

SHALL WE KNOW ONE ANOTHER?

AND OTHER PAPERS.

BY THE
RIGHT REV. J. C. RYLE,

Lord Bishop of Liverpool.

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WHAT DOES THE EARTH TEACH?

“Speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee.”— Job xii. 8.

GOD has provided two great books for man’s instruction —the book of revelation and the book of creation. The one is that volume whose name is familiar to us all—the Bible; the other is that wonderfully framed universe, whose silent pages are ever lying open to an observant eye.

The lessons of the book of revelation are known to a comparatively small portion of mankind. There are many millions of men and women who never heard of a Bible, and are utterly ignorant of its saving truths.

The lessons of the book of creation are within reach of every human being. The most unlearned savage has a great teacher close at hand, though, as a rule, he knows it not.

To both of these great books one common remark applies. A man may live in the full light of them, and yet be no wiser for them. The book of Scripture may be possessed, and yet confer no benefit on the possessor. To understand the Bible rightly, we need the teaching of the Holy Ghost. The book of creation may be open on every side of us, and yet we may see nothing of God in it. It is pre-eminently a volume which is instructive to none but an enlightened eye. “But he that is spiritual discerneth all things “(1 Cor. ii. 15). Once let a man’s mind be guided by the Spirit of God, and he will see in both volumes things that he never dreamed of before. The Bible will make him wise unto salvation through faith, which is in Christ Jesus. Creation, read with a spiritual eye, will confirm the lessons of the Bible. The words of God’s mouth, and the works of God’s hand, will be found to throw mutual light on one another.

Harvest is a season of the year which always draws me into this train of thought. Harvest, with all its interesting accompaniments, has a voice which always goes to my heart. I think of the thousands of strong arms which are clearing their way, over fields of wheat, and barley, and oats, from one end of the land to the other. I think of the thousands of eyes which are reading every square yard of our English corn-fields. I think it useful, at a season like this, to remind people of the many lessons which the earth is continually teaching. I should like to sound in the ears of every farmer, and labourer, and gleaner in the land the striking words of Job—“Speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee.”

But what are the special lessons which the earth teaches? They are many and various—far more than most people suppose—more even, I believe, than many true Christians ever consider. I am one of those who hold firmly that

there is a close harmony between nature and revelation. Let me give a few examples of what I mean:—

1. I believe, for one thing, that the earth teaches *the wisdom and power of God*.

This is a point which requires very little proof. None but an atheist, I think, would attempt to deny it. That the globe in which we live and move must have had a beginning; that matchless wisdom and design appear in every part of the framework of creation; that the minutest plants and animals, when viewed under a microscope, proclaim loudly, “The hand that made us is Divine”—all these are great first principles, which few will attempt to dispute. The denial of them involves far greater difficulties than the acceptance. No wonder that St. Paul declares: “The invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse” (Rom. i. 20).

2. I believe, for another thing, that the earth teaches *the doctrine of the fall of man*.

How, I should like to know, can we account for the many enemies which often attack the best products of the earth, and prevent them coming to perfection? The weeds which impede the growth of corn, and require to be rooted up; the insects and vermin which prey on it—the slug, the caterpillar, the wireworm, and all their companions; the diseases to which the plant is liable, such as mildew, rust, and smut, and many others; from whence do these things come? They exist, as every farmer could tell us he finds to his cost. They interfere with the full development of many a harvest, and cause many a field to disappoint its owner of a full crop. But how can they be accounted for? I am bold to say that only one answer can be given to this question. That answer must be sought in the 3rd chapter of Genesis, in the old familiar story of sin coming into the world. I assert confidently that nothing but the records of that chapter can explain the state of things which we see continually under our eyes. We cannot for a moment suppose that God created anything imperfect. Everything that God made was, like him who made it, “perfect and very good” at the beginning. But something has evidently come in since the day of creation, which has defiled and marred God’s handiwork. That something is sin! The earth, with all its beauty and fertility, is an earth which is still under the primeval curse—“Cursed is the ground for thy sake. . . Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee” (Gen. iii. 17, 18). I look for better days to come on the earth. I believe that the words of the Psalmist shall be fulfilled when Christ returns the second time, and the curse is taken away. “Then shall the earth yield her increase,” &c. (Ps. lxxvii. 6). But in the meantime, I believe firmly that the earth shows everywhere the footprints of sin.

The infidel and deist are fond of pointing to the works of nature, and bidding us look up through nature to nature's God. But let them explain, if they can, the anomalies and imperfections which no student of nature can fail to observe on the earth. I tell them boldly that they never can be explained without the Bible. The Bible alone can solve the problem. The Bible alone can make things plain. Without the Bible there are a thousand things in nature which would perplex and puzzle us. But when I read what happened in the garden of Eden, I see a solution of all my difficulties. I find that nature confirms revelation.

3. I believe, for another thing, that the earth teaches *the great truth that life comes out of death.*

No man, I imagine, can study what goes on yearly on the face of the soil without seeing that the death of one thing is the life of another. The annual death and decay of millions of leaves and plants is a part of the process by which vegetation is continually maintained. Leaf after leaf perishes, and contributes to the fertility and productiveness of coming years. Plant after plant is turned into rich mould, and helps forward the growth of another season. Even the seed-corn which is sown exemplifies the same great principle. Grain after grain must die before there can appear "the blade, the ear, and the full corn in the ear." The golden harvest which is reaped every autumn could never exist unless this great principle was annually worked out—that life springs out of death.

Now, what is all this but a confirmation of one of the mightiest truths of Scripture? What have we here but light thrown on the great foundation of Christianity—Christ's death the life of the world! Hear what our Lord himself says: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit" (John xii. 24). The sacrificial death of Christ as our substitute on the cross is the foundation-stone of the whole Gospel. From his cross and grave spring all the lessons of a Christian. Take away his atoning death, and you take away everything worth contending for in revealed religion. His death is our title to life; his sufferings the ground of our claims to glory; his crucifixion our warrant for expecting a crown. What intelligent Bible reader does not know that these are among the first principles of our faith? Is it nothing, then, that this great truth is pictured out every year on the face of the earth around us? To my mind, it is an unspeakable comfort. It helps, and strengthens, and confirms my faith.

4. I believe, for another thing, that the earth teaches the deep truth that *God acts as a sovereign in giving life where he wills.*

The profusion of vegetable life which the earth puts forth every year is so great as to baffle all calculation. Millions and millions of living seeds are called into existence which might, for anything we can see, become the productive parents of future vegetation. Yet millions and millions are never used

for this purpose. Some are picked up by birds and insects, and used as food. Some fall into the ground and rot, and pass away. Even in the most carefully prepared corn-field, the proportion of seed-corn that springs up and yields a harvest is far smaller than most people would suppose.

Now, why is all this? We cannot tell. The wisest course is to confess our ignorance. The facts are before us, and we cannot deny them; but how to explain the enormous annual waste of life which is incessantly going on, is a problem that baffles man's understanding.

But does not this state of things assist us in considering that deep and mysterious truth, the sovereignty of God in saving sinners? We know that there are nations on the earth at this moment to whom God has never been pleased to send the light of the Gospel. We know that there are thousands in our own land who, living in the full sunshine of religious privileges, remain dead in sin, and utterly careless about their souls. Graceless and godless they live, and graceless and godless they seem to die.

Now, if we attempt to explain this condition of things, we are brought to a standstill at once. It is a high thing, and we cannot understand it. It is a deep thing, and we have no line to fathom it. We can only fall back on our own ignorance, and rest satisfied that what we know not now we shall know hereafter. They that are lost at last will be found lost through their own sins and folly. The Judge of all the earth will certainly do right.

Yet surely the face of the earth around us may help us in considering the subject. The great fact that meets our eyes on every side, that not every living seed is allowed to live and grow up into a plant, is a fact that should be pondered well, and kept continually upon our minds. Whatever men may please to say about the doctrine of election in theology, they cannot deny its existence in vegetation.

5. I believe, for another thing, that the earth teaches us *the importance of a diligent use of means*.

The things that grow upon the earth contain in themselves a boundless capability of improvement. The gardener and the farmer know this perfectly well. It is one of the first principles of their business. They cannot give life. They cannot command success. "The earth bringeth forth fruit of itself." But when life has once been given, it seems to admit of indefinite strengthening and increase. By breaking up the earth and manuring it, by weeding and watering, by cleansing and protecting, by draining and irrigating, the results that may be produced are without end.

There is a spiritual lesson here, which is clear, plain, and unmistakable. Life is a thing that no man can give to his own soul, nor to the soul of another. But when life has once been imparted by the Spirit of God, there is no limit to the results that may be produced by spiritual diligence and by pains in the use of means.

He knows but little who fancies that once converted he may sit still, and dream lazily along his journey to heaven. Let him know that his soul's prosperity is most intimately bound up with his soul's carefulness and labour. Let him resist the spirit of slumber, and work hard in the ways that God has appointed. Let him take heed to his Bible-reading and his praying, to his sermon-hearing and use of the Lord's Supper. Let him watch daily over his temper and his tongue, his company and his employment of time. Let him strive and agonise after a complete victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil. Let him remember that if it is worth while to do anything for his soul, it is worth while to do it well.

Well would it be for the Church if these simple lessons were more constantly kept in mind. Happy is that Christian who cultivates his soul as if it were a farm or a garden, and learns the wisdom of spiritual diligence from man's treatment of the land.

6. I believe, lastly, that the earth teaches *that great truth, the resurrection of the body*.

Nothing, perhaps, is more remarkable than the wide difference between the appearance of the earth at the beginning of winter and at the beginning of spring. Thousands of herbaceous flowers in winter are dead down to the very ground. Not a vestige of life remains about them. The great majority of trees are naked and bare. The little child is ready to think they are dead, and will never put forth leaves again. And yet both flowers and trees are alive, and in due time will be clothed again with bloom and beauty. As soon as the warm air of spring begins to be felt a resurrection takes place. To use the beautiful words of the Canticles—"The winter is past; the rain is over and gone: the flowers appear on the earth" (Cant. ii. 11, 12).

Cold must that mind be, and dull that heart, which does not see in this great annual change a lively type of the resurrection of man's body. He who formed the world foresaw the weakness of man's faith. He foreknew our slowness to believe spiritual things. He has taken care to provide us with an annual remembrancer of what he intends to do for our bodies at the last day. As plants and trees put forth life in spring, so in due time "our bodies shall rise again." Well may we say, when we look at the difference of the earth in winter and in summer, "Why should it be thought a thing incredible that God should raise the dead?" When sneering scoffers ask the question, "How are the dead raised up, and with what body do they come?" we may boldly reply, "Who art thou that talkest of difficulties? Speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee." "Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die: and that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain; but God giveth it a body as it hath pleased him, and to every seed his own body. . . So also is the resurrection of the dead" (1 Cor. xv. 36-42).