

The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF ACTS.

ACTS iii. 4-5.

And Peter, fastening his eyes upon him, with John, said, Look on us. And he gave heed unto them, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, Silver and gold have I none; but what I have, that give I thee. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.

In the previous chapter of the Book of Acts we read, 'And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles.' But our text contains the first recorded miracle, and it at once produced conviction in the minds of multitudes, while it also led to an outbreak of persecution against the nascent church.

The scene of it was laid in Jerusalem. It was the hour of prayer; and the sun, which was sinking to the west, shed its rays upon the temple-gate, 'kindling into a blaze of glory the great central doorway of Corinthian brass.' John and Peter were wending their way towards the sacred edifice that they might join in worshipping the God of their fathers, and scribes and Pharisees with flowing robes and broad phylacteries were also assembling to perform their devotions. But a poor cripple, carried by sympathizing neighbours, was there before them, driven by his helplessness and need. Others might be late, but not so the beggar with his shrivelled limbs and ragged garments; for it offered him the chance of obtaining help from the passers-by. As soon as Peter and John came up to the place where he lay, he asked alms of them aloud, encouraged, it may be, by their look and bearing. To this appeal 'Peter, fastening his eyes upon him, with John, said, Look on us.' The words, so unusual, awakened unwonted interest and expectation in the cripple, and he gave special heed to them, wondering what might follow. 'But Peter said, Silver and gold have I none; but what I have, that give I thee. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk. And he took him by the right hand, and raised him up: and immediately his feet and his ankle-bones received strength. And leaping up, he stood, and began to walk; and he entered with them into the temple, walking, and leaping, and praising God.'

I.

THE ATTITUDE OF THE GOSPEL TO MEN.

'And Peter, fastening his eyes upon him, with John, said, Look on us.'

1. Peter's object was to awaken the man's expectation. For more than forty years, even from his birth, he had been a cripple, and this affliction had doomed him to a life of squalid beggary. Some doles from passers-by, enough to keep body and soul together, were all the pittance that he sought. He had no hope of recovery; that had long been abandoned. Life had no day-dreams for him; no golden horizon of happier days ever gleamed before his vision. There was no occupation in which, like others, he might support himself, and find in activity a solace in the passage of the weary hours. His was a poor, dependent, useless life, often cursed by humiliations and lack of food to eat and clothes to wear; and it may be that at last he had settled down into a brutish sort of content with his lot, ceasing to be disturbed by the thought of what might have been. But Peter's words, 'Look on us,' excited special expectation, and, as he continued to look and to listen, new hope was begotten in his breast, until at the word 'walk' it seemed as though a new life was opening before him, and that his lot would be wholly changed.

2. Now, it is the object of the gospel to awaken in human souls new hopes and new desires. It is the higher things that it offers us, but men are commonly heedless about higher things. Thousands, like this poor beggar, are asking only for this world's alms—silver and gold, houses and lands, the perishable prizes of earth. And they become content with the acquisition of these things, not because these things bring satisfaction to the soul, or are ever secured in the measure desired, but because by concentration of the thoughts upon these material objects all aspiration for the Unseen is shut out or deadened. They have their dreams, but their dreams are only of wealth and success; they have their horizon, but it is bounded by the seen and the temporal. All that they ask is that they may acquire more of this

world's possessions; that they may outstrip, or, at least, rival their neighbours in display, or luxuries; that they 'make their pile,' as the saying is, and lay up in store for years to come.

3. To these lower wants the gospel returns a negative response. Not that it denies the value of these earthly riches, or condemns the reasonable pursuit of them, but that it has something better to offer. Its aim is to awaken the upward look of the soul, the desire for those things which belong to the spirit and to God; and a crisis is always brought about whenever this offer of the gospel is clearly presented; for unless there is a response, the blessings of the gospel cannot be received or enjoyed. If the lame man had said, 'It is gold and silver that I want—and that only,' the miracle of healing would not have been wrought, and the cripple would have remained a cripple to the end of his days. This is too often men's attitude to the gospel. Its offer does not awaken their desires, because their hearts are set on other things. What they are seeking is the silver and the gold, and in the pursuit of this they are deaf to all other solicitations.

4. The Psalmist writes: 'When thou saidst, Seek ye my face; my heart said unto thee, Thy face, Lord, will I seek.' It was a movement of soul produced by the Spirit of God. 'I don't care for these things' is the language of the natural man. Some power from above is needed to open blind eyes and unstop deaf ears. But whenever the gospel is preached, and continually at other times, the Spirit of God is at work. All men are conscious, at some time or another, of His gracious influence. Sometimes through the word itself which arrests and transfixes thought and self-questioning, sometimes by the death of child or friend, sometimes by some earthly loss or disappointment, sometimes by an event which brings to light the hidden sinfulness of the heart, sometimes by a vision of the Redeemer in His grace and truth, the deeps of the nature are stirred, and the soul thirsts for God, for the living God. God never leaves Himself without a witness. He seems silent, but His silence speaks; He withdraws His face, but the shadow reminds of His presence.

'They fastened their eyes on him.' Is not this a characteristic feature of Christianity—that it fastens its eyes on the destitute and the sick? Science fastens its eyes on inanimate matter; Art fastens its eyes on beauty. Art

going up to the Temple to pray—which, by the way, it seldom does in our day and generation—would fix its gaze on the 'Gate called Beautiful,' and would turn away in disgust from the loathsome object that was craving alms of the passer-by. But Christianity going up to the Temple fastens its eyes on the poor cripple; and ever since, her eyes have reverted in the direction of the helpless and forlorn. Science seeks out the secrets of the world; Art seeks out the beauties of the world: but Christianity seeks out the ills of the world, and strives hard to remove them.¹

II.

THE DEMANDS OF THE GOSPEL UPON FAITH.

'In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.'

1. There is no mention of faith in this narrative, and yet it is very forcibly depicted. The lame man's actions were the manifestation of faith. 'Leaping up, he stood, and began to walk.' He would not have leaped up, or stood, and he would have been unable to walk, if he had not believed Peter's words.

2. We may at the first glance feel surprise at the quickness of his faith. He had been lame from his birth. He was more than forty years old. His infirmity had defied all the doctors' skill, and had not been outgrown or mitigated by the years. And who were Peter and John? Very ordinary men, so far as appearance went; and the name which they invoked was that of the despised and crucified Nazarene. But there was potency in the name, nevertheless, and Peter spoke with an authority which produced a strong impression. And he had faith to be healed, whatever doubts may have been suggested by fear or incredulity.

3. There is no doubt that the gospel makes large demands upon our faith. In the present day the difficulties surrounding it are more subtle and more numerous than ever. 'It is hard,' as Browning says, 'to be a Christian'; and often in revolving the question we find 'no end in wandering mazes lost.' But it is a necessary condition. It cannot be otherwise. If Jesus Christ could save every one without terms and conditions at all, He would be only too glad to do it. But it cannot be done. The nature of His work and the blessings that He brings by His work are such that it is an impossibility for any man to receive them unless he has that trust which, beginning with the acceptance by the

¹ C. Jones, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, 63.

understanding of Christ as Saviour, passes on to the assent of the will, the outgoing of the heart, and the yielding of the whole nature to Him. How can a truth do any good to any one who does not believe in it? How is it possible that, if you do not take a medicine, it will work? How can you expect to see unless you open your eyes? How do you propose to have your blood purified if you do not fill your lungs with air? Is it of any use to have gas-fittings in your house if they are not connected with the main? Will a water-tap run in your sculleries if there is no pipe that joins it with the source of supply? These rough illustrations are only approximations to the absolute impossibility that Christ can help, heal, or save any man without the man's personal faith. 'Whosoever believeth' is no arbitrary limitation, but is inseparable from the very nature of the salvation given.

4. No doubt there are many aspects of Divine revelation which lose themselves in mystery. But if our souls are perplexed, let us turn to Christ. He is the Truth, and He has the words of eternal life. Approaching Him, our doubts will dissolve as mists before the sun, and, gaining confidence like this cripple, we shall be able to set out into the larger life to which He calls us.

We must ourselves have lively faith if we are to communicate faith to others. It was Peter's own faith that carried this man's unbelief by storm. In presence of Peter's confidence he could not but believe. Most men are far more moved by the contagion of others' strong feeling and example than by arguments or verbal appeals. For the diffusion of faith it is a man like Peter that is wanted, who overleaps the obstacles which other men would stop to examine; a man like Luther, erring perhaps in fine points of doctrine, but giving impetus and force to the whole movement in Christ's kingdom, and sweeping along with him a host of weaker and dependent spirits. If we are not propagating faith in Christ, it is mainly because our own faith is meagre and timorous.¹

III.

THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL IS IN THE NAME.

'In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.'

1. When Peter appeared before the High Priest and elders on the morrow to answer for his conduct, they asked him, 'By what power, or by what name, have ye done this?' They thought of some magical agency which had been used, and would have been glad to have fastened this accusation

upon the Apostle. But he was ready with his reply, and said, 'Be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even in him doth this man stand here before you whole.'

Dr. Wilbur Chapman, when preaching at Ipswich, told the following to illustrate the power of the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth:—During the civil war in the United States a young fellow who was passing over the battlefield saw a friend of his lying almost shot to pieces. He stooped down to straighten the limbs of the wounded one, took water from his bottle to wash away the blood from his face, and then said, 'Is there anything more I can do for you?' The dying lad replied, 'Yes. If you have a piece of paper in your pocket, write a letter to my father; I think I can sign it. My father is a judge in Detroit, and if you take him the letter he will help you.' The letter was written, and this was the purport of it: 'Dear Father, I am dying on the battlefield, and my friend is helping to make things comfortable for me. If ever he comes to you, be kind to him for Charlie's sake'; and with his fingers which were fast stiffening in death he signed his name.

The civil war came to an end, the soldiers went to their homes, but this one in tattered uniform made his way to the home of the great judge. The servants, thinking that he was a tramp, would not admit him, and so he waited until the judge came out, and stepping up to him he held out the soiled piece of paper.

The judge, thinking that it was a begging letter, pushed him aside. The soldier stood aside and unfolded the paper and showed the judge his own boy's signature, and it made all the difference.

The judge took the soldier into his home, offered him whatever he wished for, and told him that whatever his influence could secure for him he should have; and it was all because of Charlie's sake.

There was power in the name.

2. In the same way it is Christ who is the power of the gospel. It is not the mere words of the message, or the doctrines which make up the gospel revelation, that give it efficacy. It is Christ Himself who is the object of faith, and who redeems the soul, and imparts eternal life. The teaching of the New Testament is, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved. He that hath the Son hath life. Your soul wants precisely what that poor cripple's body wanted—power to stand, to walk, to leap, and to utter forth the praises of God. And that power is in Christ and in Christ alone. Light to the blind, strength to the impotent, life to the dead is *He*. The more you think of it earnestly, the more will you find that life is just what you need. A bodily frame that is worn out can be patched up for a while by the

¹ Marcus Dods, in *How to Become like Christ*, 132.

physicians, but a new gush of life into it is what it needs. Give it that, or you patch and prop in vain. They try to do something like it sometimes—they pour some fresh, young life-blood into the exhausted veins. But Christ can truly do this for your soul. I am not speaking now of the solace of His compassion, of the joy of His communion, of the sweetness of His love, of the glory of the hope which He inspires. I sum it all up when I say, 'In him is life.' That life, God's life, He can give to man, He will give to you. It will be a power in the end, all-mastering, all-ruling in your being, 'a power unto salvation.' It will pass into every crippled faculty of the soul and unbind it; it will master every insurgent passion and tyrannous lust; it will thrill through long-palsied nerves and limbs, and quicken them; it will open to your powers a field of the most glorious activity; it will lift you from the brute's level to the man's; and you, who have crawled, and crept, and lain idle in the dust about the temple gates, will pass in, 'walking, and leaping, and praising God.'

I seem to see the wretched, dying race of man, crippled by sin and wasted by spiritual hunger, sitting by the gateway to a temple of heavenly purity which it is powerless of itself to enter. There sits depraved humanity, maimed, guilty, sin-sick, and perishing! One approaches, mighty to save. He comes with the kingliness of a God concealed in the lowly guise of the Son of man. He halts. He pities. He stoops and sweetly says, 'Look on Me!'

Stretching forth a hand pierced with the crucifying nail, He lifts the wretched object to its feet, exclaiming, 'Rise up and walk!' And as the grateful creature clings to its restorer it beholds through its tears of joy that He is none other than the Son of God! Oh, blessed and adorable Jesus, Thy cross, Thy cross is the 'Gate Beautiful' of salvation through which a redeemed race may enter into the Temple not made with hands, eternal in the heavens!¹

3. Note three points in conclusion—

(1) The cripple was cured through human agency; by the friends who carried him to the gate of the temple, by the instrumentality of Peter. We may help by little acts which, though apparently insignificant, may be used of God for conveying

¹ T. L. Cuyler, *Stirring the Eagle's Nest*, 205.

some of His great blessings to men; and if we have been renewed by the Holy Spirit, we shall not only be used, but be made a vessel *meet* for God's use.

(2) We ought to give praise for blessings received. The cripple went into the Temple and praised God.

(3) It is possible to be convinced, yet obdurate. The Jews acknowledged the miracle, but persecuted the miracle-workers and sought to silence them. They asked, 'What shall we do to these men? for that indeed a notable miracle hath been wrought through them, is manifest to all that dwell in Jerusalem; and we cannot deny it.'

One man gave lavishly of gold
And builded tower and town;
Then smiled content to think his deeds
Should win him great renown.

Another, poor in worldly gain,
Gave all within his ken
Of strength and tenderness and truth,
To help his fellow-men.

The record of the rich man's gifts
Lies on a dusty shelf;
The poor man lives in countless hearts,
Because he gave—himself!

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