

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

ness, despair, and eternal silence. But, on the other side, we behold men who walk in the clear light that streams from far. These own the will of Him who made the Seven Stars and Orion. These feel in every pulse that thrills a mighty influence transcending all that eye can see and coming from a Heart that ever loves. Every step of their journey is accompanied by the Angelic Presence that fights in their battles and causes the stream to break forth from the rock. Before them, as they traverse the dark plains and defiles of human uncertainty and sorrow, there moves the awful splendour of the fiery column that links the earth to heaven, that sheds its glory on the meanest task, and leads the pilgrim onward to God's promised land.

OWEN C. WHITEHOUSE.

---

SCRIPTURE STUDIES OF THE HEAVENLY  
STATE.

VI. THE FOREMOST MEN IN THE BLESSED LIFE.

(*Revelation* vii. 14-15.)

WE have been attempting by an inductive method to determine the law of the heavenly blessedness, to discover from the teaching of Scripture what constitutes the joy of the future life. In pursuing this study, we have followed a descending scale. We began with the highest round of the ladder, and tried to find the secret of Christ's own joy; we found that its secret lay in the very cross He bore. We then passed downward to the life of intermediate intelligences, and inquired what constitutes the desire of angels; we found that their deepest desire was to look into the secret of ministration. So far there is perfect agreement; the law of Christ's joy is the law of angels' joy. One other scale of

intelligence remains. St. Paul says that every *man* shall rise in his own order. There is an order of *humanity* in the heavenly state. There is a principle of Divine selection which prevents all men from being equal, which gives to one man pre-eminence over another. What is that principle? What is that law of the heavenly state which makes one human star differ from another star in glory? The order in rank can be nothing less than an order in blessedness. If we enter into the city of God, not simultaneously, but one by one, it can only be because there is a difference of preparedness in the hearts of men. It can only be because, by constitution and by training, some are earlier fitted than others for breathing an atmosphere which to the purely natural life would be a source of pain. Divine selection is not arbitrary selection; it is an order of fitness, an order of merit, and, therefore, an order of nature. What is that condition of spiritual ripeness which will enable a human soul to enter deepest into the heavenly joy?

Now, this is precisely the question which the Seer of Patmos asks in the passage before us. In the visions of the night there swims before his gaze a picture of the life of Paradise. He sees a multitude gathered together out of every country and kindred and people and tongue, united in a common worship and harmonized by a common joy. But the joy, though common, is not equal. Amid this vast multitude there are some who are happiest of the happy, who have been taken up as it were into the transfiguration-mount. They are "arrayed in white," their garments glisten with a special glory. The Seer wants to know who they are, and whence they came. He wants to know what is their character, and how they got that character; what gives them the right to their present eminence, and what gave them the power to attain it. And to the inquiring Seer there comes a very striking answer, an answer which replies to both questions at the

same time. The root of the whole explanation is given in a single word—"therefore." That word binds the whole passage together; and it binds more than the passage: it connects human destiny with human conduct. It tells the Seer that the foremost men in the blessed life are not foremost by accident, by caprice, by arbitrary will either of man or God, but by the law of human reason. They are foremost in the heavenly state because they had had an appropriate training for that state, because the future life found them already specially prepared by their life on earth.

Let us proceed to unfold the argument in detail. There is, as it seems to us, a parallelism between Verses 14 and 15—not indeed logically arranged, but clearly implied in the conception of the writer. The line of thought we take to be this: There is a threefold connection between the earthly training and the heavenly eminence of the foremost human spirits. (1) They have come out of great tribulation; *therefore* they serve God day and night in his temple. (2) They have washed their robes; *therefore* they are "before the throne." (3) They have bathed themselves in a sacrificial life, "in the blood of the Lamb;" *therefore* they have received a special kind of power which only belongs to the children of Love: "He that sitteth on the throne," *i.e.* the Lamb, "shall spread his tabernacle over them."

I. The foremost men in the blessed life have, during their earthly state, passed through a discipline of the will which has enabled them to make the will of God their own, and to delight in doing his high will. "They have come out of great tribulation." Their reward is that, in the heavenly state, the attitude of obedience, once temporary, has become habitual: "They serve Him *day and night* in his temple." This is not the popular conception of heaven. The popular conception runs thus: "These are they who have served in tribulation on earth, therefore they now serve no more." And let us remember on what this popular view is based.

It rests on the belief that there is no connection between the life of this present world and the life of future worlds. This world is a scene of probation; we are simply on our trial for life or death. Those who are content to enjoy themselves here, and to ignore that yoke of Divine service which God has imposed upon them, will be beaten with many stripes in the world to come. Those who have borne the yoke of Divine service with pain, and been content to ignore the pleasures which would tempt them from their toil, will receive at the end of the day an exemption from all service and a full right to enjoy the things which the world calls good. The life of heaven will reverse the conditions of the saint; and the life of hell will reverse the circumstances of the sinner; for, when the probation is complete, the present things may vanish away.

The view of the future life given in the Apocalypse is radically opposed to this, though here, if anywhere, we should have looked for an agreement; for the Apocalypse is of all books of the Bible that which comes nearest to an outward or empirical type of thought. Yet in the passage before us, this world, in its relation to future worlds, is not a scene of probation at all; it is a place of *education*. It is not a court of assize where men stand to take their trial for life or death; it is a school in which they are prepared for a destined work. The life of the saint is valuable because it is a preparation; the life of the sinner is deprecated simply because it is not. It is esteemed a high qualification to serve God on earth: but why? Because heaven is itself a life of service. To serve God day and night in his temple is the ideal state of the future world; that, and that alone, is the reason why the men who reach that state are "they who have come out of great tribulation." If, to the view of the Seer of Patmos, heaven had presented itself as a place of Epicurean joys, he would have felt it to be not only unfair, but illogical, that its

leading ranks should be filled by the sons of tribulation. What connection could there be between tribulation and sensuous joy? To fit a man for an Epicurean life there is required an Epicurean training; and the foremost men in such a life should certainly be those of whom it could be said: "These are they who have come out of great luxury." But if to the Seer of Patmos heaven presented itself as a scene of service, we can easily see that a discipline of sorrow would be the best preparation for that kingdom. Service is the subjection of one will to another will; and tribulation prepares for service by subduing the will, and leading men to feel that they cannot stand alone. To yield up the individual will in moments of earthly tribulation is the road to a great reward, but it is not an arbitrary reward; it is the recompense of finding a necessity of nature in what was once a law of sacrifice. The reward of the man who yields his will with tribulation is the power to yield his will without tribulation—to serve day and night. The joy to which such a man looks forward is the joy of having that life made habitual which now comes only in temporary flashes and experiences of the passing hour. It is the joy of seeing the life of sacrifice transformed from a penance into a privilege; of losing the old sense of struggle in the path of self-surrender; of being able to say, not only with resignation but with acquiescence, "Thy will be done."

Here, then, is the *first* link of the chain between heaven and earth. Those who begin by serving with difficulty and pain are rewarded by having the life of service made habitual and delightful to them—they serve day and night. There is, as it seems to us, a striking parallel of thought between this passage of the Apocalypse and another passage in the fourth Gospel, viz. John xvi. 20, where Christ says to his disciples: "Ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy." That which suggests the parallelism is the phrase, "turned into." The transformation of

sorrow into joy is a thought which belongs to Christianity alone. All religions have tried to solve the problem of human happiness, but the faith of Christ alone has attempted its solution by the incorporation of that which man calls its opposite. The Epicurean proposed to reach joy by *escaping* sorrow; the Stoic has tried to gain it by *ignoring* sorrow; Christianity has assumed the unique position of striving to attain it by *transmuting* sorrow. To turn the very elements of grief into the elements of joy; to make use of the old materials of pain for the service of happiness; to build the ladder of human progress on the lowest step of human depression; this is the thought of St. John alike in the Gospel and in the Apocalypse. He sees men bearing a heavy cross and weeping under its weight. He tells them that there is a time coming when the very cross itself shall be transmuted into a crown, and the sorrow with which they bear it "turned into joy." That which is to constitute the pleasure of the spirits of just men made perfect is the very thing that constitutes the pain of spirits that are unjust and imperfect. The secret of heavenly joy is the very element which to the worldly mind is the source of earthly sorrow—the sacrifice of self. The command to surrender the human will to a Divine will comes at the outset to every man in the form of tribulation; it strikes at the root of that false sense of independence which belongs to the initial stages of every human soul. To one who is passing through these initial stages the greatest joy of life is the promise of emancipation from the impending yoke of service. But to one who for a time has borne that yoke, such a promise would be pain. *His* greatest desire would be that the life of service should become his atmosphere, that the command of law should become the impulse of love. *This* is what St. John means by the turning of sorrow into joy, by the passage from tribulation into service. He comforts the man who in the

present world has been forced to yield up his will to God's will. He does not tell him that in the future world no such surrender will be required, but that no such surrender will there be a source of pain. The strait gate will become the broad way; the arduous duty will pass into the necessary habit of life; and they who have found tribulation in the service of a single hour will end with the power to serve day and night in his temple.

II. We come now to the *second* link of that chain which connects the present with the future world. The foremost men in the blessed life "have washed their robes;" *therefore*, they are "before the throne." Let us try to understand the nature of the privilege which is here indicated. The idea is evidently that of a crowded assembly met together to witness a spectacle of surpassing glory. For beholding that spectacle the situation of the multitude is not equally favourable; some are in front, and some in the rear. Those in the front have a direct and immediate view; they are "before the throne," and so have the privilege of immediate observation. Those in the rear, on the other hand, have no such advantage; their view is obstructed by the spectators in front of them. They have no direct and immediate evidence of what is going on in the foreground; their evidence is derived from hearsay. They do not themselves see the throne; they do not themselves hear the acclamations that surround the throne; their information regarding the majesty and the praise comes only from those who are permitted to see and hear. It comes to them like an historical tradition. It is handed back over the heads of the audience—from those who see to those who stand behind them. That is the simile in the mind of the Seer of Patmos. The intellectual blessedness of heaven is to him the privilege of knowing God; and the highest knowledge is that which comes from sight. The foremost in intellectual blessedness are the men who *see* most, who have the least



need of foreign or extraneous testimony, who are influenced by a direct and intuitive glance at the very centre of power; their reward is that they stand "before the throne."

But St. John goes on to say that even this is not an arbitrary reward. If there are some who are privileged to have a front view, it is because they have cultivated that special faculty which is concerned with the vision of God: "they have washed their robes; therefore they are before the throne." The thought is identical with the idea of the fourth Gospel: "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine;" it is identical with that of the still earlier saying, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." That a childlike heart is the organ of Divine vision, that a holy life is the medium of spiritual insight, that a pure and self-forgetting walk with God is the quickest and surest road to an understanding of the heavenly mysteries, is a thought which runs like a thread of gold through the New Testament from beginning to end. It is no arbitrary thought; it is an essential part of a great system. Each object must be known by its own faculty—light by the eye, music by the ear, softness by the touch. God is Love, and love too needs its faculty. Love can only be known by love; its organ is the heart and the life of the heart. It is not alone in the pages of him who is distinctively called the Apostle of Love that this doctrine is prominent; strange to say, it is set forth with even more emphasis by the sober and practical St. Paul. When he says, in 1 Corinthians xiii.: "Now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; then shall I know even as also I am known"—what does he mean? In the popular view there seems an abrupt transition from the foregoing exposition of charity to a study of the last things. In truth there is no abruptness; he is but continuing his exposition. The "now" and the "then" do not stand for "on earth" and "in heaven." The "now" is the time of lovelessness

whenever and wheresoever it may come; the "then" is the life of love in whatsoever world it may dawn. Paul says that so long as the life of love is absent there can be no vision of God. Men in that stage can only see through a glass, darkly. They can see the things about God, but not God Himself. Their knowledge is limited to such elements as prophecy and miracle—whether any man has seen a mountain moved by the power of faith, or heard his brother speak by the gift of tongues. Paul says that these are not permanent sources of the knowledge of God. They do not reveal the essence of the Divine Nature; they do not touch that which is inseparable from the Divine Being. They are but accidents, and therefore they are transitory: "Whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away." But there is a road to Divine knowledge which penetrates more deeply than these, which leads into the very heart of God; it is love. When a man enters into that charity which thinketh no evil, he sees God face to face. He sees Him by the possession of a kindred nature. In the life of sacrifice for his fellow-man he gets a glimpse of the central law of the universe. In the joy of that life of sacrifice he has a foretaste of the heavenly joy—the joy of angels, the joy of the Lord. The evidence of miracle, the evidence of prophecy, the evidence of all testimony, fades before the blaze of the immediate light: "when that which is perfect has come, that which is in part is done away." They who have washed their robes are before the throne.

III. This brings us to the *third* and final point of connexion between earth and heaven. We have seen that the life of sacrifice results in a vision of God; St. John says that it results in more than that; it also brings the strength of God. The foremost men in the blessed life have bathed in an element of sacrifice, "in the blood of the Lamb"

and therefore they have become the recipients of a power which specially belongs to the sacrificial spirit, "He that dwelleth in the midst of the throne shall overshadow them with his tabernacle."

Here, again, the Seer of Patmos has given utterance to a thought which is not peculiar to himself but common to the first age of Christendom. It is a paradox, but it is not the paradox of an individual mind; it is the expression of a principle by which Christianity itself must stand or fall—the power of the Cross. To the popular interpretation, indeed, St. John's words, and all kindred words of the Bible, become absolutely meaningless. When St. Paul says, "If we suffer with Him, we shall also reign with Him;" when our Lord Himself says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,"—the world with the most perfect unconsciousness gives these words a pagan sense, the very sense which Christianity came to dispel. It takes them to mean that the men who have no physical power here shall receive physical power above; that those who in this sublunary sphere have given up their personality to some lofty aim or impersonal interest shall in the new heavens and the new earth obtain a temporal crown which shall secure their own interests for evermore. The blessing of the poor in spirit is but the advent of a great reaction which shall transform poverty into wealth and change the ploughshare of toil into the sword of empire!

Now if this be Christianity, we have no hesitation in saying that the message which Christ brought into the world was a commonplace and a redundancy. If the goal of Christian glory is to be the attainment of an empire analogous to that of the Cæsars, was it not a pity ever to have disturbed the existing order of things? Would it not have been better to have allowed the Roman state to slumber on in the security of its power? What was to

be gained by the proclamation of a new kingdom if it only meant a new power of outward conquest? Or, if such a power was indeed to be the goal of humanity, why not adopt better means of preparing for it? What advantage is to be reaped from poverty of spirit, or from meekness, or from ability to bear persecution, if the design of the Christian's life be the perfecting of his physical strength above the physical strength of other men? Would not the true preparation for such a kingdom lie in the opposite course—in the cultivation of warlike prowess, in the assertion of personal claims, in the sense of individual importance; would not these and such as these have proved the fitting pathways to the attainment of a material throne?

And, undoubtedly, if the throne had been material, these would have been the pathways chosen. The fact that opposite paths have been chosen is itself the strongest proof that the power which Christ promised is one of an altogether unique kind—a power allied in its nature to what the pagan world calls weakness. We do not require to go out of our own experience in order to find that there is such a power. The greatest influence over men which has ever been wielded in this world has been wielded by human beings in their moments of self-forgetfulness. It is at times when the man is lost in the cause that the man himself is glorified; it is in the sacrifice of self that the power of personality is revealed. The men who live in the hearts of posterity have achieved that immortality by dying to themselves. The philanthropist, the poet, the philosopher, have each and all influenced their own age and other ages just in proportion as they have merged their personal being in the respective causes of morality, beauty, and truth. Their power has increased with their distance from selfish motives; the strength of their life has been manifest to others precisely in the measure in which it has been hidden from themselves.

That which has given them a possession in the world of human thought has been the fact that they themselves have been possessed by their own thought, dominated by an idea which left them no choice but to obey, and impelled by a force which they could neither oppose nor control. They have impressed the world with the strength of their individual nature just because they have been so little conscious of their own individuality that at any moment they could have said with St. Paul, "I live, yet not I."

Now this is the thought which, in the passage before us, the Seer of Patmos makes his own. He says that in the coming state of heavenly blessedness the foremost seats of power will be held by those who are most self-forgetting. The souls whose influence shall penetrate the furthest and the deepest will be the souls that have lost themselves in an enthusiasm of love; they will be filled with the life of Christ just in proportion as they lose their own. In the devotion to a great ideal of sacrifice they have become unconscious of self, have ceased to feel the need of sun or moon or any personal joy, for the Lamb is the light of their city, and each of them has found his interest in the interest of his brother. But for this very reason each of them has become the recipient of a new power—a power which is the wonder of his fellows, most of all the wonder of himself. The weakness which so long waited upon self-love, and paralysed the efforts of the individual life, has vanished with the rise of an enthusiasm which has made the individual life forgetful of its own being; and the soul which has incorporated the cares and the burdens of others has found its personal yoke to be easy and its personal burden to be light.

GEORGE MATHESON.

---