

Paul's Closing Message.

2 Tim. ii. 14--iv. 15.

BY JOHN THOMSON.

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PAUL'S CLOSING MESSAGE.

II Timothy is sometimes spoken of as the prison epistle of the Apostle Paul. Certainly it would appear to reflect right through the very trying circumstances of his closing days. And from out of these circumstances there comes here, does there not, a message that, alike in its intrinsic value, and in its impressiveness as a closing utterance of the great Apostle, remains unsurpassed in importance. For us to-day this is so, even as for Timothy, the one to whom it was primarily addressed.

One point is particularly noticeable throughout—the place and importance given to the truth, and the earnest solicitude the Apostle displays for its maintenance, and for the definite teaching of it. See how he speaks of this as his own great absorbing interest, and his sole life work; and mark how he connects even the circumstances of his imprisonment with it. “Be not thou therefore,” he exhorts Timothy, “ashamed of the testimony of our Lord nor of me His prisoner; but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel.” Of that gospel he had been “appointed a preacher, and an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles,” and in that capacity had met with much adversity—“for the which cause I also suffer these things.” Suffering trouble himself, as if a veritable malefactor, and even unto bonds, he yet rejoins to say “the word of God is not bound.” He exults in the thought that be

the opposition what it may, let the enemy do whatever lies in his power, the truth abides, the light cannot be extinguished, the testimony cannot be silenced.

Thus, looking back, and remembering how at a critical occasion no one stood with him but all forsook him, he reflects that "nevertheless the Lord stood with me and strengthened me," and this for the express purpose "that by me the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear."

Altogether he conceived it as a great charge and responsibility with which he had been entrusted, and looked upon the spread and elucidation of the truth as a matter second in importance to nothing else on earth. And so it is that he seeks likewise to impress this upon his beloved son Timothy—that there was that which had been committed to *his* trust also, a charge and a service that he in turn was responsible to keep and discharge in all faithfulness.

Over and over again, in both epistles, in different terms, he mentions it, recurring always to the thought that in the ministry of the truth, in the publication and teaching of it, is to be found a labour, an occupation, a service unsurpassed in importance, in view alike of what the Christian revelation in itself is and of the abounding error around.

And does it not also come home to us with peculiar force to day, when the abundance and virulence of this error is only so much the more strongly marked. Truth is truth still; its importance not diminished but enhanced, the need of spreading and elucidating it greater than ever. Shall we not then find in the valedictory message of Paul here to Timothy a message to ourselves? The special circumstances prevailing and impending when it was penned only tend to make it still more applicable to our case.

In this section of the epistle on which we now enter, truth and error are presented in what may be termed their native antagonism, and the spread and teaching of each come before us as a work in which opposing forces and persons are engaged.

The course of error also is traced from the beginning onwards to the close of the Christian dispensation. Of certain even then who concerning the truth had erred the Apostle could speak, mentioning them by name, Hymenæus and Philetus. Of the future he could warn—"the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine," &c. And of the remote future, "the last days," he could, by the spirit of prophecy also tell, speaking of difficult times that would arise, when error would be predominant within the sphere of professing Christendom. Error did have then its followers and teachers, it would have in the future, and it does have to-day. It is ours to see that truth has no less its devoted disciples and representatives.

"Of these things put them in remembrance," begins the Apostle, referring no doubt to all that of which he had been speaking earlier in the epistle. Previous to this the Apostle has been emphasising, for the benefit of his young correspondent, the point we have mentioned already, that the truth as given by God must be assigned a place and importance altogether unique. The peculiar character also attaching to it in the Apostle's estimation, in view of the error by which it is surrounded, cannot escape notice. It is spoken of as "the testimony of our Lord," of which Timothy is not to be ashamed; as an outline of "sound words" which he is to have or hold; and lastly as "my gospel," that is to say Paul's gospel, according to which standard elements of the faith have been revealed, and witness of them is to be maintained.

All these, we may say, are terms characterising the truth in ways relative to the nature of the circumstances then obtaining or portending. They, all of them, suppose defection or antagonism in varied degrees. And thus these characteristics, needless to say, retain, and more than retain, their significance to-day. Never was greater need for maintaining "the testimony of our Lord," for having, or retaining, the outline of sound words, for being instructed in, and holding fast to "Paul's gospel."

The clear and definite teaching of the truth revealed also has been spoken of with peculiar emphasis in the former part of this epistle. Concerning himself, the Apostle says that of the gospel he has been appointed "a preacher, and an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles." A teacher! Teaching is an important matter, and its function in the great service of making known the truth of God is often overlooked. Teachers form one class of the gifts which an ascended Christ has given (Eph. iv), and which the Holy Spirit operates (1 Cor. xii) for the benefit of the saints here on earth. And this, in passing, is exactly what is meant by the term "doctrine" so often met with in these pastoral epistles. Doctrine in Scripture simply means teaching, *i.e.*, the *act* and *method* as often as the *substance* of teaching. We confine the word to-day commonly to signify *that which is taught*. When Timothy is told to give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to *doctrine*, it is the *work* of teaching he is in this last term called on to practise. The fact is that to bring us into touch with the truth, to instil it permanently into our minds and hearts, teaching and teachers are indispensable. The truth has first of all to be revealed, then published abroad, lastly, patiently and carefully taught. So that when the apostle describes himself as an apostle, and preacher or herald, and a teacher of the Gentiles, he takes in, as it were, the whole breadth of the operation of making known the truth—an apostle to reveal it, a preacher to herald or publish it abroad, and a teacher to elucidate it, to indoctrinate his hearers with it.

We must remember therefore that it is in connection with the discharge of this last office that the word doctrine, so often occurring in these epistles is used. The earnestness and anxiety which the Apostle displays for the maintenance of "sound doctrine" or "wholesome teaching" is simply an emphasising of that need for the definite and clear unfolding of the truth which we have already seen he expresses as a great desideratum.

Timothy, his dearly beloved son in the faith, he puts in

remembrance to stir up the gift of God which was in him by the putting on of his hands. He exhorts him to "keep by the Holy Spirit which dwelleth in us, that good thing which was committed unto him" or "the good deposit entrusted." The things which he had heard of Paul "heard in the presence of many witnesses" he was to "entrust to faithful men who shall be able to teach others also." Altogether, therefore, the inviolability of the truth, and in consequence the great importance of faithful and definite teaching of it, form in great measure the theme of the epistle up to this point.

Of these things, then, Timothy was to remind his hearers and to charge them to avoid mere word strife, which not merely would not conduce to profit; but would tend to positive mischief for souls. Over-refined abstractions are merely so much web spinning, and perfectly useless for building us up in our most holy faith. Not speculation, but positive, definite truth is what we require. Not but that there are distinctions, and clearly marked divisions in the realm of Christian truth. It was one of the ways in which Timothy would approve himself a workman that needeth not to be ashamed—that he should rightly divide the word of truth.

The Apostle returns again, however, to that which is negative—to what is to be avoided: "But shun profane and vain babblings, for they will fall into greater impiety. And their word will spread as a gangrene, of whom is Hymenæus and Philetus, men who as to the truth have gone astray, saying that the resurrection hath taken place already, and overthrown the faith of some." What we might call the cumulative character of error is remarkable; how, once entertained, it develops into greater and ever greater impiety. The illustration used is that of a dire malady, a gangrene, which is remarkable for spreading rapidly over the person attacked. It may only begin with that light, irreverent, frivolous attitude of mind which finds expression in irreligious and irresponsible utterances, the profane and vain babblings here. There is

no saying to what it might advance. The seriousness of this is instanced by the case of Hymenæus and Philetus.

The Apostle has spoken of lapse, of falling, of overthrow. But there is that which cannot fail; cannot be overthrown. "Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth firm." Principles there are that abide unchanged whatever happens. And in presence of error and failure, Christendom lapsed into a mixed heterogeneous state, wherein evil and good lie side by side, these principles must be acted upon. There are those to be separated from, and those to company with, all according to the truth we are called on to be fellowhelpers with in a day of perplexity and confusion.

Foolish and unlearned questions again, or discussions with ignorant men, men not subject to the Word of God, are to be avoided—they only lead to strife. And the servant of the Lord must not strive. He is rather to seek to be inoffensive toward all men, apt to teach—again we have this important service of teaching referred to—patient or forbearing. In meekness he seeks to instruct or correct those that oppose themselves, in the hope that God may at some time give them repentance to acknowledgment of the truth, and that they may awake out of the devil's snare, who are now entrapped by him to do his will.

Something more we learn here of the truth and of the teaching of it. First that there must needs be a mind and heart subject to the Word of God before the truth can be learned or perceived. "Unlearned questions" here is literally "undisciplined questionings," questionings of men who are simply following their own minds, minds not disciplined or subject to the Word of God. We know what that means. We meet it every day: "My opinion is"; "I hold that so-and-so," &c., even amongst Christians. How different from the sentiment of 2 Cor. x. 5: "Overthrowing reasonings and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and leading captive every thought to the obedience of Christ."

Depend upon it, we can never be intelligent as to the truth of God without being thoroughly subject to it. "He that doeth His will shall know of the doctrine." The difficulty is not mere knowledge but "acknowledgment" of the truth. How terrible a thing again is error, the opposite of truth. As to those led away with it, it can only be hoped that God may at some time in His providence bring things to such a pass with them that repentance and acknowledgment of the truth will be awakened in them. In the meantime they are asleep in a trap of the devil.

There were not only serious lapses from the faith in the days when he wrote; but it was given Paul, in the capacity of a prophet to look onward to the future, and by inspiration to write of the period spoken of as "the last days." Perilous, or difficult, times there were to be when the final phases of the Christian dispensation arrived. "Men shall be lovers of self, lovers of money," etc. These are not men in general, but men within the pale of Christendom, professors of Christianity outwardly, that are spoken of. Without a doubt these times are here and now. From such as these we are to turn away. In this state of matters there are, as in everything else, leaders and led. And examples of both the Apostle had in mind, and could enumerate even then: "Of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women, laden with sins, led by divers lusts." There were, on the one hand, the despicable underhand tactics, of the wily proselytisers of error; and, on the other, the unbalanced frivolous state of mind easily swayed by the emotional, and captivated by the sensual, that made the conquest easy.

These victims of deception are spoken of as "ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth"—a most remarkable attitude. There is implied continuous mental activity, and acquisition of knowledge after a sort; but, alas! it is *not growth in the truth*. The mind can be very active on theological matters, and yet no real spiritual apprehension of divine truth be present, the most ardent searcher "finding then

no end, in wandering mazes lost." Such is the case with these followers in the way of error.

What of the leaders? In the same manner as Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses so these also withstand the truth. The magicians of Egypt worked on the principle of imitation and could make their counterfeit productions acceptable and plausible. So could these false teachers, and so do they still. But is it without significance that when in due time "their folly became manifest unto all men," as our passage expresses it, the rock upon which they split was when it came to *the production of life*. So, at all events, it is in Christendom to-day. Religious misleaders can construct a wonderful edifice of ethics and morals, elaborate a philosophy of life, enunciate truths, in many ways hold up ideals, both personal and social, in a manner to compare favourably with real Christianity; but, when it comes to the vital matter, the power in man himself to carry these out, we see the breakdown at once. *The finger of God is not there*. They can give everything but life; all the machinery but no power.

Is it not suggestive also that this is what characterises the system of Christendom essentially in this its closing phase? Sardis has a name to live and yet is dead. Laodicea is neither cold nor hot. The corporate state is such as to be pretentious of great vitality; but in reality the coldness of death reigns. These religious leaders, then, do resist the truth after this fashion, and they are characterised by men of debased mind, of no real worth as far as faith is concerned.

One more thing regarding them the Apostle has to add. He had the confidence that, in the providence of God, a limit would be set to the career of these false teachers, in his day at least, whatever might be the case at later times. After "that which letteth" or "hindereth" has been removed (2 Thess. ii. 6, 7) the apostates, of which these were a sample, might proceed far enough. But, in the meantime, these "shall proceed no further, for their folly shall be thoroughly manifest to all," as that of Jannes and Jambres came to be.

In contrast to all this seduction, and folly, and error, Timothy could reflect on that which was so well known to him, the pathway of the Apostle hitherto; his doctrine, his course, his aims and ideals. There was faithfulness there and consistency. Further, the faith, endurance, and love, that form such a blessed trio of Christian graces, shone resplendently in him. And of the resignation or patience, persecutions and sufferings, that arise from the adverse environment of this world, there was no more striking example. "Such sufferings," says the Apostle "as befell me in Antioch, in Iconium, in Lystra, what persecutions I endured."

The question may arise, Why are these in particular selected? Antioch, Iconium, Lystra. By reading Acts xiii. to xvi. we may see. The incidents would be memorable, ever memorable, to Timothy. Resident in these parts, it was just about the time that his own discipleship began that these things happened in his neighbourhood. When he became an active follower of the Lord and of the Apostle these persecutions mentioned would be recent, and the talk, no doubt of God's people there. Thus, then, these sufferings of the Apostle in proclaiming the truth in the district with which Timothy was so familiar, and by which his early attention had been awakened to the fact that through just such a path as that his course also, as a disciple, must lie, there was peculiar force in bringing to his remembrance at this time.

Out of them all had the Lord delivered him. Yea, say, the Apostle, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. This, in the nature of things, Christianity and the world being what they are. Not all that are Christians; but all that *in Christ Jesus will live godly*. Always and ever true this is, for a godly life in Christ Jesus always lies athwart the course of the world. The aged Apostle would have us remember this. He himself had long since proved the truth of the principle in stripes and imprisonments, in sorrows and sufferings, and his present circumstances exemplified it.

Changed as the days may be, altered as the temper of the times, faithfulness will still in some measure reap the same reward. In the Gallo-like tolerance the world has accorded us hitherto, we are in danger of forgetting that its antagonism to Christ still remains unchanged. Let us be reminded, by the rattling of the Apostle's chain here, as it were, as he admonishes us "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution," that this is verily the case, and should occasion arise let us be prepared to endure hardness, to be partakers of the afflictions of the gospel, to suffer persecution.

Once more to note the course of the religious leaders whose case gave rise to this apparent digression: "But evil men and impostors shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived." Instead of being led astray like such, "abide thou," he says "in those things which thou hast learned, and hast been convinced of"—(what a lack of real conviction there is about some things we profess to hold), "knowing of whom thou hast learned them"—Paul himself probably, the vessel of their divine revelation. In any case the persuasion or assurance of these truths was on the ground of their divine authority. This also is strengthened by the consideration that that which Timothy had, from infancy, been familiarised with as the ground and sure foundation of faith was the Holy Scriptures, able to make wise unto salvation.

The next verse goes still further, and is above all others the Scripture's own statement of its claim to divine authority and inspiration: "*Every Scripture is inspired of God.*" Its use and profit to the child of God is thereupon stated: it is "profitable for doctrine, for conviction, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly furnished unto every good work."

In chapter iv. now, the Apostle, having laid down the truth as to the sacred deposit, both as to its intrinsic character and as to its useful purpose, rises to a passionate exhortation to Timothy to be earnest in the ministration of it. On two grounds he urges it (1) the growing subtlety and power

of false teaching ; (2) his own approaching departure. "I testify," or "adjure thee, before God and Christ Jesus who is about to judge living and dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom"—a very solemn and weighty charge—"preach the word ; be urgent in season out of season ; convict, rebuke, encourage with all long-suffering and doctrine." Such ministration of the truth, it must be realised, calls for qualifications of no ordinary kind. Spiritually and morally the preacher must be equipped to undertake it. "With all long-suffering and doctrine" means, with the utmost patience of a teacher, and with the clearest definiteness of divinely-revealed doctrine.

For the time will come when such sound doctrine will not be endured ; but, having itching ears, men will heap to themselves teachers after their own lusts, and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside unto fables. Now, if ever, has such a time come. The sound wholesome teaching of revealed truth is not tolerated. Men, desirous of that which is pleasing to the ear, find a multitude of teachers to satisfy their own fancies. How forcible the Apostle's charge to us therefore to-day. The fables to which the masses of Christendom are turned aside are witness to the truth of the Apostle's premonition. The truth from which they have turned is still with us, and should be held to, and witnessed for.

The Apostle's own imminent removal from the scene of his labours he pressed on Timothy as only an additional incentive to still more earnest endeavour on his part. For himself he was assured that the time of his departure was at hand, and it made him only the more urgent that the good work might be carried on. How vividly are brought before us in the verses that follow in the chapter, the circumstances of his closing days. Intense grief it must have been to this devoted servant and Apostle to note the general defection, not merely from himself personally, but also from the truth he stood for. As one has said, "It is nothing to be in a small minority at the beginning of a testimony, for every true principle begins in a

minority of one. It carries with it hope, which is the birth-right of youth. But when a testimony has been proclaimed and in a measure accepted, next neglected, discredited, and deserted by its own advocates, then all is discouragement, dragged down by disappointment, which is the weary burden of age."

But the Apostle is not so dragged down. He felt the weight of it, and it gives point and earnestness to his exhortations to Timothy here, and, shall we not say, to us; but it is no crushed, embittered, chagrined spirit that breaks out in this closing message—"But thou, be sober in all things, suffer hardship, do an evangelist's work, fully perform thy ministry." For himself—"The Lord," he exults in confidence of faith, "shall deliver me from every evil work, and shall preserve me unto His heavenly kingdom, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen." The time of his departure has come, and, with a good fight fought, having finished his course, and kept the faith, he passes on to where he waits for his sure reward, leaving behind him this last, clear, solemn charge to Timothy, to us.

This valedictory message of Paul then, to one so dearly beloved as Timothy, charged with all the seriousness of such an one's last words, comes to us also with something more than ordinary significance. The circumstances under which it was written, the situation disclosed as prevailing and imminent in the professing church, and the particular topic which it is largely concerned with laying stress upon, all make it peculiarly interesting to us to-day.

This message comes not from one who cannot fully appreciate the difficulties of our time. It comes not from one who in the soft, smooth, happy eventide of a successful life, as the world counts success, could look forth with an easy complaisance on the fruit of his efforts, and let fall trite aphorisms for the guidance of others. It is no long-favoured child of fortune who is here drawing from his store of easily garnered wisdom; but a man who, in the sacrifice and suffering of a life given

up to the service of God, in the buffeting and persecution of a career spent in the spread of the truth in a hostile world, had learned to endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.

At the close here now, this faithful witness of the testimony of our Lord, after being hounded and battered from one end of the civilised world to the other, lies a prisoner in Rome. Not only so, but he was in some degree a forsaken prisoner also, others falling away or falling back from facing such an ordeal. A few choice spirits there were surrounding him, "fellow-workers unto the kingdom of God," as he, Cæsar's prisoner calls them; and these had been a comfort unto him. But in large measure he was left alone to face the cost of faithfulness.

It is indeed an affecting picture this, of this old, infirm man in the centre of the vast world-empire standing alone for the testimony and truth of God, and to see that his great thought now, his last word to others is still to press on in upholding and spreading it. His great anxiety was that as, one after another, he and others of the first band of witnesses passed away, others should, as it were, step forward to take up the torch, that such as Timothy would be stirred up to carry forward the testimony.

In full view of all that was taking place in the church, and of all the inroads of error that he clearly discerned were coming this was what he pressed. The place and function of the truth, the need for its maintenance and the necessity of its teaching, is, for the Apostle, the great need of the moment.

It is not less so but surely more to day. This is for us the true apostolic succession. In the presence of so much error, the closing words of this beloved faithful servant of God, his warnings, his exhortations should be weighted with power, and winged with significance to us. The call it contains should come home to to be up and doing in the work of that ministry of the truth, in our measure, and to the maintenance of the faith that is being so traitorously surrendered all around.

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