language used by our Lord will hardly admit of being explained and fined down by such an interpretation as this.

Others think that our Lord is speaking of what He had witnessed when Satan and his angels fell from heaven, and were cast down into hell, because they kept not their first estate.—“There was a time when I saw Satan, great and mighty as he was, fall suddenly from his high position, and become a lost spirit.” This last interpretation appears to me far the more satisfactory of the two, and is that which is held by Cyprian, Ambrose, Chrysostom, Jerome, Gregory, Bede, Theo­phylact, Bernard, Erasmus, Pellican, Doddridge, Gill, and Alford.

The application of our Lord’s words, assuming that He refers to Satan’s original fall, is differently explained.

Theophylact, Heinsius, and Gill, consider that our Lord’s meaning was; “Marvel not that the devils are subject unto you, for I beheld their prince fall, and it is no wonder that his servants now fall before you.”

Cyprian, Jerome, Gregory, Bede, Erasmus, and Pellican, con­sider that our Lord’s intention was to warn the disciples against vain glory; “Be not puffed up because the devils are subject to you. Remember that Satan fell through pride, as I myself saw.”

I believe this last view to be the true one, and I think it is confirmed by St. Paul’s warning to Timothy, when he bids him not make a novice a Bishop, lest “being lifted up with pride, he fall into the condemnation of the devil.” (1 Tim. iii. 8.)

19*.—*[*Power to tread on serpents, (&c.*]It may be doubted, whether these words are to be interpreted figuratively or literally. In favour of the literal view, may be placed our Lord’s promise in Mark xvi. 18, and the fact that St. Paul took up a viper and was unhurt. (Acts xxviii. 5.) In favour of the figurative view, may be placed the fact, that Satan is called the “old serpent,”that his agents partake of his nature, and that there is a promise in Genesis iii. 15, that “the seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent’s head,” in which all Christ’s members are interested. (See also Psalm xli. 14.)

[*Scorpion.*]A scorpion is a poisonous insect about four inches long, with a sting in its tail, found in tropical climates. Its sting is very dangerous. When coiled up it has some resemblance to an egg. (See Luke xi. 12.)

[*The Enemy.*]This means Satan, the great enemy of God and man.

20.—[*Your names are written in heaven.*]This means that “you are registered in heaven as citizens of God’s kingdom, and persons who are chosen to salvation through Christ, pardoned, accepted, and saved.” It is the same as St. Paul’s saying “whose names are in the book of life.” (Phil. iv. 3.) See also Dan. xii. 1; and Rev. xiii. 8; xx. 12. We find the contrary expression, “written in the earth,” in Jerem. xvii. 13.