



SUNDAY READING

SERMON.

Alive.

BY REV. C. H. SPURGEON.

"The righteous of thy testimonies is everlasting: give me understanding, and I shall live."—Psalm 119:134.

Yesterday afternoon I was the subject of a somewhat singular circumstance. An esteemed friend and relative came to my house, evidently laboring under great distress of mind, and having inquiries to make of a very important order. He had seen a gentleman who had informed him that it was generally rumored that I had had been taken ill with heart disease and had died in a very short time. It was clear I was not dead, and the great fear was removed. The question was put, "Would you like to see him?" But my kind friend was perfectly satisfied, and was too full of joy to wish to linger; he would go back and answer with certainty the many inquiries which continued to be made at the time. How the report originated I am quite at a loss to tell. It has evoked much kindness, but it is rather odd to feel called upon to assure your friends that you are yet alive; I can but show myself and ask my friends to see for themselves; I look like a dead man.

Spiritually Alive.

By this incident I was led to turn a heart-glance upon myself, and to say, "I wonder whether there is any question as to whether I am alive in the higher sense?" That I am alive as to my natural life is clear enough; but is my spiritual life equally evidenced? The inquiry came home to my own heart, and therefore I suggest it to yours, for it may profit you. Brethren, do you live unto God? Are you walking as those who are alive from the dead? Remember, my sisters, that it is written, "She that liveth in pleasure is dead while she liveth;" may no woman here come under that condemnation! Brethren, I call upon you also to remember the word of the Lord Jesus to the church of Sardis, "I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead." Many exceed upon the face of the earth, but into "life" they have not entered.

My subject is life, may the Lord of life help me to speak of it after a lively manner. A consideration of the text will help in the inquiry as to whether we live unto God or no; and it may further help those who sigh after the divine life to discover the way of divine quickening.

I. First let us consider this prayer in its simplicity. We ask you to notice, first, that this is a suitable prayer for the awakened sinner. He discovers himself to be guilty, and he perceives that there is a punishment for sin, and so far he understands his position. Alarmed by his conscience, he thinks he sees the Judge upon the great white throne about to pronounce the final sentence, and he knows what it must be, for it is written, "The soul that sinneth, it shall die;" so far he understands well enough. He hears, also, that there is life, life in Christ Jesus, life for the guilty; but his mind is much confused with many terrors, and with the horrible dread of the sure consequences of his sin. He has sufficient faith in the revelation of God to know that there is life in a look at the Crucified One; but he does not quite understand what that look means. Then is his time to pray, "Give me understanding, and I shall live."

Equally applicable, however, will this be in the case of one who is a Christian, and who is struggling against temptation. Perhaps, my brother, you are placed in a position where

You Are Fiercely Tempted

from without by the world, and possibly you may fear that you will not be able to survive it. It comes with such force that you are staggered by its power; you feel that you cannot bear up under such pressure, you despair of your spiritual life. Well, then, ask God to bring home His word to your hearts, that you may act wisely, and may meet the rebuke of the ungodly and the temptations of the wicked prudently, baffling the adversary by your sacred vigilance. Pray, "Give me understanding, and I shall live," for a clear understanding is needful for your preservation from the enemy.

Do you think that this prayer will often well up from the heart of the suffering believer? To some of our dear brothers and sisters life is one long pang, for bodily distress has fixed its fangs in their flesh. There are others whose life is always from hand to mouth, and sometimes bread is scant in the cupboard, so that grinding poverty breaks them to dust. These are sore ills, as those know who have to bear them. Some, too, are subject to domestic trials, watching daily the pining away of one they love; or bereavement has followed bereavement till they seem left alone in a land. Dear ones, who have been in these ways, have you not cried out at times, "I shall never be able to bear it; I shall die of a broken heart under these great afflictions. O that I might hide me in the grave!" You fear that you will perish if the pressure continues; but you will do no such thing. God will help you to bear your burden by sustaining your soul with heavenly meat that others know nothing of. If the load be made not lighter, this shall be done by your having a clearer understanding of the word of God, and after having a fuller experience of its supporting power. Breathe, then, the prayer—"Give me understanding, and I shall live."

I thank God that a large number now present are not so much sufferers as workers. Now, I know that you who are working for God and trying to win souls often feel as if you were not half alive. I am compelled to make such a confession personally. I want to get alive to the utmost; not only having life, but having it

"more abundantly." I have some life in me, thank God; but I want it to quicken me more completely. Sometimes we get into a sleepy state, and then the spirit chides us, and we cry, "This will never do."

We Need Quickening.

brethren; do you not feel that it is so? I believe that those who are most earnest are the very persons who blame themselves the most for the want of earnestness. Here, then, is our prayer, "Give me understanding, and I shall live."

Is not this a very proper and blessed prayer for aspiring minds in the church of God, of whom I trust there are many present? Such men are not satisfied with themselves, but press forward to that which is yet beyond and above them. They have not reached that imaginary climax which some prattle of, who dote upon their fancied perfectness; but their motto is "Onward, upward, heavenward." These dwell on high, but their cry is "Higher, higher." They are calm and happy, but yet they sigh for a still surer frame, they have power in prayer, but they long for more of a wrestling spirit, and for greater prevalence with God. If there be any here who are fired with such divine ambitions, what better prayer can they use than this, "Give me understanding, and I shall live?"

Last of all, when we shall not be so much aspiring saints as expiring saints—when we come to lie upon our last bed, and to look into the unseen, then may we still pray after the same fashion. When the eye shall begin to open to the light of heaven, and things darkly seen before grow clearer in the dawn of the eternal day, when the songs of angels begin to break upon the opening ears of the soul, and heaven is drawing near, for grace is ripening into glory, and glory is coming to welcome its heir—then may we pray to live through the understanding and experience of the divine word. How blessed it will be to have such an understanding of divine realities that we shall stay ourselves upon the promises, shall rejoice in the everlasting covenant, and derive strong consolation from the oath of God. How blessed, then, to understand our living union with our risen Lord, and to know the experience of the happy psalmist when he sang, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

Thus, I think I have shown you that this prayer sounds well on every note of the scale. You may sound it out of the depths of seeking penitence, and you may run up the very highest note with the expectancy of glory, and the word will sound well on any note you touch. From the wicket-gate of humble faith up to the gate of pearl which admits into the golden city you may go on praying, "Give me understanding, and I shall live."

II. The time is come when under our second division the prayer is to be more fully opened up. "Give me understanding, and I shall live." Here is

A Want Confessed

because it is deeply felt; the suppliant owns his need of understanding. Has that want been felt by you, my brother? We are all fools till God gives understanding. A sense of our own folly is the door-step of all wisdom. He that is taught of God is the man that asks to be taught of God, and she who has chosen the good part is the woman who sits at Jesus' feet to hear His words. It is the mark of a wise man that he does not think himself so, and that he continues to pray "Give me understanding."

Next, the prayer is directed to God, for God alone can give understanding. Teachers can enlighten an understanding which already exists, but they cannot give one. Masters and instructors can profit nothing till we have an understanding with which to receive knowledge aright. All real understanding of the word of God must come to us as it did to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, of whom it is written, "Then opened He their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures." The author of the sacred volume must himself expound it to the heart and understanding, or we shall be rather blinded by its light than made to see thereby.

Brethren, the psalmist speaks of understanding in a general way—"Give me understanding"—as if he wanted the faculty for use in many directions. In every transaction of this life we need to be prudent, for we are surrounded by a thousand snares and pitfalls, and if we do not exercise discretion we shall be taken all unawares and become the prey of our enemies. We bear within our own natures so much to confuse and confound and entangle that if we are not taught prudence and understanding we shall certainly never escape from the mischief that is within us. We are frequently

Like Men in a Fog.

who cannot be sure where they are. It happened but the other day near Milan that so dense a fog covered the railway that a number of workmen who were employed upon the line heard the sound of an approaching freight train and rushed to get away from it; but at that very same moment an express train, which they had not heard or seen, came rushing upon them, and cut them to pieces. Such is our condition at times; we try to get away from one temptation and we fall into another; we hope to escape one form of evil and we rush into another. Haste breeds heedlessness, and warmth of zeal is apt to beget indiscretion, so that we daily need a good share of understanding as a ballast to our sail. A Christian man should be a sensible man, a man with all his wits about him. He needs to possess the wisdom of the Book of Proverbs as well as the devotion of the Psalms and the rapture of Solomon's Song. Those books are placed together in the Bible as if to show that they ought to be read together, and that their spirit and influence are essential to a complete practical character.

Still, while the understanding sought for in the prayer is evidently of a general character, the former portion of the verse

links it with a special understanding of the word of God; and oh, beloved, we need above all things to understand what God has revealed. Take care first that you know it. Search the scriptures, let them be the man of your right hand. Knowing and believing, it will be time to advance to meditation. Consider the words of God; weigh them, test them, dive into them. The richest ore lies deepest. There may be sands of gold sparkling upon the surface of the Bible, but the great nuggets are reserved for those who dig deep both by day and by night. Consider well the words of eternal life, and then go on to obey their teaching. You will never have an understanding of the Word unless you practice it. To this must be added experience, for who understands the word till he has experienced its truth and power? But what a blessed knowledge of a promise you receive when it is fulfilled to you! How you understand the reality of prayer when you have received an answer. How you know the meaning of communion with Christ when your face shines with seeing him!

What Life Means.

Permit me to say that no man who is at all awakened can really live unless he knows the word of God and understands its inner meaning. For this reason: Do you call it life to live without light? You may have been in the sepulchral dungeons of Venice, where not a ray of light ever came to the unhappy prisoner. To linger there, do you call that life? To live without the light of God is just such an existence. We have heard of men who have been immured in dungeons for forty years, wearing constantly the manacles, never breathing the fresh air,—do you call that life? Can there be "life" where there is no liberty? Alas, some men have never been free, but have remained captives to their lusts, never knowing the liberty wherewith Christ makes them free. Call you such bondage life? But more, many men exist without peace, driven to and fro like a sere leaf by the tempest. Never resting, they are as a rolling thing before the whirlwind. Call you that life? "There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked." Is that life? And then to have no grand object, no object worthy of yourself—to be living in this world merely to get enough bread and cheese to eat, just keeping yourself breathing and your family breathing—is that life? No heavenly object, no ambition worthy of an immortal spirit, do you call that life? Death before you, which you dare not think of! No hope, unless it be the ghastly figment of annihilation! Dreadful hope! To me a thought most horrible! To live without hope is not life; far rather call it death. Lord, give me understanding of Thy everlasting testimonies, then I shall live, but I shall never live till thou dost grant me this boon.

III. Now we shall take the third step and go deeper, laying bare the argument of this prayer.

What does he mean by saying, "The righteousness of thy testimonies is everlasting: give me understanding, and I shall live." I think he means this—that the word of God when it is practically and experimentally understood by the mind is a pledge of life. Do you think that God would take one of us to be His child and teach us His word, and then after all permit us to be condemned to die? Is that His fashion? Did you ever hear of a judge who instructed a criminal in the arts and sciences laboriously for years with the view of executing him when the task was done? Nothing of the sort. If the Lord has taught you it is because the Lord has bought you, and he will not lose the purchase of His blood. If the Lord has taught you it is because He means to take you where your education will be completed, to take you home to dwell with Himself above. "Give me understanding and I shall live." I am quite clear about that.

The Crown of Life.

Once more, the understanding of God's word is the very flower and crown and glory of true life. When a man so understands God's word as to experience it, and to practice it, he has reached a high point of spiritual culture, and his life will be loaded, like Aaron's rod, with buds and blossoms and fruit unto God's glory. He will be such a man that he shall only need to take one step and be in heaven. He is a sheaf of corn fully ripe, each single stalk bowing its head towards the earth as if it asked to be ingathered. Let us pray God to give us an understanding of His blessed word, for then we shall be ripe for glory, and in the highest sense it will be true that we shall "live."

I cannot make out the notion of certain professing Christians, that a change comes over christianity as the ages move on; that there is a christianity for the first century, and a revised christianity for the present era. We have become very enlightened of late! You are aware that this is the marvellous nineteenth century. We have invented the electric light, and none can deny that we are the most enlightened people that ever lived on the face of the earth! It is not, of course, pride on our part to say so, for we are very modest. Among us there are men who are wonderfully brilliant—Paul was but a farthing candle compared with them. They understand by

Culture and Thought

so much of these things that it is an honor to speak with them. The gospel that was preached to the poor, which childlike persons understood by the enlightening influence of the Holy Spirit, is in their eyes a very poor business. They sneer and turn up their cultured noses at what they call "the simple gospel," as if a simple gospel was meant for simpletons. Well, now, to my mind, this is the very bliss and blessedness of the gospel, that the righteousness of God's testimonies is everlasting, that though it has been tried by criticism and tested by experience, it remains the same in its spotless purity and in its divine infallibility to this day. Do you want a better gospel, any of

you? Go and fish for it, if you do, but not in the waters of truth. Do you want any nobler promise, any surer covenant? As for me, I bless God that the righteousness of his testimonies is everlasting, and by them I mean to abide all my days, God helping me.

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A flower cannot blossom without sunshine and a man cannot live without hope.—George P. Upton.

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We sleep, but the loom of life never stops, and the pattern which was weaving when the sun went down is weaving when it comes up tomorrow.—Henry Ward Beecher.

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