

CHRIST WITH HIS PEOPLE IN THIS
WORLD; HIS PEOPLE WITH HIM
IN THE LIFE TO COME.

STEPHEN.

THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD.

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CHRIST WITH HIS PEOPLE IN THIS WORLD ; HIS PEOPLE WITH HIM IN THE LIFE TO COME.

THE Lord's interest in His people is wonderful indeed. His delight is in the saints, the excellent of the earth, we learn from the Psalm (xvi. 3). Who could be counted amongst such the record of His life on earth discloses. "He receiveth sinners and eateth with them" was the sneering remark of the Pharisees and scribes (Luke xv. 2).

Had we asked the Pharisees who were the excellent we can quite understand, from the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, to whom they would have pointed. But who drew near to the Holy One of God in that fifteenth chapter of Luke? It was the publicans and the sinners. And He allowed them to draw nigh. He did not repel them. He who had sat at meat in Matthew's house in the midst of a company of publicans allowed, as we read in Luke, *all* the publicans and sinners to draw nigh. They were attracted to Him. He received them ; He could eat with them ; for He came not to call the righteous, but sinners (Matt. ix. 13).

Such were the Lord's ways in life. He died. The world saw Him no more. He was no longer to be found walking about amongst men of different classes, whether converted or not. But death, which affects a severance between men departed and all on earth, did not, and could not, make a separation between the Lord and His people still down here. True, they could not, as before, go to Him. But, blessed be His name, He could come to them, and He did at times during the forty days that intervened between His resurrection and His ascension. Unchanged in His feelings towards His own, His disciples should know it, and on that first day of the week on which He rose

to how many did He appear. Mary Magdalene saw Him in the garden by the tomb. He met the company of the women on their way to the city, bearing tidings of His resurrection, communicated to them by angelic agency. He joined the two on their way to Emmaus, walked with them, talked with them, and sat down to meat with them. He appeared likewise to Peter, and then to the eleven and those with them in the upper room. No one expected Him on any of these occasions. He, however, sought out His own.

The soldiers guarding the tomb did not see Him. They entered Jerusalem that morning without encountering Him. But Mary was not finally to leave the garden without seeing Him, and the women on their way to the city were privileged to behold Him. No unconverted Pharisee, however, and no member of the Aaronic priesthood ministering at the altar could have said that He appeared unto them. A wide and marked difference there was now between the Lord's disciples and the rest of their countrymen. The former might meet with closed doors for fear of the Jews, but the Lord of glory could come into their midst, and set them perfectly free in His presence. The guest of a man that is a sinner! so said the Pharisees at Jericho, as the Lord entered the house of Zacchæus. Henceforth the Pharisees would have no opportunity to make such remarks. They would never see Him visit His people. Yet He could be, and would delight to be, in their midst, and for a time in their company visible to natural sight.

What a privilege was theirs! The fear of man caused them to meet with closed doors (John xx. 19), but the Lord could enter nevertheless. He came and stood in their midst. Surely we may say that no one expected Him, yet He appeared. All assembled there saw Him. They were sitting at meat. He stood in their midst. Without warning and without noise, without opening the door, the different accounts lead us to believe, He was present among them. It

was not a dream ; it was not a vision ; it was not a ghostly appearance. It was Himself in His body of flesh and bones (Luke xxiv. 37-39), in that body in which He had been crucified, marked with the print of the nails, and bearing the token of the soldier's spear thrust. Yet a change had passed over it—a change which He indicated as He spoke of flesh and bones, but not a word of blood. It was, nevertheless, Himself that they all saw. He was alive ; He was risen. They saw Him, and were glad. Death had not made a final separation on earth between Him and His disciples. He ate, too, in their presence to assure them that it was Himself. And now He who had ministered to them before His cross ministered again, and opened their understanding that they might understand the Scriptures (Luke xxiv. 45). Breathing on them that they might receive the Holy Ghost, indicating, too, that a world-wide service was to be before them (Luke xxiv. 47), and adherents were to be gained to swell the company of the disciples (John xx. 23), that day, the first day of the week, significant of the beginning of a new epoch on earth, then drew to its close. But all of them could say, "We have seen the Lord." The testimony of Mary Magdalene—"I have seen the Lord," as we should read in John xx. 18—was not credited by the rest, as Mark writes (xvi. 11). Now they too could say, and told Thomas of it, we have seen the Lord.

Would they see Him again ? He had not promised it. A week apparently passed without any fresh appearance. His promise, "I will see you again" (John xvi. 22), had been fulfilled. His words, too, "Your hearts shall rejoice," had been verified ; and "Your joy no man taketh from you" began from that day to be experienced. The Lord was risen indeed. He could not be holden of death. He could not be shut out from His people. But when and where could they see Him ? He determined that which lay beyond their power to control. A week, we have

already said, went by. Would they ever see Him with outward eyes again? Had He left them and gone to His Father, ascending heavenward, of which He had spoken to Mary Magdalene (John xx. 17)? Then a company gathered out by His ministry, and apart from the Jews who had rejected Him, were meeting again with closed doors, Thomas being with them. A second time, without noise or previous warning, it would seem, the Lord appeared in their midst. The house which He had so recently cleansed and called His own (Matt. xxi. 13) — in which, too, He had taught during the last week of His sojourn on earth — knew Him no more. The priests were daily ministering at the altar, but Him they saw not. The people might crowd the courts at the hour of prayer; but His form, once so familiar to them, was seen there no more. Yet in Jerusalem He was seen. There was a place where He was found. His disciples assembled together, and He came and stood again in their midst. A privileged company, indeed, were they on that occasion likewise.

And now among them He spoke, and addressed Himself to Thomas: "Reach hither thy finger, and behold My hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into My side: and be not faithless, but believing" (John xx. 27). Now, why such words to Thomas? The Lord had heard the reply of Thomas to the testimony of the rest of having seen Him as risen. But He was not visible to any mortal eye when that disciple expressed His unwillingness to believe them. None of the others had told the Lord about it. He, however, had heard it. He was fully aware of that which had passed. Thomas was convinced: "My Lord," he said. But the Lord having shewn His perfect cognisance of the words of His disciple a week previous, Thomas added, "My God." The Lord's reply to Thomas' desire for ocular proof quite overcame him. "My Lord, and my God" was all that he could say. He needed now no tangible proof.

He was convinced ; he was satisfied. But was ocular proof necessary ere the resurrection of Christ should be believed? What should we do if such were the case? The Lord then added a word, precious to us who live between the ascension and the rapture: "Because thou hast seen Me thou hast believed ; blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed" (29).

Two important facts this second appearance establishes. The one that, though unseen, He knows all that goes on. The gods of the heathen might be supposed to be pre-occupied, or journeying, or sleeping, needing to be aroused or to be awakened (1 Kings xviii. 27). The Lord knows all that is said, and sees all that is done. Then the second fact appears, that nothing can shut Him out from His people, if true in heart to Him, if He be minded to be present. Must not these appearances have taught the disciples of His continued interest in them, and this last of His perfect cognisance of what each was saying? Nothing was escaping His notice, for He is God ; and His affection for His people remained unchanged. What the sixteenth Psalm had foretold of Him in life was true, and blessedly true after His death—in the excellent of the earth was His delight.

Of a third appearance John tells us. This time it was to seven disciples, of whom Peter, Thomas, John and his brother James, and Nathaniel are named. Engaged as they had been on the lake all the night fishing, but without success, the Lord appeared in the morning on the shore, and addressed them, saying, "Children, have ye any meat?" An answer from them in the negative, in ignorance of the One who addressed them, brought a response to cast the net on the right-hand side of the vessel. That done, their effort was rewarded with an immense haul of fish. Who the stranger was on the shore, John in the boat with Peter now perceived. It was the Lord. He was there to meet them, to direct them, and to minister to them.

For on reaching the shore they found a fire of coals, and fish laid thereon, and bread. Then followed the invitation, "Come and dine." The Lord was again with them, just when none of them expected it. He knew that they were on the waters of the lake of Galilee, and not at Jerusalem. He came to them where they were, brought the fish to their net, and provided refreshment; surely not unneeded after a night of fruitless toil. They had gone fishing. As yet, they had not received power from on high for their work. They were, therefore, not neglecting higher duties for a night at their old occupation, though this may have been the last occasion on which they were found in their former scene of labour—on the lake of Galilee.

The Lord's visits might be frequent (Acts i. 3), but His occupation with them was constant. He came and He went; came without warning, appeared when He chose, and disappeared as suddenly as He had come. Surely this was teaching for them, a preparation for the time when He should have ascended, fixing in each heart the thought that He knew all about them, where they were and in what they were engaged, though they could not see Him as they had been formerly accustomed to do.

They ate, too, and drank in His presence, perfectly at home after they had been assured of His resurrection (Acts x. 41). With His own on earth He was found, and as much interested in them as ever. But the world knew nothing of these precious interviews. Neither the high priest, the chief priests, the Pharisees nor the Sadducees were present on those occasions. With the world the Lord as risen had nothing to do; nor will He concern Himself with it till He comes to judge it. Meanwhile He is working, by the Spirit through the Word, to rescue perishing souls out of it. Such seasons, however, could only be enjoyed during forty days. After that He ascended, no longer to be on earth in that bodily form to which the disciples must have then become accustomed.

Yet He is with His people still, and He who was perfectly aware of the words of Thomas, though no one saw Him standing by, is just as cognisant of all that goes on amongst His people as He was on the day of His resurrection. Found, too, in their midst then, He promised to be with His disciples to the end of the age (Matt. xxviii. 20); and has told us also of a condition, if fulfilled, on which we can count on His presence. During those forty days no disciple could *count* on His personal presence, though they *enjoyed* it. But we can *count* on His presence in spirit if gathered unto His name in accordance with His words in Matt. xviii. 20: "For where two or three are gathered together unto My name, there am I in the midst of them." "*Unto My name*" we have quoted, for that is really what the Lord said, implying that His name was to be centre of gathering for His people during all future time. And if it be but two or three so gathered, He has promised to be in their midst. What delight He must have in being with His own! None can see Him now with outward eyes; the world cannot enjoy such a privilege as His presence; but the poorest, the feeblest, the least intelligent of His people, if only so gathered, can be sure of His presence among them—a privilege indeed! Angels delight to do His will. All the angelic host will, may we not say do? worship Him. All creation will rejoice when He returns, the true Sun, to gladden earth by the brightness of His presence. Meanwhile, His saints now can know what the world does not—the blessedness of being found on earth where He can be and is present.

But the saints, members of His body, will not be always here. How many, indeed, have passed away. A new, a different experience, therefore, is theirs. We can experience His presence *with us*. They experience the blessedness of being *with Him*, proving, though in this very different way, His delight in His own. From Himself came the first intimation of such a favour. To one who had been a thief, and

was justly suffering crucifixion for his sins, was this made known. The dying Saviour addressed him in language surely audible to others, saying, "To-day shalt thou be with Me in paradise" (Luke xxiii. 43).

Did any Pharisee who heard it curl his lip in token of his scorn? That penitent thief had learnt by experience, ere the sun had set in the western horizon, the fulfilment of that promise, and the blessedness of it. And from that day to this he has never been away from Christ. Unclothed though he was, in paradise with Christ he found himself. For the resurrection he assuredly waits to be clothed upon with his house from heaven, but he waits not to be with Christ. He learnt what that was on the day that he had died. The soldiers broke his legs that his death might be hastened, and be ensured before sunset. By breaking his legs they hastened his departure. Yes, but whither? To be with Christ.

What the penitent thief proved, the Apostle Paul in his turn desired, viz., to depart and to be with Christ; and he adds—and who will gainsay it?—"for it is far better" (Phil. i. 23). Would any tell us of purgatory, and picture the sufferings of purgatorial fires? What purgatory was there for the penitent thief, who that day was to be in paradise with Christ? Did the Apostle Paul anticipate purgatory in the other world? Who could desire to be in purgatory, if that indeed existed? He desired to be with Christ, and looked, that if absent from the body he should be present with the Lord (2 Cor. v. 8). To be with Christ, and that immediately, was his expectation, and that is the immediate and sure prospect of the saint when he departs this life.

The penitent thief and the chief of sinners both with Christ, how that speaks to us of what saints are to the Lord! He will have His own—even though unclothed—*with* Himself, and that from the moment of their death. They depart to be with Christ.

But again the Lord speaks concerning the saints,

not only of their immediate blessing, but of final blessedness likewise. "I will come again, and receive you unto Myself" (John xiv. 3) told the apostles of His undying interest in His own, and His purpose to have them for ever with Himself. Would any one confine such a purpose to the company of the apostles? The Lord's words in His prayer to His Father are a corrective of such an idea. He prayed. They heard Him; and we read the words then uttered: "Father, I will that they also whom Thou hast given Me be with Me where I am (or, that which Thou hast given Me, I will that, where I am, they also may be with Me); that they may behold My glory which Thou hast given Me" (John xvii. 24). His desires for His people remained unchanged. Embalmed now in the sacred page, they assure us that they are unchangeable. It is He Himself who proclaimed them. It is He who will fulfil them. He will come for His own. And His last words in the sacred volume confirm to us that He has not forgotten them. To John He said, "Surely I come quickly." "Amen: Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. xxii. 21) was the ready response of His servant.

He will come for His people, His servants. And when He speaks of this He affirms it without any condition connected with it. He will certainly come for them. But who can be said to be of that company? Here again we have to say that He has told us. "If any man serve Me let him follow Me; and where I am there shall also My servant be" (John xii. 26). And again He speaks, "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit down with Me in My throne" (Rev. iii. 21). The followers in truth, and those who are overcomers, these, He tells us, will be with Him. To them His coming for His own is certain. He would have each one prove that he is one of that company.

With His people now who are on earth, He will have His heavenly saints *with* Himself, even if unclothed. He will crown the wondrous story by having them, when raised or changed, *with* Himself in glory

throughout eternity. What must His saints be to Him? objects of His present interest; objects, too, of His delight for ever!

C. E. S.

STEPHEN.—*Acts vi.-vii.*

THE necessity arising out of the "murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration," brings into prominence this honoured vessel of the Holy Ghost.

His character, as given in the first of these chapters by the Spirit of God, calls for consideration. We know not his earthly parentage, but we read that men of "honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom," were wanted to look after the temporal needs of the disciples, and such were found in the assembly at Jerusalem.

Stephen is the one first named. He is described as a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost. One so characterised would not long be in the rear of the conflict. He would, no doubt, faithfully attend with the other brethren to the duties just laid on them. But we read that "full of faith and power, he did great wonders and miracles among the people."

He is soon seen in close quarters with the foe, and the wisdom and spirit by which he spake was irresistible.

Now we find his enemies enlisting in their opposition to the truth which he spake to them those who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God." This course had been pursued to the full against the Master. Now it is the servant that is feeling the force of the enmity that Satan was inspiring men with. It is suffering *for* Christ's sake. He hears all their lies; he sees how the people are being roused against him. But he is in peace; the *peace of God* which passeth all

understanding is garrisoning his heart in the presence of the people who would in a little embrue their hands in his blood.

Look at the picture portrayed for our gaze by the Holy Ghost of this man ! It is written that all that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel. He was not an angel. If he had been an angel, one of those beings "that excel in strength, that do His commandments, hearkening unto the voice of His word" (Ps. cii. 20), beings who had never fallen from their first estate, no wonder would have been produced by beholding such a sight as faced these would-be judges of right that day. It was a man of their own race, but under the full control of God the Holy Ghost. He knew they charged him with what was wholly untrue. He knew the One he belonged to, and whom he served, was in perfect knowledge of all they were doing and saying against him. And thus the *peace of God within* gave him in their eyes the appearance of one who was entirely of a different race.

Stephen's first utterance, as he begins his wonderful epitome of Israel's course up to the moment then present, was "The God of glory." It suited him to speak of glory. He was full of faith and of the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost, who had come down to earth consequent on the session of the Son of Man at the right hand of God, filled him ; therefore to speak of the God of glory, and the words and ways of that God, would tell home on their conscience sharper than a two-edged sword.

But it is not my purpose, in penning these lines, to dwell on the *address* to the Jewish council, but to call attention to the faithful course of one of like passions with ourselves, and who in the short history we have of him is mentioned as *full of faith and the Holy Ghost*.

We are prepared for a sharp and short conflict.

He is a skilled warrior. Every word finds out the foe. No answer is forthcoming ; but they try to drown the sound of his words, and "running upon him with one accord, they stone him, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." He had nothing to put right in that quarter. All was right there. He had just to go home when his work of suffering was done, when his Master would release him ; and, beautifully in keeping with the closing words of chap. vi., "he falls asleep" (vii. 60).

We have asked a friend who has passed through a night of suffering, "Did you sleep?" The answer may have been, "No ; who could in such circumstances?" But here was one who, with the stones falling heavily upon him, "falls on sleep." By weakness and defeat he won the victory. He went to be with Him who from the right hand was watching His servant, and ministering to him all he required to be a partaker of His sufferings

How suited are his words to such persistent rejecters of Christ, and of the Holy Ghost. "I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God." This filled up their cup. But mark well how that for his own heart it is *Jesus* he sees. He looks up and sees the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God. Thus he won the prize.

It is not only the great boldness that is manifested in Stephen, but the inner quiet which he was seen to possess, which we need to notice. He is more than a conqueror, we may surely say. He reckons himself to be dead unto sin, and alive unto God in Christ Jesus our Lord. The life of Jesus is made manifest in his mortal flesh. His enemies do their worst. They stone him amid his prayers, which reach the ear of Him who sits on the throne. He is like his Master. He cries, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." The Lord help us to ponder over the words, "Full of faith and of the Holy Ghost," as the secret of daily victory over sin in us and around us.

“Full of faith and of the Holy Ghost” are great words. If we judge ourselves to be short of this attainment, but have the desire to reach unto it, there is hope. But, alas! the satisfaction that reigns is so great that, instead of being conquerors through Him that loved us, we are vanquished on every hand—in the world, and in the Church. Stephen resisted unto blood (Heb. xii. 4).

Two spheres are mentioned in Scripture in which we are called to be overcomers—the world in the epistle of John, and the Church in Revelation ii., iii.

May God show His people what His thoughts are about the world—a system which began in Genesis iv. and culminated in the murder of the Son of God—and likewise give the understanding as to His word which makes known what the Church is as His dwelling-place upon earth. Its first appearance on earth we have in Acts ii., but ere the apostles left the scene it had left its “first love,” and gradually the decline increased. Now the Word of God will not be endured by His professing people, and individual interest in Christ as a Saviour is considered to be everything. This is not *overcoming*. Christ the Lord desires to see us refusing man’s thoughts and ways in His assembly, and accepting His thoughts and ways as our rule and guide in all things connected with its presence here on earth. May He grant a *revival* among His beloved people to this end, ere He calls us away from a world we have all failed in so badly.

D. S.

THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD.

I'm going o'er the border
 To the golden land ahead ;
There is the hidden manna
 And *there* the heavenly bread !
 I have fed upon them here,
 For faith is not denied,
 But great is my desire
 In His presence to abide !
 Yea, to leave earth's din and discord
 For *this*, the presence of the Lord !

Here present in the body
 I'm absent from the Lord,
 Though cheered with heavenly comfort
 And nourished by His word.
 But there with Him my Saviour,
 Is day without a night,
 A day of glorious promise,
 The Lamb itself its light !
 Who would not change life's toilsome road
 For *this*, the presence of the Lord ?

I'm crossing o'er the border
 To the land of sunny smiles ;
 Behind me sin and sorrow,
 Behind me Satan's wiles ;
 Before me God's own country,
 The land of radiant bliss,
 Oh ! bright, O happy journey
 Far from this wilderness !
 I long to hear His welcome word,
 Come share the presence of the Lord !

W. R.
