

Faith's Resource in Sickness

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WHENEVER a truth is ignored and neglected, the enemy will pervert it, and introducing error into it, will make it the basis of some evil doctrine. No doctrine that appeals to professing Christendom can afford to throw off the mask of scripturalness, if it claims to be Christian at all. All heresy contains a measure of truth, which acts as the bait upon the hook to attract the unwary. It will also usually be found that the truth so used is that which from general neglect has become unfamiliar to most.

This association with error renders the truth it contains obnoxious to those loyal in heart, so that they are confirmed in their neglect, not realizing that that neglect has made the evil use of Scripture possible.

In this way the precious truths, as to our Lord's coming, and the general outline of the events of the last days, had been for long years neglected by the Church. We might almost say that, since the days of the apostles, they had been ignored save in a most general and vague way. As a consequence the enemy linked these truths with the wicked, extrav-

gant or absurd blasphemies of some system of error. In this way Irvingism, Seventh-Day Adventism, Mormonism, and various schools of Restorationism and Annihilationism, have obtained the ear of the uninstructed conscience, by making use, in greater or less degrees of accuracy, of the neglected truth of prophecy. Thus prophetic truth became identified in the minds of most with these errors, and this in turn has served to render it all the more neglected. On the other hand the enemy has intruded his poison into the minds of many by the cunning admixture of truth.

We can never afford to ignore truth—any part of it. Were a single part of Scripture ignored, generally and persistently, we might expect Satan to draw from it some doctrine cunningly mingled with deadly error. What an argument we have in this, if there were no other reasons, for constantly and systematically reading and studying every portion of the word of God.

What has been said of the truth of the Lord's coming, applies with equal force to the subject now before us. Rome has always claimed the power, through her saints, to heal the sick; and the false systems already mentioned, with scarce an exception, claim a similar power. It is on the other hand, a well-known fact that

evangelical Christendom has almost entirely shrunk from looking at the subject at all. Wherever there has been reaction from this, the teachings of Scripture on the subject have been distorted or placed in undue prominence, or given wrong connections. Thus "Faith Healing" in its varied forms, has become a doctrine of such prominence as well-nigh to eclipse the truths with which it has been associated, if nothing worse; while such awful blasphemies as that of "Christian Science" have found an acceptance among many, which shows the need of a clear understanding of what the word of God has to say upon this subject.

We may truly say that nothing is more common in this world than sickness. What a comment this is upon its condition and relation to Him who, when it came all fair from His hands as the habitation of man, pronounced it "very good." Every sickness is a premonition of death, and is but the echo of that solemn word to fallen Adam, "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." Sin has come in, and death by sin, and the universal sway of death is witnessed by the universal prevalence of sickness.

How infinitely pathetic it is!—all humanity groaning under suffering or in sympathy with it! Think of the anguish of mothers over

their little ones, whose entrance into this world was at the risk of their own lives, and who sicken and linger and die at the very threshold of life. Think of the blight that sooner or later falls upon every home—the supporter taken away, or the tender loving mother, or the pride and hope of the family removed in the fresh vigor of young manhood or womanhood. Sickness is but the precursor of all this, even when there is recovery for the time. We need not be surprised then at the efforts to restore the suffering. It is a witness of that natural affection which lingers in fallen man, a relief to the all-prevailing selfishness of the race.

And can we think that God is indifferent, the only indifferent One to all this suffering? Of course, we reply, No. But is there not a real danger of our shutting Him out, in our thoughts, from the sick room? Are not the thoughts of most, even of most Christians, that God is good, merciful and pitiful, but that we must let things take their course, do the best we can, and hope and pray?

Far be it from us to say a single word against most of that. But the fact is that God is looked upon as at a distance by most of His own, and it is considered presumption to bring Him too near. As a result little comfort is obtained, save of a most general char-

acter. Thus there is failure to see the hand of God in the sickness. It is regarded as "providential," but not by many as a distinct voice to sufferers and to all concerned.

We should recognize His special presence and attention in sickness. All comes through Him, and if a father who calls to his son expects to be answered, so does our Father when He calls to us in sickness. Oh, that the saints of God realized this more fully! We have to do with *Him*; sickness is His appeal to us, and our first care should be to say from our hearts, "Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth."

If God has spoken, He has said something. It would be wanton cruelty if He had afflicted us without a definite purpose. We dare not harbor such a thought for a moment. Let us not then *act* as if we had such a thought. Of whom do most of us think first in sickness, of God or the physician? Far be the thought to despise any human means to relieve suffering, but God must be first. Asa sought to the physicians rather than to the Lord, and he was not cured. How much restless anxiety would be spared if we immediately turned to God, and submitted the entire trouble to Him. We would be none the less faithful in the use of means, but the heart would have found its rest with God at the very outset.

And what needful and holy lessons He would be teaching us. Many of these are necessarily personal, but there are certain general features that we may point out.

Perhaps one of the first lessons to be remembered in sickness is that we are part of God's creation, and subject to the governmental consequences of the fall. None are exempt from this. It brings home to us in an unmistakable way the reality of disobedience. It bridges, as we might say, the distance between Eden and ourselves, and we hear God saying to us what He said to Adam. It is a holy and profitable lesson to bow under His mighty hand as one of His creatures. Our salvation has not affected that, and while His grace has put us into a new place, our bodies are still in the groaning creation, and we wait for their redemption. To say that the body of the saint is now a partaker of the resurrection-life of Christ is little short of blasphemy, if really meant: for it would do away with the need of resurrection and of the Lord's coming. Those who have His resurrection-life in their bodies will never die, for "Christ being raised from the dead, dieth no more" (Rom. 6: 9).

We will thus be reminded of our frailty, our dependence. How prone we are to forget that! Man's breath is in his nostrils, and yet he ex-

alts himself and does and plans as if he were his own master. God lays His hand upon him, and what is he? a poor feeble vessel of clay. His boasted strength is gone, and helpless as an infant, he must fall into the arms of Everlasting Strength. The child of God cannot, because of that, expect to be immune from sickness. He must, as to his body, take his place with all mankind. This will keep him humble. He will not presume upon grace, as though it granted an immunity to nature in a place where sin is inherent in that nature.

And what wholesome exercise, of heart-searching, prayer, and patience, will result from thus being with God about our sickness. We will "hear the rod and Him who hath appointed it." Faith will be called into exercise, and the purpose of the affliction will be understood. We have been speaking of some of the general lessons common to all. Without doubt there will be many a lesson known only to the soul and to God. Even in the most blameless life outwardly, there is much that the holy eye of Love has seen which it cannot pass by. Devotion that has seemed well-nigh complete, has had the stain of spiritual pride. Conduct that has seemed most loving, has concealed the *feeling* of envy. Duties have been neglected, spiritual sloth

fostered, opportunities have not been availed of. Ah, brethren, when we are in the holy presence of God, our best things need to be judged, the iniquity of our holy things is disclosed. We need not suspect or accuse one another of grave outward evil, but there will always be room for searching of heart, and for confession to God.

Sickness, or other affliction, may be sent as preventives to pride or other evil. "*Lest I should be exalted above measure*" etc., (2 Cor. 12: 7). Paul had been honored with most amazing revelations, in which his body had been lost sight of: "Whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth" (ver. 2). He returns, however, after the vision, to his normal state, and knew of course that he was now "in the body." He might have been tempted to ignore or forget this—nay, to claim even that resurrection-life had now been imparted to his body. All this is most graciously obviated by the "thorn"—the bodily affliction. Nor was this removed even after thrice-repeated entreaty. It remained, and with it the all-sufficient grace to make it the occasion for the display of divine strength. Thus Paul could gladly suffer affliction that the power of Christ might rest upon him.

In like manner are there not cases to-day

where the Lord does not restore the sick? Where the weakness and suffering remain, and with them, the sense of the Lord's grace and presence? How many a household has its sanctuary around the bed of some life-long, patient sufferer; what a testimony for Christ, what fragrance of faith, what cheer abound here; and what a witness for the *necessity* of the coming of the Lord, to transplant such a flower to its true environment in the garden of the Lord. Do not such cases, known to most of us perhaps, furnish an answer to the flippant charge of so-called faith-healers, that *all* sickness is unbelief.

The case of Epaphroditus (*Phil. 2: 25-30*) illustrates the fact that special devotedness may bring sickness, even to death. So far from this sickness being a chastening upon Epaphroditus for sin and failure, it was an honorable mark of the reverse. Does not such a case remind us that we are living in a world where the cross is a reality, where faithfulness often brings the reverse of what the world calls success? In this way the sickness of Epaphroditus is raised to the dignity of association with Paul's thorn, and Stephen's martyrdom.

But this brings us to consider the simple fact of illness among the saints. We must not ignore it, or pass over it lightly. We are

to turn to God about it, and learn the lessons which He would teach us. Thus each one will be able to say, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted."

But there are others concerned besides the sick one. "If one member suffer, all the members suffer with it." There is surely a voice, not only to the immediate family, but to the people of God who are connected with the afflicted person. "For this cause many are weak and sickly *among you*, and many sleep." It does not necessarily follow that the sickly ones or those who fall asleep are the ones who have failed to judge themselves. They may be godly ones whose departure would be most sorely felt, and thus their sickness would be calculated to affect the assembly far more than that of some careless or useless one. "The righteous perisheth," said the prophet to the careless nation. God removed the faithful if by this means the indifferent might lay it to heart. Alas, he had to say, "And no man layeth it to heart." Is it not to be greatly feared that this has been the case in our day too? God lays His rod upon His people; it matters not who the individual directly afflicted may be, the voice is for us all. "Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord" (Lam. 3: 40).

Is not this the great object of all affliction,

to turn us afresh to God? How prone we are to forget, to neglect, to grow cold by imperceptible degrees, until some chastening is required to bring us unreservedly before our God. His love must have us in His presence. There only can we walk in holiness, and be conformed to the image of our Lord. "If thou wilt return . . . return unto Me" (Jer. 4: 1). He wishes no mere reform, no mere correction of this or that point of conduct; He desires the entire change of the attitude of the soul that has wandered from Him.

Ah, brethren, when a company of His people thus recognize the hand of God upon them in the affliction of a single individual, how precious are the results. Instead of being confined to the immediate circle, the peaceable fruits are produced among all. Is not this the purpose of our God, and shall we not lay it seriously to heart? Corporate truth is most wide-reaching.

We have now reached the point where we can act together. The tendency of nature is to drift asunder. Grace unites. A common object, a common life, and a common Spirit dwelling within us—all these draw us together. Thus, too, a common trial has the same effect. Have the saints been growing cold? Have they been falling asunder? Ah, how a common affliction, laid to heart, will

draw them together, because it draws them to God. United humbling and confession will be the result, and a practical unity be again manifest.

Until some such state has been reached, individually and collectively, all the objects of the affliction have not been attained. How can we ask for the removal of the chastening if we have not learned in some degree its lesson? We might almost as well apply to a physician to heal, as to the Lord, if *only* healing is our object. May this not explain much of the delay in answering our prayers? It would but harden, if God granted the prayers of unexercised souls.

But affliction has had its blessed results, and the saints, humbled under the mighty hand of God, seeing the needs-be of the chastening, and turning with all their hearts to Him, can now see what His word offers for comfort and help.

"Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the Church unto God for him" (Acts 12: 5). Never was case more hopeless than this, so far as man was concerned. The thirsty sword of persecution had just had its appetite whetted by the blood of James. One more day, and Peter must die. But the church, the assembly, not a few, but all, were before God

in prayer. The word suggests both the intensity and the perseverance of their supplications. We know the result. And He is the same God to-day.

But we have a special scripture upon this subject which we are now ready to examine.

"Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms. Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: and the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much. Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth for the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit" (Jas. 5: 13-18).

James writes, as we know, to the nation, "to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad." He looks upon them still as the people of God, and seeks in the spirit of one of the prophets to draw them to God. He

recognizes of course that Christ has come, but he does not take up the truths of redemption and the descent of the Spirit, as Paul, Peter and John. He is thus, we might say, the last voice of God to the nation. It is a book of moral principles for the conscience, rather than dispensational. Rightly to answer to the word here they must have new birth and faith in Christ, but the question of outward separation from Judaism is not raised as it is in the epistle to the Hebrews.

Hence we have allusion to the synagogue, with the respect of the rich to which the Jews were specially prone, as not being a heavenly people. We need not be surprised therefore to see the governmental side of truth emphasized, and special directions for the comfort of the sick. But it is striking at the very point where we would think the Jewish features most prominent, we find the assembly. But let us look at the passage somewhat in detail.

The general resource in times of affliction is prayer; just as joy, with hearts in the presence of God, leads to thanksgiving for His mercies. Nothing is to take us out of His presence: we pour out our sorrows in prayer, and our joys in praise. How simple is the walk with God.

But now sickness has come. We first see

the exercise of the one who is laid low: "Let him send for the elders of the assembly." This shows a heart that bows under the hand of God, and that recognizes the share His assembly has in all that concerns each one. The elders are the representatives of the entire assembly, and more particularly of its oversight, care and government. They are of course godly men of faith, age and experience, who have themselves been trained in the school of God, and who know what sorrow is. They were appointed by the apostles under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and thus had in that day an official position under the designation of inspiration.

This official position seems to accord with the anointing with oil spoken of in connection with prayer. It was used we remember by the twelve disciples when sent forth on their mission of healing to Israel (Mark 6: 13). It was the invariable mark of official designation of kings, priests and prophets (when the latter had any designation). It is a well-known type of the Holy Spirit, who alone can fit for service, or restore to it; and, as a type, fittingly belongs to an epistle to those who had not yet separated from Judaism, whatever else it may signify.

But it is the prayer of faith, and not the oil that saves the sick. This is evidently the

essential and permanent part of the direction. Prayer links us with God; forms never can. These men of faith and experience, with the care of the assembly upon them, unitedly pour out their hearts to God. In faith they lay hold upon Him, and He does not disappoint. "The prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up." The affliction was recognized as from the Lord; His mercy was sought, in connection with the order and government of His house; and His hand of power raised up.

More than this, if sins had been committed, they would be forgiven. This does not mean that sin necessarily had been committed, save in the general sense we have already seen, but that the sickness might have been as chastening for some special sin. The restoration to health in that case would be a witness of the restoration to communion also.

This leads the apostle to speak further of this feature of governmental dealing for sins, and the place of confession. It will be noticed that he does not speak of confession to the elders, though that may have been done, but "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed." Grace has brought us into the light. The holiness of God manifested our sins, while His grace has put them away. We abide in that light

with all naked and open to His holy eye. This sense of being in the presence of God will give real fellowship with all who are in that presence. "If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another." Thus confession of faults will be natural and unforced to those whom we realize are in the light. If we have been before God truly about our sins, pride is gone, and there will be no hesitation on that account to speak to one another. This does not mean that we should be constantly pouring out the tale of our failures into our brethren's ear. There may be those who are in no spiritual condition to receive such confidences. The lesson may have been learned with God. All will one day come out at the judgment-seat of Christ, but there are times when it can most profitably come out now. If there is the confidence in the Lord and in one's brethren, it may often be a most sanctifying lesson to all concerned.

This confession of faults is spoken of as mutual, and so with the prayer that follows. It shows that it is to be done whenever there is need and faith for it. Most surely it could not be made a condition of prayer, nor be held before the sick one as the priest would hold up the confessional, as the only door to absolution. This would be neither grace nor holiness.

The apostle closes the subject with an example of the effectual—"the energetic"—prayer of a righteous man, one who is walking with God. Elijah closed and opened the heavens by his prayer. He was a man like ourselves, weak, liable to attacks of unbelief and discouragement, and yet he wrought with and for God, and obtained the answers to his prayers. What an incentive to do likewise.

But it will be said, and truly, that we are not living in the days of the apostles, that elders cannot now be officially appointed, and therefore this scripture is inoperative. Most surely there can be no assumption of official dignity, and, more sad than that, there is a state of ruin which makes us even ask, Where is the assembly? The world has crept in, discord and strife have followed, till the Church of Christ, to man's eye, is a rent and divided thing. Elders of the assembly! Alas, the assembly itself has crumbled into fragments; and if grace has enabled a few to act upon the truths of the assembly, it is but the feeblest of remnants. Weeping and shame become us. Elders and anointing would then seem to be out of place where our common ruin witnesses against us.

But, blessed be the God of all grace, *He* has not failed. Christ and the Holy Spirit have not changed, and the word of God, with its

precious promises, remains the same. Eliminate, then, that which speaks of the unfailed Church, and we have still, fellowship, experience, care, and above all the prayer of faith. Nothing can alter that. God is the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.

Nor is it presumption to recognize those gifts of rule which abide for the Church. Brethren of age and experience, of piety and faith—there are these, thank God—whom faith can call in to unite in the prayer that lays hold of God. There is still the brotherly confidence that can pour out the sorrow and the failure into the ear of loving sympathy.

How much, then, dear brethren, we have left from this scripture for our comfort and guidance even in a day of ruin. Shall we not then make practical and experimental use of it? "Prove Me now herewith" may we not plead, if we have morally complied with the conditions? (Mal. 3: 10, 11.)

We cannot dictate to our blessed God, nor would we *demand* the restoration to health of the sick. We would, however, *ask* that if it be His will He may show us mercy. Thus was Epaphroditus raised up. May we not count upon the same mercy? Particularly when it is some useful and faithful servant of Christ and the Church, either locally or more generally, may we not claim the promise, in sub-

mission ever to higher wisdom and purposes than ours?

Nor is this in the least inconsistent with the believing use of means for recovery. The same prophet who announced Hezekiah's recovery in answer to prayer, prescribed the means which was to be used for that recovery. It is pernicious to antagonize God's instrumentalities; to turn the back upon His mercy because brought by the hands of a physician. This begets a pride which will need humbling as surely as any other sin. Some may be misled, and humbly refuse the use of means, but the *system* which does this is based on pride. It dictates to God.

Let us now turn to the house where God has raised up the loved one in answer to prayer and exercise. Joy and gratitude are there, chastened by the memory of the sorrows and exercises passed through. The glory is given to God, and this by a circle as wide as was engaged in the previous exercises. Let the reader ponder "the writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, when he had been sick, and was recovered of his sickness" (Is. 38: 9-22). There is the memory of the bitterness of the chastening, the hourly expectation of death, the cry to God. Then comes the grateful acknowledgment that "Himself hath done it," and the sense of a holiness in God

that will impel him to walk softly all his days.

So may it be with us, beloved and sorrowing saints of God. Let us learn from the great Teacher, and while bereavement does come, and, blessed be God, is not a sorrow without hope—nay, is far better for the one who departs—let us learn also to make use of this resource for faith in times of sickness.

Lord, awaken Thy people, and sanctify to them all Thy ways.