

COMING EVENTS AND PRESENT DUTIES.

BEING PLAIN PAPERS
ON PROPHECY

BY

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PREFACE TO SECOND EDITION.

IN sending forth a new and enlarged edition of this volume, I have nothing to add or withdraw.

I see nothing in the state of the Church or the world to make me alter the opinions on prophecy which I expressed twelve years ago.

I can only say, that I am more and more convinced, as I grow older, that to keep our eyes steadily fixed on the second coming of Christ is one great secret of Christian peace.

If this volume helps any one reader to cultivate the habit of looking at Christ's coming again, as well as Christ crucified, and Christ interceding, I shall be satisfied.

J. C. RYLE.

*Stradbroke Vicarage,
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PREFACE.

THE volume now in the reader's hands requires a few introductory words of explanation.

It contains little that is entirely new. It consists of eight sermons, delivered on public occasions, at various intervals during my ministry, and afterwards published in the form of tracts. Of these sermons, one or two have perhaps obtained a greater circulation than they deserved, while one or two, in my humble judgment of more real worth, have received comparatively little notice. They are now brought together in their present form, for the convenience of those who wish to have a manual of my views of prophecy, in a compact state.

At the very outset I warn the reader of these pages that he will find here nothing deep or abstruse. I have purposely avoided everything that can be called speculative or conjectural. I have strictly confined myself to a few great prophetic principles, which appear to me written as it were with a sunbeam. I have not attempted to expound such portions of God's Word as Ezekiel's temple, or the symbolical visions of Revelation. I have not ventured to fix any dates. I have not tried to settle the precise order or manner in which predictions of things to come are to be fulfilled. There is nothing I dislike so much in prophetic inquiry as dogmatism or positiveness. Much of the discredit which has fallen on prophetic study has arisen from the fact that many students instead of expounding prophecy have turned prophets themselves.

If anyone asks me what my prophetic opinions are, I am quite ready to give

him an answer. Cautious and doubtful as I feel on some points, there are certain great principles about which I have fully made up my mind. I have held by them firmly for many years, and have never had my opinion shaken about them. I have lived in the belief of them for more than a third of a century, and in the belief of them I hope to die. The older I grow, the more do I feel convinced of their truth, and the more satisfied am I that no other principles can explain the state of the Church and the world.

One thing only I wish to premise, before making my statement. The reader must distinctly understand that I do not put forth my prophetic views as articles of faith, but only as my private opinions. I do not say that nobody can be saved who does not agree with me about prophecy. I am not infallible. I am very sensible that holier and better men than myself do not see these subjects with my eyes, and think me utterly mistaken. I condemn nobody. I judge nobody. I only ask liberty to hold and state distinctly my own views. The day will decide who is right. It is the new heart, and faith in Christ's blood, which are absolutely necessary to salvation. The man who knows these two things experimentally may be wrong about prophecy, but he will not miss heaven.

The following, then, are the chief articles of my prophetic creed:—

I. I believe that the world will never be completely converted to Christianity by any existing agency, before the end comes. In spite of all that can be done by ministers, churches, schools, and missions, the wheat and the tares will grow together until the harvest; and when the end comes, it will find the earth in much the same state that it was when the flood came in the days of Noah. (Matt. xiii. 24-30; xxiv. 37-39.)

II. I believe that the wide-spread unbelief, indifference, formalism, and wickedness, which are to be seen throughout Christendom, are only what we are taught to expect in God's Word. Troublous times, departures from the faith, evil men waxing worse and worse, love waxing cold, are things distinctly predicted. So far from making me doubt the truth of Christianity, they help to confirm my faith. Melancholy and sorrowful as the sight is, if I did not see it I should think the Bible was not true. (Matt. xxiv. 12; 1 Tim. iv. 1; 2 Tim. iii. 1, 4, 13.)

III. I believe that the grand purpose of the present dispensation is to gather out of the world an elect people, and not to convert all mankind. It does not surprise me at all to hear that the heathen are not all converted when missionaries preach, and that believers are but a little flock in any congregation in my own land. It is precisely the state of things which I expect to find. The Gospel is to be preached "as a witness," and then shall the end come. This is the dispensation of election, and not of universal conversion. (Acts xv. 14; Matt. xxiv.

13.)

IV. I believe that the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ is the great event which will wind up the present dispensation, and for which we ought daily to long and pray. “Thy kingdom come,”—“Come, Lord Jesus,” should be our daily prayer. We look backward, if we have faith, to Christ dying on the cross, and we ought to look forward no less, if we have hope, to Christ coming again. (John xiv. 3; 2 Tim. iv. 8; 2 Peter iii. 12.)

V. I believe that the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ will be a real, literal, personal, bodily coming; and that as He went away in the clouds of heaven with His body, before the eyes of men, so in like manner He will return. (Acts i. 11.)

VI. I believe that after our Lord Jesus Christ comes again, the earth shall be renewed, and the curse removed; the devil shall be bound, the godly shall be rewarded, the wicked shall be punished; and that before He comes there shall be neither resurrection, judgment, nor millennium, and that not till after He comes shall the earth be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord. (Acts iii. 21; Isa. xxv. 6-9; 1 Thess. iv. 14-18; Rev. xx. 1, etc.)

VII. I believe that the Jews shall ultimately be gathered again as a separate nation, restored to their own land, and converted to the faith of Christ, after going through great tribulation. (Jer. xxx. 10, 11; xxxi. 10; Rom. xi. 25, 26; Dan. xii. 1; Zech. xiii. 8, 9.)

VIII. I believe that the literal sense of Old Testament prophecies has been far too much neglected by the Churches, and is far too much neglected at the present day, and that under the mistaken system of *spiritualizing and accommodating* Bible language, Christians have too often completely missed its meaning. (Luke xxiv. 25, 26.)

IX. I do not believe that the preterist scheme of interpreting the Apocalypse, which regards the book as almost entirely *fulfilled*, or the futurist scheme, which regards it as almost entirely *unfulfilled*, are either of them to be implicitly followed. The truth, I expect, will be found to lie between the two.

X. I believe that the Roman Catholic Church is the great predicted apostasy from the faith, and is Babylon and antichrist, although I think it highly probable that a more complete development of antichrist will yet be exhibited to the world. (2 Thess. ii. 3-11; 1 Tim. iv. 1-3.)

XI. Finally, I believe that it is for the safety, happiness, and comfort of all true Christians, to expect as little as possible from Churches or Governments under the present dispensation,—to hold themselves ready for tremendous convulsions and changes of all things established,—and to expect their good things

only from Christ's second advent.

The student of prophecy will see at a glance that there are many subjects on which I abstain from giving an opinion. About the precise time when the present dispensation will end,—about the manner in which the heathen will be converted—about the mode in which the Jews will be restored to their own land,—about the burning up of the earth,—about the first resurrection,—about the rapture of the saints,—about the distinction between the appearing and the coming of Christ,—about the future siege of Jerusalem and the last tribulation of the Jews,—about the binding of Satan before the millennium begins,—about the duration of the millennium,—about the loosing of Satan at the end of the thousand years,—about the destruction of Gog and Magog,—about the precise nature and position of the new Jerusalem,—about all these things, I purposely decline expressing any opinion. I could say something about them all, but it would be little better than conjecture. I am thankful that others have more light about them than I have. For myself, I feel unable at present to speak positively. If I have learned anything in studying prophecy, I think I have learned the wisdom of not “making haste” to decide what is true.

I am well aware that the views I have laid down appear to many persons very gloomy and discouraging. The only answer I make to that charge is this:—Are they Scriptural? Are they in accordance with the lessons of history and experience?—To my mind they certainly are. I see human failure and human corruption stamped on the conclusion of all dispensations preceding our own. I see much in the present state of the world to make me expect that the present dispensation will not end better than those which have gone before. In short, there seems an inherent tendency to decay in everything that man touches. There is no such thing as creature perfection. God is teaching that lesson by all His successive modes of dealing with mankind. There will be no perfection till the Lord comes. The Patriarchal, the Mosaic, and the Christian dispensations all tend to prove this. Those words of Scripture shall yet be verified, “I will overturn, overturn, overturn it: and it shall be no more, until He come whose right it is; and I will give it Him.” (Ezek. xxi. 27.) When the Lord Jesus comes back to earth, and the tabernacle of God is with men, then will there be perfection, but not till then. God will have all the glory at last, and all the world shall confess that without God man can do nothing. God shall be “all in all.” (1 Cor. xv. 28.)

The one point on which I desire to fix the eyes of my own soul, is the second personal coming of my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To that “blessed hope and glorious appearing,” I wish, by God's help, to direct all who read this volume. God forbid that anyone should neglect present duties! To sit idly waiting for Christ, and not to attend to the business of our respective positions, is not Christianity, but fanaticism. Let us only remember in all our daily employments, that we serve a *Master who is coming again*. If I can only stir up one

Christian to think more of that second coming, and to keep it more prominently before his mind, I feel that the volume will not have been published in vain.

If anyone ask me why I have chosen this particular period for the republication of these prophetic tracts, I think it is sufficient answer to point to the times in which we live. I do not forget that we are poor judges of our own days, and are very apt to exaggerate their importance. But I doubt much whether there ever was a time in the history of our country, when the horizon on all sides, both political and ecclesiastical, was so thoroughly black and lowering. In every direction we see men's hearts "failing for fear, and for looking for those things that seem coming on the earth." Everything around us seems unscrewed, loosened, and out of joint. The fountains of the great deep appear to be breaking up. Ancient institutions are tottering, and ready to fall. Social and ecclesiastical systems are failing, and crumbling away. Church and State seem alike convulsed to their very foundations, and what the end of this convulsion may be no man can tell.

Whether the last days of old England have really come,—whether her political greatness is about to pass away,—whether her Protestant Church is about to have her candlestick removed,—whether in the coming crash of nations England is to perish like Amalek, or at length to be saved, and escape "so as by fire,"—all these are points which I dare not attempt to settle: a very few years will decide them. But I am sure there never was a time when it was more imperatively needful to summon believers to "cease from man," to stand on their watch-towers, and to build all their hopes on the second coming of the Lord. Happy is he who has learned to expect little from Parliaments or Convocations, from Statesmen or from Bishops, and to look steadily for Christ's appearing! He is the man who will not be disappointed.

J. C. RYLE.

*Stradbroke Vicarage,
August, 1867.*

P.S. The reader of this volume will probably observe that some of the thoughts and ideas are occasionally repeated. They will kindly remember that this arises from the sermons which comprise it having been delivered at different places, and at long intervals. I have thought it best and wisest, for many reasons, to reprint them without alteration.

“THE READING WHICH IS BLESSED.”

“The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John; who bare record of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw. Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.”—REVELATION I. 1-3.

WE live in “troublous” and “perilous” times. It is many years since there has been so much in the aspect of public affairs to raise anxious thoughts, as there is in the present day.

We are always apt to exaggerate the importance of events that happen in our own days. I do not forget that. But I cannot retract what I have just written. I look around me at the things now going on in the Church and in the world. I look forward to the possible future. And as I look, I feel that I am justified in speaking of our times as “perilous” and “troublous.” I appeal to the judgment of all who observe the history of their own times. *“Is there not a cause?”*

There are three heavy judgments which God can send upon a nation—the sword, the pestilence, and the famine. All these three have fallen heavily upon our country within the last few years. The Irish famine, the Russian war, the cholera, the cattle plague, have left marks on this country which cannot be erased. Surely these signs of the times deserve no common notice. They should make us say with Habakkuk, “I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon my tower, and will watch to see what He will say unto me.” (Hab. ii. 1.) They should make us cry with Daniel, “O my Lord, what shall be the end of these things?” (Dan. xii. 8.)

But one thing, at all events, is clear, and that is the duty incumbent on Christians to search more diligently than ever the *prophetical Scriptures*. Let us not be like the Jews at the first advent, blind to the hand of God, and the fulfilment of His purposes in all that is going on in the world. Let us rather remember that the word of prophecy is given to be “a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day-star arise.” (2 Pet. i. 19.) Let us walk much in that light. Let us search “what and what manner of time the Spirit of Christ in the Prophets did signify, when He testified before the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should fol-

low.” (1 Pet. i. 11.) Let us compare prophecies fulfilled with prophecies unfulfilled, and endeavour to make the one illustrate the other. Let us strive, above all, to obtain clear views of the things yet to be expected, both in the church and the world, before the end comes, and time shall be no more.

With such feelings I now invite you to enter on the consideration of the verses of Scripture which stand at the head of this address. Those verses, I need hardly remind you, are the preface or opening words of the Book of Revelation. May the blessing which is specially promised to the readers and hearers of this book, be with all into whose hands this address may fall!

Reader, there are three points to which I desire to call your attention:—

- I. The general character of the Book of Revelation.
- II. The arguments commonly used to deter men from reading it.
- III. The many useful lessons which the study of it is calculated to teach.

I. *The general character of the Book of Revelation.*

The Book of Revelation differs widely from any other book of the Old or New Testaments. In many respects it is thoroughly unlike the rest of the Bible. There is a solemn and majestic peculiarity about it. It stands alone.

It is peculiar in *the dignity with which it begins*. The very first verse prepares the reader for something extraordinary,—for a book even more directly from God, if possible, than one written under the plenary inspiration of the Holy Ghost. It is called, “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto Him, to shew unto His servants things which must shortly come to pass; and He sent and signified it by His angel unto His servant John.”

It is peculiar in the *subject matter which it contains*. It contains less of doctrinal and practical Christianity, in proportion to its length, than any book of the New Testament. With few exceptions, its pages are filled with prophecies—prophecies of the widest range, extending, it seems to me, from the time of John, to the very end of the world; prophecies embracing a vast number of events, spreading over the whole “times of the Gentiles,” and covering the mighty interval between the destruction of the first Jerusalem and the descent of the new Jerusalem from heaven; prophecies of universal importance to all mankind, having reference not only to the condition and prospects of the believing Church, but also of the unconverted world.

It is peculiar in *the style and dress in which its subject matter is clothed*. With the exception of the 2nd and 3rd chapters, the greater part

of the book is composed of visions which the Apostle John saw in the Spirit. In these visions the vast range of the Church's history was revealed to him under emblems, figures, allegories, symbols, and similitudes. The meaning of the great majority of these symbols and emblems is not explained. The general characteristics of these visions are much alike. All are marked by a vastness, a grandeur, a majesty, a life, a force, a boldness, a sublimity, entirely unparalleled in any human writings. The door opened in heaven—the voice, like a trumpet speaking—the sea of glass, like crystal—the seven seals—the seven trumpets—the seven vials—the four angels holding the four winds—the mighty angel with a face like the sun, his right foot on the sea, his left on the earth—the woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet—the great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns—the beast that rose out of the sea—the mighty earthquake—the destruction of Babylon—the summoning of the fowls of heaven to the supper of the great God—the binding of Satan—the great white throne—the last judgment—the descent of the New Jerusalem from heaven—the description of the glorious city,—who can read such things without being struck by them? Who can study them and avoid the conclusion—“This is written with the finger of God?”

Such is the general character of the Book of Revelation. Such is the book which you are emphatically told, it is “blessed” to read. I will only offer two general remarks on the symbolical style in which the book is composed, and then pass on.

One remark is, that you must not regard the use of symbolical language as entirely peculiar to the Book of Revelation. You will find it in other parts of Scripture. The very emblems and figures of the Apocalypse, whose meaning seems so obscure, are often employed by the Holy Ghost in the Old Testament. You read, for example, of four living creatures in the fourth chapter. You read of four also in Ezekiel (i. 5.)—You read of horses in the vision of the four first seals. You read of horses also in the vision of Zechariah (vi. 2, 3.)—You read of a sealed company in the seventh chapter. You read also of a sealed and marked people in the vision of Ezekiel (chap. ix.)—You read of a plague of locusts under the fifth trumpet. You read of locusts also in the prophecy of Joel (chap. ii.)—You read of John eating the little book in the tenth chapter. You read also of Ezekiel eating the roll in his vision (chap. iii.)—You read of olive trees and candlesticks in the vision of the two witnesses. You read of the same emblems in the prophecy of Zechariah (chap. iv.)—You read of a beast having seven heads and ten horns, in the thirteenth chapter. You read of a similar beast in the Book of Daniel (chap. vii.)—You read of a wondrous celestial city in the twenty-first chapter. You have the description of a city scarcely less mysterious, though different, at the end

of Ezekiel (chap. xl., &c.)—These things are worthy of remark. They show us that we must not be stumbled by the symbols of Revelation, as if they were altogether a new and strange thing. We must remember they are used in the Old Testament as well as here, though far more sparingly, in communicating the mind of God to man. The peculiarity of the Apocalypse is not so much the use of symbols and emblems, as the profuse abundance of them.

My other remark is, that a symbolical style of composition will always seem more strange to us than it does to Oriental nations.¹ Figures, parables, illustrations, and similitudes, are infinitely better known in the countries round the Holy Land than they are among ourselves. The hieroglyphic inscriptions, for example, which abound in Egypt and elsewhere in the East, are nothing more than symbolical writings. Who does not know that at first sight these hieroglyphics seem uncouth, meaningless, dark, and obscure? The first step the student of them must take is to become familiar with their appearance. By and by he may hope to become acquainted with the key to their meaning. Ultimately, that key being found, these very hieroglyphics are found full of interesting matter. It is much the same with the Book of Revelation. It is a book of sacred hieroglyphics. Its very style is one to which our matter-of-fact northern mind is utterly unaccustomed. To us, therefore, its visions seem doubly strange—strange because we are not familiar with such a mode of conveying our ideas—stranger still, because in many cases we have no clue to their meaning. Our first step must be to read them and study them much, so as to become familiar with their outward garb,—with the style of composition in which they are clothed. So studying in a prayerful

¹ “The Symbolical or Hieroglyphical character is an art of communicating the conceptions of the mind by visible figures, which having a metaphorical relation or similitude, or at least affinity to the conceptions, excite in others the same conceptions.”—Daubuz *on Revelation*, p. 6. 1720.

“The Hieroglyphical characters are like all kinds of animals and members of men, and working tools, especially those of carpenters. For their writing does not show the discourse about the subject matter by the composition of syllables, but by the emphasis of the figures.”—Diodorus *Siculus*, quoted by *Daubuz*, p. 8.

“From this way of writing arose a symbolical way of speaking too; the symbolical characters, which they were so conversant with, furnishing them continually with metaphors and other tropes, first in their mysterious or religious speeches and from them easily passing on to the vulgar matters. Which kind of speech set up the priests and wiser sort of men above the level of the vulgar, because such a figurative and florid kind of speech and notions seemed to add great beauty to their thoughts, and distinguished that of wise men from the plain style of the rest. Thence it comes that most of the Oriental languages, especially that of the poets, affect this way.”—*Daubuz*, p. 8.

spirit, we may hope that the meaning of their inward contents will be gradually made more plain to our minds

One thing let us always remember in reading the visions of the Apocalypse. Whether we understand little or much, let us settle it in our minds as a fixed principle, that every vision in the book has a real definite meaning.

The time is short. We hasten on towards a day when every page shall be unfolded and unsealed. Every knot shall be untied. Every hard question shall be solved. Then shall we see that the Revelation, like every other part of the inspired volume, was all “very good.”

Then shall we find that the blessing pronounced on its students was not given in vain, and that those readers whom God blesses are blessed indeed.

II. Let us consider, in the next place, *the arguments commonly used to deter men from studying the Book of Revelation.*

There never have been wanting good men who have cried down the study of Revelation as unprofitable. They have spoken of it as a book too dark and mysterious for use. They have bid men respect it as inspired, but not touch it—reverence it at a distance, as part of the Bible, but not draw near to it or handle its contents. To this prejudice we probably owe the unhappy omission of the book from the daily calendar of lessons in the Liturgy of the Church of England. It is deeply to be regretted, that in the last arrangement of that calendar the Apocryphal story of Bel and the Dragon should have been thrust in, and the Revelation of John the Divine should have been shut out. Room was made for an entirely uninspired composition. No place was found for a book to the reading of which a special blessing is promised. Truly we may say in this case, “Great men are not always wise, neither do the aged understand judgment.” (Job xxxii. 9.)²

Reader, when such prejudices have existed against the study of the Book of Revelation among good men, you will not wonder that the children of the world should have gone further. Men, more witty than wise, have launched sharp sayings, jests, and jibes at its students. They have not been ashamed to find a mark for witticism in its solemn and mysterious visions. Even a man like Scaliger declared that one of Calvin’s wisest acts was his abstaining from writing a commentary on the book. Dr.

² It is a curious fact that the fourth council of Toledo, held about the year 640, made the following decree: “Because there are many that do not receive the book of Apocalypse as authentic, and *scorn to* read it in the Church of God, if any one for the future shall refuse to receive it, or to read it in the Church, in the time of Mass, from Easter to Whitsuntide, he shall be excommunicated.”—Cressener *on Revelation*. 1690.

South, a clever writer, though an unsound theologian, said, that the study of Revelation either “found a man mad or made him so.”³

But, after all, what is the real worth of the objections commonly made to the study of Revelation? Let us weigh them in the balances, and see to what they amount. To my own mind they appear neither so serious nor so unanswerable as is commonly supposed.

One class of objectors dislike the book because it seems to point to a coming state of things in the world, which, to their minds, is *monstrous, incredible, and improbable*.

That God should send plagues and judgments upon the nations of the earth, because of their sins against Him,—that the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the captains, and the rich, and the mighty, and the bond, and the free, should really flee to hide themselves from the wrath of the Lamb,—that the kingdoms of this world should really become the kingdoms of our God, and of His Christ,—that the saints of the Lord Jesus should ever reign upon the earth, and everything that defileth be *cast out*,—all this is to their minds almost *absurd*. “It is contrary to their common sense,” they tell us. “It is a mark of a weak mind to believe it. It is extravagance. It is raving. It is enthusiasm. It is going back to the ranting of fifth-monarchy-men in the Commonwealth. It cannot be. We cannot show them the details of the mode in which all these things shall come to pass. They will not believe them. A book from which we draw such strange fanatical opinions, can never be a profitable one to study.”

I am not careful as to the answer to be given to such objectors. They would do well to remember that the great leading events yet to come, to which Revelation points, are in no wise more wonderful than many which have already taken place in the world. The destruction of the old world by the flood,—the wasting of Babylon, Nineveh, Tyre, and Egypt,—the scattering of the Jews, and their perpetual preservation, notwithstanding, as a separate people,—all these were things utterly improbable at the time when they were foretold. But we know that they all came to pass. And as it has been in days gone by, so it shall be in days to come. Men, in their pride of heart, forget that in the eyes of an Eternal God the movements of the nations of the earth are but as the struggles of a few ephemeral insects. Yet a little time, and despotic and constitutional governments, liberal and conservative parties, all, all shall be swept away. God has said it, and with Him nothing is impossible.

³ “Voltaire was pleased to say, that Sir Isaac Newton wrote his comment on the Revelation to console mankind for the great superiority he had over them in other respects. But Voltaire, though a very agreeable, is yet a very superficial writer, and often mistaken in his judgment of men and things.”—*Bishop Newton on Prophecy*. 1754.

As to the *manner* in which the great events predicted in Revelation shall be brought about, we do not pretend to explain it. There are many things which we accept as facts, and yet should find it impossible to explain. We believe the creation of all things out of nothing. We believe the doctrine of the Trinity in Unity. We believe the fact of the Incarnation. But who would dare to offer an explanation of any of these great mysteries? We have a right to regard unfulfilled prophecy in the same light. We claim belief for its facts, though the mode of their accomplishment be at present hid from our eyes.

I leave this first class of objectors here. I fear the secret spring of their arguments, in too many cases, is the dislike of the natural heart to spiritual things. The heart not taught by the Holy Ghost rebels against the idea of severe judgments against sin,—a kingdom of Christ,—a reign of the saints. And why? The plain truth is, that it is not so much the Book of Revelation that such a heart really objects to, as the whole Gospel of Christ, and all the counsel of God.

Another class of objectors must next be noticed. These are they who deprecate the study of Revelation because of the wide *differences which prevail in the interpretation of its contents, and the notorious mistakes into which interpreters have fallen.*

I do not for a moment pretend to deny the existence of these differences and mistakes. Some good men tell us confidently that the whole book is entirely unfulfilled. They look for an accomplishment of its visions so clear and unmistakable that there shall be no room left for doubt. Other good men assure us, with no less confidence, that the whole book is fulfilled, with the exception of a small portion at the end. A third school of expositors maintains that the Revelation is partly fulfilled and partly unfulfilled. As to the details of the book, the meaning and application of the several visions it contains, the fulfilment of times and seasons, time would fail if I were to recount the various interpretations that have been put forth, and the errors that have been committed.

Now, what shall we say to these things? What can the advocate for Apocalyptic study reply to these undeniable facts?

My reply is, that the variations and mistakes in the views of interpreters constitute no argument against the study of the book itself. Because others have missed the road in searching for truth, you and I are not to give up the search altogether, and sit down in contented ignorance. Who has not heard of the extravagant and contradictory theories which astronomers, geologists, and physicians have occasionally propounded in their respective sciences? Yet who would think of giving up astronomy, geology, or medicine in despair, because of the conflicting tenets and avowed mistakes of their professors? Luther and Zwingle differed wide-

ly about the Lord's Supper. Cranmer and Hooper differed widely about vestments. Wesley and Toplady differed widely on predestination. Yet no one in his senses would think of giving up the study of the Christian system because these good men could not agree.

My answer furthermore is, that the very mistakes and differences of Apocalyptic interpreters are not without their use. They have cleared the field in many a direction, and shown us what the Revelation does *not* mean. Expositors have shown in many cases the weakness of other men's interpretations, if they have not succeeded in establishing their own. To know what an unfulfilled Scriptural prediction does *not* mean is one step towards knowing what it *does*. When Napoleon was overtaken by the rising tide, in a dark evening, on the sandy shore of the Red Sea, he is said to have ordered his attendants to disperse, and ride in different directions,—charging each one to report as he proceeded whether the water grew shallower or deeper. There was great wisdom in that order. Each man's report was useful. The report of him who found the water deepening was in its way as useful as the report of the successful finder of the right path. It is much the same with the widely-varying expositions of Revelation. It is evident that many of them must be wrong. But all in their way have done good. There is hardly one, perhaps, which has not contributed some sparks of light.⁴

My answer beside this is, that the differences of Apocalyptic interpreters, great as they undoubtedly are, are often magnified and absurdly exaggerated. The common points of agreement among expositors are more in number, and greater in importance, than men commonly suppose. Whether the seals, trumpets, and vials, are fulfilled or not, all students of the Revelation agree that there are judgments predicted in it on the unconverted and unbelieving. Whether days mean literal days, as some say, or years, as others say, all are agreed that the time of the wicked triumphing is defined, limited, and fixed by the counsels of God. Whether the beast with horns like a lamb be the Papal power or not, nearly all are agreed that Romish apostasy is foretold in the book, and doomed. Whether Christ shall come and reign *visibly* on earth or not, for 1,000 or 365,000 years, all are agreed that He shall come again with power and great glory, that the kingdoms of this world shall sooner or later become the kingdoms of our God, and of His Christ, and that all believers should look and long for their Lord's return. I doubt much whether this is as much considered by the opponents of Apocalyptic study as it deserves.

⁴ "Among the interpreters of Revelation in the last ages, there is scarce one of note who hath not made some discovery worth knowing."—*Sir Isaac Newton on the Apocalypse. Chap 1. p. 253.*

I grant them freely that the divergences and contrarities of the paths drawn out by the expositors of the book are very many, and very great. But, I bid them remember that the great terminus towards which all their lines lead is always one and the same. Oh! that men would remember that mighty terminus, and realize the tremendous importance of the end and breaking up of all things towards which they hasten. Then would they be more anxious to study any book which handles matters like those contained in Revelation. Then would they be less ready to catch at any excuse for declining Apocalyptic study.

The only remaining objection to the study of Revelation which I shall notice, is that which is drawn from *the mysterious character of a large portion of the book*.

That the Revelation is full of dark and difficult things it is of course impossible to deny. Some of its symbols and emblems the Spirit of God has thought good to interpret and explain. The seven stars,—the seven candlesticks, the incense, the fine linen, the waters on which the woman sat,—the woman herself,—all these, and a few more, are expounded, perhaps as a specimen of the kind of meaning which should be attached to the symbols of the book generally. But, after every deduction, there remain a very large number of visions and emblems which the Spirit has not thought fit to interpret. These symbols are unquestionably dark and mysterious. It is not, perhaps, saying too much to admit, that after all the attempts of commentators, ancient and modern,—preterist and futurist,—there are many visions and symbols of Revelation which, we must confess, we do not understand. I do not say that elaborate and learned expositions of them have not been offered, but not expositions so manifestly satisfactory that we can demand a reader's assent to them. If truth be spoken, we must allow that all the expositions of *some parts* of the Revelation are nothing better than ingenious conjectures. We admire them as we read. We are not prepared to say that they are not true, or to furnish a reason for refusing our assent. But still they fail to carry conviction with them. We somehow feel the mark is not yet hit, the spring of the lock is not yet touched, the whole truth is not yet discovered.

But I appeal to the common sense of men, and their sense of fairness, and I ask them whether they have a right to expect that such a book as the book of Revelation, can in the very nature of things be anything but dark and mysterious.

Here is a prophetic book which spans the mighty gulf between the end of the first century and the day of judgment,—a book which was given to show God's dealings with the Church and the world during a space of well-nigh 2,000 years,—a book which points to the rise and fall of empires and kingdoms, with all the attendant wars and tumults over a

third part of the habitable globe,—a book, above all, which does not tell its story in simple, plain matter of fact narration, but clothes it in majestic visions, symbols, emblems, figures, and similitudes.

Here are we reading this book during a life of three score and ten years at most,—with all the cares and anxieties of this world pressing upon us,—with an understanding partaking in the corruption of the fall,—with a heart naturally earthly and sensual, and, even after conversion, weak and deceitful,—knowing little of ourselves,—knowing little of contemporary history,—finding constantly how hard it is to discover the real truth about events happening in our own day. Is it likely, I ask,—is it probable,—is it agreeable to common sense, that such students, coming to such a book, should find it anything but mysterious, and hard to understand? Can anyone doubt as to the reply?

The plain truth is, that we are like children watching some mighty building in process of erection. They see a thousand operations which they are utterly unable to comprehend or explain. They see scaffolding and stones, and iron and brick, and mortar and timber, and rubbish. They hear noise, and hammering, and cutting, and chipping. It seems to their eyes a vast scene of hopeless confusion. And yet to the eye of the architect all is order, system, and progress. He sees the end from the beginning. He knows exactly what is going on.

It is much the same with us in trying to pass a judgment on the application of many of the Apocalyptic visions. We are like those who stand on the outward surface of a sphere. The range of our mental vision is exceedingly limited. We know so little, and see so little, beyond our own circle,—the very pages of history are so often full of inaccuracies and lies, that we are really very poor judges of the question, whether such and such visions have been fulfilled or no. More light, I firmly believe, may yet be expected before the end come. Much may probably be yet unfolded and unsealed. But as to any certainty about the meaning of *all* parts of the Apocalypse, when I see how little certainty there is about anything 1,000 miles from us in distance, or 100 years in time, I own I do not look for it until the Lord comes.

And here let me turn for a moment to those who secretly wonder *why the Book of Revelation was not written more plainly*, and why things of such vast interest to the Church have been purposely clothed in the mysterious garb of symbol, allegory, and vision.

I might easily remind such persons of Bishop Sherlock's remark on this very point: "To inquire why the ancient prophecies are not clearer, is like inquiring why God has not given us more reason, or made us as wise as the angels." But I have no wish to leave them there. I would ra-

ther use an argument which has often proved satisfactory to my own mind, and silenced the speculative questionings of a curious spirit.

I ask you then, whether you cannot see wisdom and mercy in the darkness which it has pleased God to throw around the prophetic history of His Church? You wonder in your own heart why the things to come were not more clearly revealed. But, consider for a moment how fearfully deadening and depressing it would have been to the early Christians, if they had clearly seen the long ages of darkness and corruption which were to elapse before the Lord returned. Reflect for a moment how much unhappiness primitive believers were spared, by not knowing for certain the events which were to take place. If humble saints in the days of imperial persecution could have dreamed of the eighteen weary centuries, during which the saints were yet to wait for their Lord from heaven, they might almost have sat down in flat despair. If Polycarp had foreseen the present state of Asia Minor,—or Ignatius that of Syria,—or Chrysostom that of Constantinople,—or Irenaeus that of France,—or Athanasius that of Egypt,—or Augustine that of Africa,—their hands might well have trembled, and their knees waxed faint.

Count up, I say, the dark and painful pages of which there are so many in the annals of Church history. Set down in order the heresies, and false doctrines, and apostasies, of which there has been such a rank growth,—Arianism, and Romanism, and Socinianism, and Neologianism, and their kindred errors. Place before your mind's eye the centuries of ignorance and superstition before the Reformation, and of coldness and formality since Luther's generation passed away. Count up the crimes which have been perpetrated in the name of Christianity,—the massacres, the burnings, the persecutions within the Church,—not forgetting the Vallenses, the Albigenses, the Spanish Inquisition, the slaughter of the Huguenots, and the fires of Smithfield. Do all this faithfully, and I think you will hardly avoid the conclusion, that it was wise mercy which drew so thick a veil over things to come. Wise mercy showed the early Christians a light in the distance, but did not tell them how far it was away. Wise mercy pointed out the far off harbour lights, but not the miles of stormy sea between. Wise mercy revealed enough to make them work, and hope, and wait. But wise mercy did not tell all that was yet to be fulfilled before the end.

Who thinks of telling his little children in their early years, every trial, and pain, and misery which they may have to go through before they die? Who thinks of filling their tender ears with the particulars of every bodily disease they may have to endure, and every struggle for success in life in which they may have to engage? Who thinks of harrowing up their young souls by describing every bereavement they may have to

submit to, or dilating on every death-bed they may have to watch? We do not do it, because they could not understand our meaning, and could not bear the thought of it if they did. And just so, it seems to me, does the Lord Jesus deal with His people in the Apocalyptic vision. He keeps back the full revelation of all the way they must go through till the time when He sees they can bear it. He considers our frame. He teaches and reveals as we are able to bear.

After all, there is no argument in reply to those who object to the study of Revelation so powerful as the simple promise of the Word of God. The predictions of Revelation may seem to many improbable and absurd. The differences and mistakes of interpreters may fill others with disgust and dislike to the very name of Apocalyptic study. The acknowledged mysteriousness, and confessed difficulties of the book, may incline many to shrink from perusing it. But there the book stands,—part of those Scriptures which are all given by inspiration, and all profitable. And there on the forefront of the book stands a promise and an encouragement to the reader and hearer: “*Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear.*” These words, no doubt, were spoken in foresight of the objections that men would raise against the study of the book. Give these words their full weight. Fall back on them when all other arguments fail. They are a reserve which will never give way. God has said it, and will make it good. “Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of the prophecy of this book.”

III. The third and last thing which I now wish to consider is, *the number of useful lessons which the Book of Revelation is calculated to teach.*

I am anxious to impress this point on your attention. I want you to establish it in your mind as a settled thing, that the Book of Revelation is an eminently profitable book for every reader of the Bible to study. It is a fountain to which the poorest and most unlearned shall never go in vain.

I say, then, that there are many blessed and comfortable truths scattered up and down, all over the Book of Revelation, which are intelligible to the simplest comprehension, and yet full of food for the most spiritual mind. God has mercifully so ordered the composition of the book, that there is hardly a chapter from which a man may not draw some striking and edifying thought. He may be unskilful in the interpretation of visions. He may have no idea of the meaning of seals, or trumpets, or vials,—of the two witnesses,—of the woman fleeing into the wilderness,—of the first or second beasts. But still, if he perseveres in humble, prayerful study of the whole book, he shall find in almost every page verses which shall richly repay his pains. They shall shine out on him like stars in the dark vault of heaven in a moonless night. They shall re-

fresh him like an Oasis in the wilderness, and make it impossible for him to say, "All is barren." They shall sparkle like precious stones on the shore, as he walks by the deep waters of the mysterious book, and make him feel that his journey in search of treasure is not in vain.⁵

Let me select a few examples, in order to show what I mean.

There is much about *the Lord Jesus Christ* in Revelation. There are names, and titles, and expressions about Him there, which we find nowhere else. There is new light thrown on His offices, His power, His care for His people. Surely this alone is no small matter. To know Jesus is life eternal. To abide in Jesus is to be fruitful. If we are indeed born of the Spirit, we can never hear too much about our Saviour, our Shepherd, our High Priest and Physician. If our hearts are right in the sight of God, we can never hear too much about our King. Like snow in summer, and good news from a far country, so are any fresh tidings about Christ.

There is much about the desperate *corruption of human nature* in Revelation. There is evidence on this subject in the Epistles to the Seven Churches, and the repeated accounts of the incorrigibleness and impenitence of the nations of the earth under judgments, which we shall all do well to lay to heart. We can never be too well acquainted with our own sinfulness and weakness. The spring of all humility, thankfulness, grateful love to Christ, and close walk with God, is real, thorough, scriptural knowledge of the wickedness of our own hearts. None will ever build high who does not begin low. The soul that loves much is the soul that feels its debt is great, and that much has been forgiven.

There is much about *hell* in Revelation. There are many fearful expressions which show its reality, its misery, its eternity, its certainty. How deeply important is it to have clear views on this solemn subject in the present day! A disposition appears in some quarters to shrink from asserting the eternity of punishment. A flood of that miserable heresy, universalism, seems coming in upon us. Amiable and well-meaning enthusiasts are speaking smooth things about the love of God being lower than hell, and the mercy of God excluding the exercise of all His other attributes of justice and holiness. Tender-hearted women and intellectual men are catching at the theory that, after all, there is hope in the far distance for everybody, and that Satan's old assertion deserves credit, "Ye shall not surely die." Oh! reader, beware of this delusion. Be not wise above that which is written. Believe me, it is a great thing to believe in

⁵ "It is true, many things in the Book of Revelation are obscure, and it is likely that the full clearing of them is not to be expected till God in some singular way shall open them up. Yet there are many clear, edifying, and comfortable passages of God's mind in it, the Holy Ghost mixing them in to be fed upon, to sweeten those passages that are more obscure, and to encourage the reader to search for the meaning of them."—*Durham on Revelation*.—1658.

the reality of hell. Study the Apocalyptic visions well, and you will find it hard to disbelieve it.

There is much about *heaven* in Revelation. I speak of heaven in the common acceptance of the word. I mean the future abode of the saints and people of God. And I say that no book in God's Word tells us so much about heaven as the Apocalypse. If there was nothing else to be learned from the book beside this, we ought to be most thankful. Where is there a believer in the Lord Jesus who does not frequently think on the world to come and the resurrection state? Who that has lost a dear friend or relative, who died in the Lord, can abstain from meditating on the life of glory, and the place of meeting? Who among the people of God does not frequently reach forward in imagination into that unknown and unvisited abode, and strive to picture to his mind's eye the manner of the place and its employments? It is mysterious, no doubt. But nowhere is the veil so much lifted up as it is in the Book of Revelation.

There is much about *the prospects of the Church of Christ* in the Revelation. When I speak of the Church, I mean the Church of the elect, the living body of Christ, whose members are all holy. The pages of the Apocalypse show plainly that the triumphs, and rest, and ease, and peace of that Church are not in this world. Its members must make up their minds to battles and fightings, to trial and persecution, to cross and affliction. They must be content to be a little flock, a poor and despised people, until the advent of Christ. Their good things are yet to come. Well would it be for believers if they would learn from Revelation to moderate their expectations from missions, schools, and all other ecclesiastical machinery. Then should we not hear as we now often do, of disappointment, and despondency, and depression among true Christians, and especially among ministers. We live in the time when God is taking out a people. These are the days of election, but not of universal conversion. We are yet in the wilderness. The bridegroom is not yet with us. The days of absence, and mourning, and separation are not yet past and gone.

There is much in Revelation to show *the folly of depending entirely on the powers of this world* for the advancement of true religion. There is much to show that believers should not look to kings, and princes, and rich men, and great men, for the bringing in and support of the kingdom of Christ. The times are not yet come when kings shall literally be "the nursing fathers" of the Churches. It is striking to observe how often the Apocalypse speaks of them as the enemies of God's cause; and not the friends. We need this lesson here in England. With a settled conviction that the principle of an Established Church is scriptural and sound, I still feel we need reminding that alliance with the powers that be has its dis-

advantages as well as its advantages to the visible Church of Christ. It is apt to engender indolence, apathy, and formality among professing Christians. I firmly believe that the Church of England would have exerted itself more, and done more for the world, if its members had been more familiar with the Book of Revelation, and learned from it to expect little from the State..

There is much in Revelation to show the painful *childishness of the vast majority of true Christians* all over the world. Here we are, the greater part of us, scrambling and wrangling about the merest trifles,—contending about forms, and ceremonies, and outward matters of man’s devising, as if they were the essentials of Christianity,—talking of order, and precedent, and custom, and routine, while millions of heathen are perishing for lack of knowledge, and myriads of our countrymen are dying as ignorant as the heathen around our own doors. And all this time the eternal purposes of God are rolling on to fulfilment—the kingdoms of this world are on the brink of dissolution—the day of judgment is at hand, and an hour draws nigh when Episcopacy, Presbyterianism, Congregationalism, Establishments, and voluntary Churches, shall be clean swept out of the way, and nothing but grace, faith, and heart-holiness shall abide and stand the fire. Never, never do I, for one, read the Apocalypse without feeling the excessive littleness of Christians. We are like children busy with our little houses of sand at low water by the sea side. The tide is rising. Our houses will soon be gone. Happy shall we be if we ourselves escape with our lives!

There is much, in the last place, in Revelation to show *the safety of all true believers in Christ*, whatever may come upon the world. Awful as are the woes of which the Apocalypse speaks there is not a syllable to show that a hair shall fall from the head of any one of God’s children. Hid, like Noah, in the ark—plucked, like Lot, from the fiery judgment—withdrawn, like Elijah, from the reach of their enemies—rescued, like Rahab, from the ruin of all around—they at least may read the Revelation without being afraid. The book that looks dark and threatening to the world, speaks no terrors to them. Like the wondrous pillar of cloud at Pi-hahiroth (Exod. xiv.), it may fill the mind of an ungodly man with gloom, but, like the same cloud, it shall give light by night to the people of God.

Reader, what shall we say to these things? I have mentioned eight things which stand forth plainly and unmistakably in the Book of Revelation. There is no mystery about them. They require no deep learning to understand. A humble mind and a prayerful heart will not fail to discover them.

These are the kind of things which we can never know too well. The offices of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself—the corruption of man—the reality of hell—the nature of heaven—the prospects of the Church—the folly of trusting in princes—the childishness of God’s people—the safety of believers in the day of wrath—these are the kind of subjects with which we cannot be too familiar. These are the plain lessons which, with all its many difficulties, Revelation will unfold. Verily if these things are engraven deeply on our minds, our reading of the Apocalypse will be blessed indeed!

These are the kind of things which Satan labours hard to keep us from. Well may that old enemy fill men’s minds with prejudice against Apocalyptic study. Well may he suggest the evil thought, “it is all mysterious, it is all too deep, we need not read it.” Let us resist him in this matter. Let us cleave to Revelation more closely every year. Let us never doubt that it is a profitable study for our souls.

It only remains now to conclude this address with three practical remarks:—

1. For one thing, let us thank God that *the things needful to salvation are all clear, plain, and devoid of mystery to a humble mind*. Whatever difficulties there may be in the visions of the Apocalypse, the most unlearned reader of the Bible shall never miss the way to heaven, if he seek to find it in a childlike and prayerful spirit.

The guilt, and corruption, and weakness of man, is not a hidden thing, like a seal, a trumpet, or a vial.

Christ’s power and willingness to save, and justification by faith in Him, are not a dark thing, like the number 666.

The absolute necessity of a new birth and a thorough change of heart is not an uncertainty, like the meaning of the two witnesses.

The impossibility of salvation without meetness for heaven is not a mystery, like the interpretation of the vision of the four living creatures.

But, reader, remember while you thank God for this clear teaching in the things essential to salvation, that this very clearness increases your personal responsibility. Take heed, lest an open door being set before you, any of you should fail to enter in by it and be saved.

Hearken, every one into whose hands this address may come, and understand. I give you a plain warning this day. Do not forget it. You may reach heaven without knowing much about the deep things of the Apocalypse, but you will never get there without the saving knowledge of Christ, and a new heart. You must be born again. You must renounce your own righteousness, and acknowledge yourself a sinner. You must wash in the fountain of Christ’s blood. You must be clothed in the gar-

ment of Christ's righteousness. You must take up the cross of Christ and follow Him.

There are the things *absolutely needful*. These are the things without which no man, learned or unlearned, high or low, can ever be saved.

Rest not, rest not till you *know these things by experience*. Without them you may know the whole list of Apocalyptic commentaries, be familiar with all that Mede, and Brightman, and Cressener, and Daubuz, and Durham, and Cuninghame, and Woodhouse, and Elliot, and Alford, and Garratt, have written on the subject, and yet rise at the last day a lost soul,—knowing much intellectually, like the devils, but, like the devils, ruined for ever.

2. For another thing, let me entreat all students of the Book of Revelation, *to beware of dogmatism and positiveness* in expressing and maintaining their views of the meaning of its more mysterious portions.

Nothing, I firmly believe, has brought more discredit on the study of prophecy, than the excessive rashness and overweening confidence with which many of its advocates have asserted the correctness of their own interpretations, and impugned the expositions of others. Too many have written and talked as if they had a special revelation from heaven, and as if it was impossible for anyone to maintain a character for common sense if he did not see with their eyes.⁶

Let us all watch our hearts and be on our guard against this spirit. Dogmatism is a great trap which Satan lays in men's way when he cannot prevent them studying the Apocalypse. Let us not fall into it. Let us rather pray for a spirit of modesty and humility in offering our solutions of the deep things of symbolical prediction. Let us allow that we may possibly be wrong, and that others may possibly be right. Believe me, we all need this caution. We are unhappily prone to be most positive when we have least warrant for our assertions, simply because our pride whispers that our credit for discernment is at stake, and that having made statements mainly on the authority of our own judgment, we are specially bound to defend them.

Happy is that student of prophecy who is willing to confess that there are many things of which he is yet ignorant. Happier still, and more uncommon too, is he who is able to use those three hardest words in the English language, "I was mistaken."

⁶ "Joseph Mede, the most learned and able interpreter of prophecy that this country can name among its divines, was remarkable for his modesty and humility. In a letter of his to Dr. Twiss, speaking of the leisurely and deliberate progress he made in his exposition of Apocalypse, chap. 14, he adds these words, 'I am by nature dilatory in all things, but in this let no man blame me if I take more pause than ordinary; for it has sunk deeply into my mind, that rashly to be the author of a false interpretation of Scripture is to take God's name in vain in a high degree.'—*Mede's Works*, 1672.

3. Finally, let all believers take comfort in the thought that *the end to which all things are coming is clear, plain, and unmistakable*. There may yet be judgments in store for the world, of which we know nothing. There may be “distress of nations with perplexity” far exceeding anything we have yet heard of, read, or seen. There may be more grievous wars, and famines, and pestilences, and persecutions yet to come.

But the end is sure. Yet a little while, and He that shall come, will come, and will not tarry. The kings of the earth may struggle and contend for their own worldly interests; but sooner or later the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our God, and of His Christ. There shall be an eternal peace. He shall come and take possession “whose right it is.” The dominion and power shall be given to the saints of the Most High, and of the increase of their peace shall be no end.

Oh! that we may all remember this! In patience let us possess our souls, and in every trying time do as Luther did,—repeat the forty-sixth Psalm:—“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

“Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof. Selah.

“There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the Most High.

“God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that right early.

“The heathen raged, the kingdoms were moved: He uttered His voice, the earth melted.

“The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah.

“Come, behold the works of the Lord, what desolations He hath made in the earth.

“He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth; He breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder; He burneth the chariot in the fire.

“Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth.

“The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah.”