

Not Afraid of Sackcloth.

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In the Book of Esther 4:3 we read, "None might enter into the king's gate clothed with sackcloth." St. Paul in his second epistle to the Corinthians 3:12 says, "Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech." In the first text we read of a refusal to face the facts of life, the hard and painful facts—"None might enter into the king's gate clothed in sackcloth." In the second we read of an unflinching sincerity of vision, and of a sincerity which does not flinch because it is armed by a great hope—"Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech."

There are three ways in which we may deal with the harder things of life. First of all, we may take the way of the Eastern king and resolve not to see them, to bar the door against them, to act as if they did not exist. There is a second way. We may face them without the Christian hope. There is a third way. We may face them with the Christian hope, and that is the true and only wisdom. Let us dwell for a moment on those three ways or methods.

I. We may close the eyes and the ears, and say that we will not look upon the things that affright and affront us. "None might enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth." We know what that leads to, that life lived in an unreal world, in a world of imagination. We know what it has done in history through all the ages. Our fathers looked upon the French Revolution as a mere outbreak of the spirits of hell. Considering the matter with fuller knowledge, we see that the storm was provoked by a long course of crime and folly, by a persistent deafness to the harsh discords of humanity. Rulers who believed that they existed for nothing but their own pleasure were destroyed from off the face of the earth as a sign to mankind. It was the blindness of the rulers that roused the madness of the people. We may close the doors and curtain the windows and hide, as it were, our faces from misery, but it is in vain. The flaring lights flicker, the storm outside begins to mutter and to break, and the inexorable call comes, and we have to open our eyes and look out on the woe and the wrong and the torture of this world, on all the wretchedness that is rising against us to sweep us from our place. Nor by any decree can we keep from our homes the antagonists of peace. Treachery will enter, and be a fire in the heart, love will come in and be a misery, bereavement will follow and take the light from life. In other words, even the king cannot keep his gate against the dark ministers of pain that insist upon an entrance, and will force it at last.

II. We may look willingly or unwillingly at the facts of life without any hope in Christ. I will not speak of those, and there are many, who look upon the agony of the world simply to find in it the opportunity of new sensation. We have read of women flaunting over the stricken field of war, and they have been visited with a righteous condemnation. When, some twenty years ago, attention was forced on the unspeakable degradations of London life, there was a pastime called slumming which actually became fashionable. A bastard sentimentalism joined to a prurient curiosity took many to see under what conditions life was lived in East London. There was at the back of it no truth, no sincerity, and it soon passed away, leaving hearts that were already as hard as the nether millstone harder still, if that were possible. I wish to speak rather of the hopeless, earnest, despairing outlook on the miseries of life. There are those like the poet whose hearts become as

"A nerve o'er which do creep
The else unfelt miseries of the world."

They meditate upon sin and grief and death, upon the vast sum of human woe, upon their little and slow means for diminishing it, till the heart spends itself in fierce and hopeless throbs. The thought beats upon the brain like as on an anvil. Yet all becomes at last so commonplace and so sad and so far beyond remedy. The waves of mournful thought cannot be stemmed, but they flow in vain. The end is at best a quiet misery.

"But now despair itself is mild,
Even as the winds and waters are;
I could lie down like a tired child,
And weep away this life of care."

At worst it is a passionate and vain rebellion. It was said about three of the most distinguished among French social reformers that they all of them at last died of their wounds, defeated, broken-hearted, almost unmanned. It was because they never learned to ally their own compassion for humanity with the vastness of the love and pity of Jesus Christ.

III. We come to the one wise way of facing the problems and the agonies of life without flinching and without fear. We may face them so as the possessors of the Christian hope, and in no other way—"Seeing then we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech."

St Paul has been speaking of the comparative dimness of the Mosaic ministry. That ministry had passages of glory, but the glory was transitory and faded away. It was shone down by the everlasting splendour of the new ministry of Christ. In Christ the veil was taken away,

and taken away forever. There was a veil on the face of Moses; there was no veil on the face of Jesus. It is as if the eyes that sought each other with such desire burned the screen that parted them. So said the apostle, since we live in light, we speak in light. We declare every truth of the gospel, we make every claim for our ministry. The future glory will make all our words good. We are not afraid to look on the hostile elements of life and call them by their true names. We need no disguise, no euphemism, so softening. We use great boldness of speech, and are not afraid. Christianity be it remembered, is the only religion that has fairly measured itself with sin and grief and death. It has undertaken at last to subdue them completely. It recognizes the sternness of the battle; it confesses that the foes are terrible foes. It has no hope save in the might of Christ who is conquering and to conquer, but in him it reposes an unshaken and absolute and inviolable trust.

(1) Take, to begin with, sin. Christianity does not make light of sin. It knows that sin is something more than a derangement, something more than a disease. Though it does not deny those relics of the image and glory of God that dwell in the human heart, it does not seek to rally the still lingering forces that make for the right in the most degraded human soul. It uses great plainness of speech, and describes the state of man not as a sickness, but as a death. Its phrase is "dead in trespasses and sins," that is the blight of humanity. Christ has come to raise the dead. "You hath he quickened who were dead in trespasses and sins." It is only by working the miracle of resurrection that Christ can deliver one human soul. Christianity fully recognizes the far-reaching issues of transgression, the vitriolic intensity of remorse, but it comes to undo the coil of consequences. It comes to liberate from the guilt, the penalty, and the power of sin. And it does so by setting over against the immense disaster of the world the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

That is what no other religion does. At best, every other religion heals hurt slightly, or does not heal it at all. Whenever we begin to go into the doctrine of atonement we find ourselves confronted by problems of immense perplexity. We are plunged into the "abyssal depths of personality." Nevertheless the human heart has always answered and always will answer to the Divine remedy for sin. It understands the parable of Heine. After quoting the Homeric description of the feasting gods, he says, "Then suddenly approached panting a pale Jew with drops of blood on his brow, with a crown of thorns on his head, and a great cross laid on his shoulders; and he threw the cross on the high table of the gods so that the golden cups tottered, and the gods became dumb and pale, and grew even paler till they at last melted away into vapour." Yes, it is the cross that has redressed the balance; it is the blood of Jesus Christ that cleanses from all sin. The old question,

"Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
To wash it white as snow?"

is asked to no purpose. There is not rain enough. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten the defiled hand. But at last it comes to this, that the Christ crucified is to them that believe the power of God and the wisdom of God. It is told of a great Greek scholar that his last days were days of sadness. He was worn by pain, and his powers of speech failed him. The expression of his eyes, like those of the dying Agricola, desired something, and that something was found in a large printed copy of the well known hymn,

"Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in thee,"

which had been displayed a few days before by one of his family. He passed peacefully away after he had read the familiar words. He found, as all sinners may find, a refuge in that strong Rock that was rent by love, and there is no other refuge. Because we can speak plainly of the cross, we can speak plainly of sin.

(2) In the same way Christianity measures itself with grief. It says that at last there will be no place for it. "There shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things are passed away." Griefs come upon us in such battalions. They implicate themselves so closely with our life. They are, as it would seem, the inseparable companions of what is best and dearest and highest in this world, and it is very hard for us to imagine how we shall ever be done with them. Christianity itself recognized this. Even when the tabernacle of God is with men and he dwells with them, and they are his people and he himself is with them and is their God, tears linger in their eyes. But he is not content to have it so. God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes. He will plunge grief into the nethermost fires, therein to be consumed. And how? Surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.

"All tears done away with the bitter, unquiet sea,
Death done away from among the living at last,
Man shall say of sorrow—Love grant it to thee and me!
At last, 'Tis past."

(3) Again, Christianity measures itself with death. Lessing, I think, was right, when he took the view that Christianity presents death in a more awful light than heathendom. The Greek view of death made it the twin brother of sleep, and so in a manner amiable. Christian-

ity increases the terror of death by showing it as the wages of sin. "Some philosophers," said Lessing, "have thought that life was a punishment, but to consider death such was a view which apart from revelation could hardly have occurred to the human mind." So here also we use great plainness of speech. We say that death is terrible not merely because it is the end, but because it is the beginning. It is terrible not merely for its accessories, but because it is the judgment of God upon transgression. St. Paul himself recognized that death was the last enemy to meet Christ in the field and to be destroyed. And yet so absolute was Christ's victory over death that in the New Testament it is spoken of as sleep. It is not that the name has been changed, but that the thing itself has been changed, changed in its very nature and essence. More than eighteen hundred years have passed since St. Paul taunted death and the grave in words of triumphant scorn. "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" And yet there is not one of us today who has not felt the sting of death. There is hardly one who has not wept over the seeming victory of the grave. But we know that for the Christian there is no death, that Christ by rising again, the firstfruits of his sleeping people, has plucked the sting from death and spoiled the victory of the grave; and so we can look calmly at it, and have peace, peace by the death-beds of our dear ones, peace when our own life is slipping away from us, peace as we stand by the grave where already we have two or three gathered together in his name, peace in the thought that they all live to God, peace in the hope of the day to be when the little hills in the churchyard shall rejoice on every side—at the voice of the archangel and the trump of God. For Christ has abolished death.

(4) To give one more illustration, we can afford to speak very calmly about the world and its enmity to Christ. There is no need that we should deceive ourselves. We need not try to think that we are in the majority, or that we shall have an easy triumph. We do not need to underrate the forces that are against us, nor do we need to minimize the hostility of the natural man to Christ. What says the apostle? "The whole world lieth in wickedness." And again, "Not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble are called." We need not fear to face the fact that our progress is slow and difficult, and that sometimes even we seem to go back. We are advancing at the best inch by inch through a hostile and difficult country. The tide of battle rolls backward and forward. If we seem to gain, our adversaries immediately become more resolute and desperate. Sometimes we wonder what is to come of it all. Will Christianity be able even to hold its own in England? Sometimes we think that Christ has forgotten us, and say that he is as a man astonished, and as a mighty man that cannot save. There are hearts here that are very sore for some branches broken from the True Vine or the latter rain denied. I do not believe that we have the means of measuring the advance of the Kingdom of God. Sometimes, indeed, there are revivals, overflowing tides of grace before which the mountains seem to be swept away. But I am sure that you cannot measure the advance of the cause by the statistics of the visible church. Christ is calling many who never associate themselves with their brethren, and whose names are not to be found on any of our rolls. And it may be even that the visible church makes more progress in years when she confessedly declines than in years when she increases. It may be that we should be stronger if, like Christ, we aimed at quality rather than at quantity. In any case, we are not to be moved overmuch by such things. We can afford to admit all the difficulties, to admit them frankly. We can do it because we have such a hope, because we know that Christ is conquering and to conquer, and that the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ. We rejoice in every sign of success, we rejoice in every new sanctuary that is opened for the worship of Christ. We rejoice in ever a living and awakening ministry bestowed by the Redeemer upon his church. But what we rest upon is not any of these things. We rest upon Christ's sure promise, upon Christ's living energy, on the power of the Holy Ghost.

"None might enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth," but Christ our King offers his welcome and his heart to those who are clothed in sackcloth, who are weary and heavy laden. I am sure there are such among us this morning, men and women brooding vainly over the past, and afraid to think about the future. You have entered the King's gate. Come to the King. Bring your sins and your sorrows to Christ. Come into the covenant, come into his company, and he will never leave you. His presence will make all the difference. It will not in this world bid sorrow and struggle depart. The heart is heavy.

"To think that each new week will yield
New struggles in new battlefield."

But if he is with us in the fight, everything will be changed. Said St. Paul once, "I will abide and winter with you." He has promised to be with us to the end of the world, and he will winter with us through the dark, cold years until the winter ends, until we pass from the turmoil of this world to the peace of that. And for you who are not yet clothed in sackcloth, for you whose peace has not yet been broken by the dark sorrows of life, he is the friend of friends. I know that a young heart may be very heavy. I know that the ancient thirst of humanity is in the most joyous spirit and will crave for satisfaction. This morning your hopes may be high, but in your souls there is always that low cry for rest, that low cry which swells at last into passionate weeping if the rest is not given. You have the hard things of life before you, but you need not fear them if you win the hope that is in Jesus Christ, or rather if you win him, for he is the hope. Unto him that loved us and loosed us from our sins in his own blood, and made us a kingdom of priests unto God, even the Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Might we all join at last in that triumphal cry!—British Weekly.

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