EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS

ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE.

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MATTHEW XVII. 1–13.

1 And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart.

2 And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light.

3 And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with him.

4 Then answered Peter, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias.

5 While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him.

6 And when the disciples heard *it,* they fell on their face, and were sore afraid.

7 And Jesus came and touched them, and said, Arise, and be not afraid.

8 And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no man, save Jesus only.

9 And as they came down from the mountain, Jesus charged them, saying, Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead.

10 And his disciples asked him, saying, Why then say the scribes that Elias must first come?

11 And Jesus answered and said unto them, Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things.

12 But I say unto you, That Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them.

13 Then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist.

THESEverses contain one of the most remarkable events in our Lord’s earthly ministry,—the event commonly called the transfiguration. The order in which it is recorded is beautiful and instructive. The latter part of the last chapter showed us the cross. Here we are graciously allowed to see something of the coming reward. The hearts which have just been saddened by a plain statement of Christ’s sufferings, are at once gladdened by a vision of Christ’s glory. Let us mark this. We often lose much by not tracing the connection between chapter and chapter in the Word of God.

There are some mysterious things, no doubt, in the vision here described. It must needs be so. We are yet in the body: our senses are conversant with gross and material things; our ideas and perceptions about glorified bodies and dead saints must necessarily be vague and imperfect. Let us content ourselves with endeavouring to mark out the practical lessons which the transfiguration is meant to teach us.

In the first place, we have in these verses a *striking pattern of the glory in which Christ and His people will appear when He comes the second time.*

There can be little question that this was one main object of this wonderful vision. It was meant to encourage the disciples, by giving them a glimpse of good things yet to come. That “face shining as the sun, ” and that “raiment white as the light,” were intended to give the disciples some idea of the majesty in which Jesus will appear to the world, when He comes the second time, and all His saints with Him. The corner of the veil was lifted up, to show them their Master’s true dignity. They were taught that if He did not yet appear to the world in the guise of a King, it was only because the time for putting on His royal apparel was not yet come. It is impossible to draw any other conclusion from St. Peter’s language, when writing on the subject. He says, with distinct reference to the transfiguration, “We were eye witnesses of His majesty.” (2 Peter i. 16.)

It is good for us to have the coming glory of Christ and His people deeply impressed on our minds. We are sadly apt to forget it. There are few visible indications of it in the world: “We see not yet all things put under” our Lord’s feet. (Heb. ii. 8.) Sin, unbelief, and superstition abound. Thousands are practically saying, “We will not have this man to reign over us.”—It does not yet appear what His people shall be: their crosses, their tribulations, their weaknesses, their conflicts, are all manifest enough, but there are few signs of their future reward. Let us beware of giving way to doubts in this matter. Let us silence such doubts by reading over the history of the transfiguration. There is laid up for Jesus, and all that believe on Him, such glory as the heart of man never conceived. It is not only promised, but part of it has actually been seen by three competent witnesses. One of them says, “We beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father.” (John i. 14.) Surely that which has been seen may well be believed.

In the second place, we have in these verses, *unanswerable proof of the resurrection of the body, and the life after death.* We are told that Moses and Elijah appeared visibly in glory with Christ. They were seen in a bodily form. They were heard talking with our Lord. Fourteen hundred and eighty years had rolled round, since Moses died and was buried; more than nine hundred years had passed away, since Elijah “went up by a whirlwind into heaven:” yet here they are seen alive by Peter, James, and John!

Let us lay firm hold on this part of the vision. It deserves close attention. We must all feel, if we ever think at all, that the state of the dead is a wonderful and mysterious subject. One after another we bury them out of our sight: we lay them in their narrow beds, and see them no more, and their bodies become dust. But will they really live again? Shall we really see them anymore? Will the grave really give back the dead at the last day? These are questions that will occasionally come across the minds of some, in spite of all the plainest statements in the Word of God.

Now we have in the transfiguration the clearest evidence that the dead will rise again. We find two men appearing on earth, in their bodies, who had long been separate from the land of the living,—and in them we have a pledge of the resurrection of all. All that have ever lived upon earth will again be called to life, and render up their account: not one will be found missing. There is no such thing as annihilation. All that have ever fallen asleep in Christ will be found in safe keeping,**—**patriarchs, prophets, apostles, martyrs,—down to the humblest servant of God in our own day. “Though unseen to us they all live to God.” “He is not a God of the dead, but of the living.” (Luke xx. 38.) Their spirits live as surely as we live ourselves, and will appear hereafter in glorified bodies, as surely as Moses and Elijah in the mount. These are indeed solemn thoughts! There is a resurrection, and men like Felix may well tremble. There is a resurrection, and men like Paul may well rejoice.

In the last place, we have in these verses *a remarkable testimony to Christ’s infinite superiority over all that are born of woman.*

This is a point which is brought out strongly by the voice from heaven, which the disciples heard. Peter, bewildered by the heavenly vision, and not knowing what to say, proposed to build three tabernacles, one for Christ, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. He seemed, in fact, to place the law-giver and the prophet side by side with his divine Master, as if all three were equal. At once, we are told, the proposal was rebuked in a marked manner. —A cloud covered Moses and Elijah, and they were no more seen. A voice at the same time came forth from the cloud, repeating the solemn words, made use of at our Lord’s baptism, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased: hear ye Him.” That voice was meant to teach Peter that there was One there far greater than Moses or Elijah. Moses was a faithful servant of God; Elijah was a bold witness for the truth: but Christ was far above either one or the other. He was the Saviour to whom law and prophets were continually pointing. He was the true Prophet, whom all were commanded to hear. (Deut. xviii. 15.) Moses and Elijah were great men in their day, but Peter and his companions were to remember that in nature, dignity, and office, they were far below Christ.—He was the true sun: they were the stars depending daily on His light. He was the root: they were the branches. He was the Master: they were the servants. Their goodness was all derived: His was original and His own.—Let them honour Moses and the prophets, as holy men, but if they would he saved they must take Christ alone for their Master, and glory only in Him. “Hear ye Him.”

Let us see, in these words, a striking lesson to the whole Church of Christ. There is a constant tendency in human nature to “hear man.” Bishops, priests, deacons, popes, cardinals, councils, presbyterian preachers, and independent ministers, are continually exalted to a place which God never intended them to fill, and made practically to usurp the honour of Christ. Against this tendency let us all watch, and be on our guard. Let these solemn words of the vision ever ring in our ears: “Hear ye Christ.”

The best of men are only men at their very best. Patriarchs, prophets, and apostles,—martyrs, fathers, reformers, puritans,—all, all are sinners, who need a Saviour: holy, useful, honourable in their place,—but sinners after all. They must never be allowed to stand between us and Christ. He alone is “the Son, in whom the Father is well pleased;” He alone is sealed and appointed to give the bread of life; He alone has the keys in His hands: “God over all, blessed for ever.” (Rom. ix. 5.) Let us take heed that we hear His voice, and follow Him; let us value all religious teaching just in proportion as it leads us to Jesus. The sum and substance of saving religion is to “hear Christ.”

MATTHEW XVII. 14–21.

14 And when they were come to the multitude, there came to him a *certain* man, kneeling down to him, and saying,

15 Lord have mercy on my son: for he is lunatic, and sore vexed: for ofttimes he falleth into the fire, and oft into the water.

16 And I brought him to thy disciples, and they could not cure him.

17 Then Jesus answered and said, O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you? bring him hither to me.

18 And Jesus rebuked the devil; and he departed out of him: and the child was cured from that very hour.

19 Then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, Why could not we cast him out?

20 And Jesus said unto them, Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.

21 Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.

WEread in this passage another ofour Lord’s great miracles. He heals a young man lunatic and possessed with a devil.

The first thing we see in these verses is *a lively emblem of the awful influence sometimes exercised by Satan over the young.* We are told of a certain man’s son, who was “lunatic and sore vexed.” We are told of the evil spirit pressing him on to the destruction of body and soul: “Oft-times he falleth into the fire, and oft into the water.” It was one of those cases of Satanic possession, which, however common in our Lord’s times, in our own day is rarely seen; but we can easily imagine that, when they did occur, they must have been peculiarly distressing to the relations of the afflicted. It is painful enough to see the bodies of those we love racked by disease: how much more painful must it have been to see body and mind completely under the influence of the devil! “Out of hell,” says Bishop Hall, “there could not be greater misery.”

But we must not forget that there are many instances of Satan’s spiritual dominion over young people, which are quite as painful, in their way, as the case described in this passage. There are thousands of young men who seem to have wholly given themselves up to Satan’s temptations, and to be led “captive at his will.” (2 Tim. ii. 26.) They cast off all fear of God, and all respect for His commandments. They serve divers lusts and pleasures. They run wildly into every excess of riot. They refuse to listen to the advice of parents, teachers, or ministers. They fling aside all regard for health, character, or worldly respectability. They do all that lies in their power to ruin themselves, body and soul, for time and eternity. They are willing bond-slaves of Satan.—Who has not seen such young men? They are to be seen in town and in country; they are to be found among rich and among poor. Surely such young men give mournful proof that although Satan now-a-days seldom has possession of man’s body, he still exercises a fearful dominion over some men’s souls.

Yet even about such young men as these, be it remembered, we must never despair. We must call to mind the almighty power of our Lord Jesus Christ. Bad as this boy’s case was, of whom we read in these verses, he was “cured from the very hour” that he was brought to Christ! Parents, and teachers, and ministers should go on praying for young men, even at their worst. Hard as their hearts seem now, they may yet be softened: desperate as their wickedness now appears, they may yet be healed. They may yet repent, and be converted, like John Newton, and their last state prove better than their first. Who can tell? Let it be a settled principle with us, when we read our Lord’s miracles, never to despair of the conversion of any soul.

In the second place, we see in these verses *a striking example of the weakening effect of unbelief.* The disciples anxiously inquired of our Lord, when they saw the devil yielding to His power, “Why could not we cast him out?” They received an answer full of the deepest instruction: “Because of your unbelief.” Would they know the secret of their own sad failure in the hour of need? It was want of faith.

Let us ponder this point well, and learn wisdom. Faith is the key to success in the Christian warfare: unbelief is the sure road to defeat. Once let our faith languish and decay, and all our graces will languish with it. Courage, patience, long-suffering, and hope, will soon wither and dwindle away, Faith is the root on which they all depend. The same Israelites who at one time went through the Red Sea in triumph, at another time shrunk from danger like cowards, when they reached the borders of the promised land. Their God was the same who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. Their leader was that same Moses who had wrought so many wonders before their eyes: but their faith was not the same. They gave way to shameful doubts of God’s love and power. “They could not enter in because of unbelief.” (Heb. iii. 19.)

In the last place, we see in these verses, *that Satan’s kingdom is not to be pulled down without diligence and pains.* This seems to be the lesson of the verse which concludes the passage we are now considering: “This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.” A gentle rebuke to the disciples appears to be implied in the words. Perhaps they had been too much lifted up by past successes; perhaps they had been less careful in the use of means in their Master’s absence, than they were under their Master’s eye. At any rate they receive a plain hint from our Lord, that the warfare against Satan must never be lightly carried on. They are warned that no victories are to be won easily over the prince of this world. Without fervent prayer, and diligent self-mortification, they would often meet with failure and defeat.

The lesson here laid down is one of deep importance. “I would,” says Bullinger, “that this part of the Gospel pleased us as much as those parts which concede liberty.” We are all apt to contract a habit of doing religious acts in a thoughtless, perfunctory way. Like Israel, puffed up with the fall of Jericho, we are ready to say to ourselves, “The men of Ai are but few” (Josh. vii. 3); “there is no need to put forth all our strength.” Like Israel, we often learn by bitter experience, that spiritual battles are not to be won without hard fighting. The ark of the Lord must never be handled irreverently: God’s work must never be carelessly done.

May we all bear in mind our Lord’s words to His disciples, and make a practical use of them. In the pulpit and on the platform, in the Sunday school and in the district, in our use of family prayers and in reading our own Bibles, let us diligently watch our own spirit. Whatever we do, let us “do it with our might.” (Eccles. ix. 10.) It is a fatal mistake to underrate our foes. Greater is He that is for us than he that is against us; but, for all that, he that is against us is not to be despised. He is the “prince of this world:” he is a “strong man” armed, keeping his house, who will not “go out,” and part with his goods without a struggle. “We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers.” (Ephes. vi. 12.) We have need to take the whole armour of God, and not only to take it, but to use it too. We may be very sure that those who win most victories over the world, the flesh, and the devil, are those who pray most in private, and “keep under their bodies, and bring them into subjection.” (1 Cor. ix. 27.)

MATTHEW XVII. 22–27.

22 And while they abode in Galilee, Jesus said unto them, The Son of man shall be betrayed into the hands of men:

23 And they shall kill him, and the third day he shall be raised again. And they were exceeding sorry.

24 And when they were come to Capernaum, they that received tribute *money* came to Peter, and said, Doth not your master pay tribute?

25 He saith, Yes. And when he was come into the house, Jesus prevented him, saying, What thinkest thou, Simon? of whom do the kings of the earth take custom or tribute? of their own children, or of strangers?

26 Peter saith unto him, Of strangers. Jesus saith unto him, Then are the children free.

27 Notwithstanding, lest we should offend them, go thou to the sea, and cast an hook, and take up the fish that first cometh up; and when thou hast opened his mouth, thou shalt find a piece of money: that take, and give unto them for me and thee.

THESEverses contain a circumstance in our Lord’s history which is not recorded by any of the Evangelists excepting St. Matthew. A remarkable miracle is worked in order to provide payment of the tribute-money required for the service of the temple. There are three striking points in the narrative, which deserve attentive observation.

Let us observe, in the first place, *our Lord’s perfect knowledge of everything that is said and done in this world.* We are told that those who “received tribute-money came to Peter, and said, Doth not your Master pay tribute? He saith, Yes.” It is evident that our Lord was not present, when the question was asked and the answer given; and yet no sooner did Peter come into the house than our Lord asked him, “What thinkest thou, Simon? of whom do the kings of the earth take custom or tribute? ” He showed that He was as well acquainted with the conversation as if He had been listening or standing by.

There is something unspeakably solemn in the thought that the Lord Jesus knows all things. There is an eye that sees all our daily conduct; there is an ear that hears all our daily words. All things are naked and opened unto the eyes of Him with whom we have to do. Concealment is impossible: hypocrisy is useless. We may deceive ministers; we may impose upon our relations and neighbours: but the Lord sees us through and through. We cannot deceive Christ.

We ought to endeavour to make practical use of this truth. We should strive to live as in the Lord’s sight, and, like Abraham, to “walk before Him.” (Gen. xvii. 1.) Let it be our daily aim to say nothing we would not like Christ to hear, and to do nothing we would not like Christ to see. Let us measure every difficult question as to right and wrong by one simple test: “How would I behave if Jesus was standing by my side?” Such a standard is not extravagant and absurd. It is a standard that interferes with no duty or relation of life: it interferes with nothing but sin. Happy is he that tries to realize his Lord’s presence, and to do all and say all as unto Christ.

Let us observe, in the next place, *our Lord’s almighty power over all creation.* He makes a fish his pay-master: He makes a dumb creature bring the tribute-money to meet the collector’s demand. Well says Jerome, “I know not which to admire most here, our Lord’s foreknowledge or His greatness.”

We see here a literal fulfilment of the Psalmist’s words: “Thou madest Him to have dominion over the works of Thy hands*;* Thou hast put all things under His feet:―the fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea, and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas.” (Psalm viii. 6-8.)

Here is one among many proofs of the majesty and greatness of our Lord Jesus Christ. He only who first created could at His will command the obedience of all His creatures. “By Him were all things created.—By Him all things consist. ” (Col. i. 16-18.) The believer who goes forth to do Christ’s work among the heathen may safely commit himself to his Master’s keeping. He serves One who has all power, even over the beasts of the earth. How wonderful the thought, that such an Almighty Lord should condescend to be crucified for our salvation! How comfortable the thought, that when He comes again the second time He will gloriously manifest His power over all created things to the whole world: “the wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the bullock: and dust shall be the serpent’s meat.” (Isaiah lxv. 25.)

In the last place, let us observe in these verses, *our Lord’s willingness to make concessions, rather than give offence.* He might justly have claimed exemption from the payment of this tribute-money. He, who was Son of God, might fairly have been excused from paying for the maintenance of His Father’s house. He who was “greater than the temple,” might have shown good cause for declining to contribute to the support of the temple: but our Lord does not do so. He claims no exemption. He desires Peter to pay the money demanded. At the same time He declares His reasons: it was to be done, “lest we should offend them.” “A miracle is worked,” says Bishop Hall, “rather than offend even a tax-collector.”

Our Lord’s example in this case deserves attention of all who profess and call themselves Christians. There is deep wisdom in those five words, “lest we should offend them.” They teach us plainly that there are matters in which Christ’s people ought to sink their own opinions, and submit to requirements which they may not thoroughly approve, rather than give offence and “hinder the Gospel of Christ.” God’s rights undoubtedly we ought never to give up; but we may sometimes safely give up our own. It may sound very fine and seem very heroic to be always standing out tenaciously for our *rights!* But it may well be doubted, with such a passage as this, whether such tenacity is always wise, and shows the mind of Christ. There are occasions when it shows more grace in a Christian to submit than to resist.

Let us remember this passage as *citizens and subjects.* We may not like all the political measures of our rulers; we may disapprove of some of the taxes they impose: but the grand question after all is, Will it do any good to the cause of religion to resist the powers that be? Are their measures really injuring our souls? If not, let us hold our peace, “lest we should offend them.” “A Christian,” says Bullinger, “never ought to disturb the public peace for things of mere temporary importance.”

Let us remember this passage as *members of a Church.* “We may not like every jot and tittle of the forms and ceremonies used in our communion; we may not think that those who rule us in spiritual matters are always wise: but after all, are the points on which we are dissatisfied really of vital importance? Is any great truth of the Gospel at stake? If not, let us be quiet, “lest we should offend them.”

Let us remember this passage as *members of society.* There may be usages and customs in the circle where our lot is cast, which to us, as Christians, are tiresome, useless, and unprofitable: but are they matters of principle? Do they injure our souls? Will it do any good to the cause of religion if we refuse to comply with them? If not, let us patiently submit, “lest we should offend them.”

Well would it be for the Church and the world if these five words of our Lord had been more studied, pondered, and used! Who can tell the damage that has been done to the cause of the Gospel by morbid scrupulosity, and conscientiousness, falsely so called! May we all remember the example of the great apostle of the Gentiles: “We suffer all things, lest we should hinder the Gospel of Christ.” (1 Cor. ix. 12.)