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I

THE CHILD IS FATHER OF THE MAN

.....

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the Man;
I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

When Charles Spurgeon reviewed a biography of William Wordsworth by A. J. Symington in 1881, he described as a strength of Wordsworth an intuitionism characteristic of himself. Wordsworth's power lay in his 'sympathy with the spirit which is embodied in visible things, and in his perception of the moral teaching of all things that are.' Spurgeon's own love for nature and his commitment to see natural phenomena as brimming with spiritual application and illustration of doctrine¹ made him more friendly

1. As an example of Spurgeon's use of nature for substantial sermonic material, see his *Teachings of Nature in the Kingdom of Grace* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1896). This book, containing fifty-six selections of articles, sermons, and brief essays, does not move from nature to sermon but from a biblical text that has some reference to a natural phenomenon into an exposition of how the gospel employs that natural phenomenon as an apt illustration of spiritual truth.

toward and grateful for this insight than Wordsworth's mystical intuitism could have prompted in itself.² Given his understanding of providence Spurgeon would agree that 'The Child is Father of the Man' and also that our days are 'bound each to each', not so much by a 'natural piety' as by divine purpose, perceived most clearly in gospel-wrought piety.

In 1874 he cited a Wordsworth phrase as having spiritual insight to prompt the 'enlargement of the sphere of our life'. Wordsworth wrote of the farmer, enmeshed in natural wonder in every stage of his vocation, who has no sight for its transcendent beauty:

The primrose by the river's brim
A yellow primrose was to him,
And nothing more!

Plowing and sowing, reaping and mowing, constituted the farmer's philosophy and prompted 'no sacred homilies to him; the birds sang, but he would have been as much pleased if they had been silent; the hills were a weariness to climb, and the view from their summit he thought nothing of; his soul was inside his smock frock and his corduroys, and he never wished to go beyond them.'

Spurgeon believed that the cities also were filled with such men who found the 'music of the spheres' in the clink of sovereigns. Their souls are 'like squirrels in cages, and each day their wheel revolves.' Christ came to give His people 'a wider, broader life than this!' Many merely natural men see insightfully into the wonders of nature and are deep in philosophy 'and force their way into the secret chambers where the immature principles of things are nestling.'

Still, however, they are bound by time and space. But new life in Jesus 'enlarges the sphere of the most capacious mind, and makes the greatest intellect to feel' that before knowing Christ his understanding was 'cabined, cribbed, [and] confined.' When one has been 'tossed upon the stormy sea of sin, and has descended

2. S&T, August 1881, p. 417.

into the deeps of the tremendous ocean of terror,' the 'grace of our pardoning God' has given us a new world. When we can see His smile, feast on His love, and have fellowship with the infinite, 'We are no longer shut up to self, but we hold conversation with the spirits before the throne of God and commune with all the saints redeemed by blood!' Now we have seen mysteries which 'were before hidden from our eyes!'³

Even so, when one has a merely cognitive knowledge of biblical truth and an external acquaintance with spiritual realities, he is no less 'cabined, cribbed, [and] confined.' He must be given new sight to blind eyes and spiritual clues to unlock revealed mysteries. When his eyes were opened, already so much lay before his sight that progress was immediate and rapid. Spurgeon observed: 'I suppose all the powers of the man are in the child, but many of them are dormant, and will only be exercised when life is more abundant.' Among several keys to the full exercise of resident powers is fitting knowledge: 'Life is in their hearts, ... but it is only partially in their heads, for they do not study the gospel nor use their brains to understand its truths.'⁴ For Spurgeon, the brain was loaded before the heart had life.

The Expansive Possibility of Early Preparation

When eyes are opened, they must be opened to see things that are there. The more that is there, the more one sees. Depth of knowledge more quickly becomes settled maturity and expansive usefulness. Early training will bear abundant fruit.

The advantages of early preparation can be seen with power in the history of the apostle Paul. He states that 'I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers' (Gal. 1:14). Paul's knowledge of the Old Testament and his grasp of the received

3. MTP 20:1150: 'Life More Abundant.'

4. *Ibid.*

interpretations exceeded that of any of his contemporaries. Then, reflecting on the relationship between divine sovereignty in salvation and the immediate effects of his intellectual life, he reported: 'But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone, . . . but I went away into Arabia' (Gal. 1:16-17).

Paul went there for a twofold purpose: one, called with striking certainty as an apostle, he went to receive the revelation of the new covenant as consisting of the person and work of Christ – 'was pleased to reveal his Son to me.' This happened with greater profundity and depth than to any other apostle (2 Pet. 3:15; 1 Cor. 3:10, 11; 4:1, 15). Two, this revelation would be given in accord with the knowledge that he already had of the revelation constituting the Old Testament. His scheme of interpretation was radically altered, but the knowledge he already had attained rendered his usefulness greatly expanded. For this reason, very soon Paul 'proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God,"' and 'increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ' (Acts 9:20, 22).

When Paul counted 'everything as loss' he was not rejecting the value of his deep knowledge of Scripture or of the righteousness set forth in the Law. He had not seen it in the light of Christ and, therefore, when Christ was revealed to him, both in the saving encounter and in the radical reorientation of biblical interpretation, every gain he formerly had both in righteousness and knowledge and supposed ethnic purity came to be nothing in and of itself. Instead, 'the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus' replaced and reinterpreted all of it.

Even so, the early preparation of Spurgeon in doctrinal knowledge and expectations of piety, when placed in the light of the saving work of Christ, flowered into incomparable power and consistency in his calling as a pastor. An American biographer, daring to make a judgment when Spurgeon was but twenty-three years old, in 1857 wrote:

Before he left Cambridge, while the dignitaries of the university and town were enjoying their lettered content, Mr Spurgeon was wont frequently to address Sunday Schools, in season and out of season; to visit the neighboring villages, where descending day, as well as opening morn, found him still busy in refreshing the weary and spiritually destitute. Thus, in the very morning of his life, in the dew of his youth, we find him in labors more abundant, his ardor and love supplying the lack of experience, and filling his friends with the highest hopes of his future usefulness and fame, in the service of his Divine Master.⁵

Immediately upon his conversion, and even before, Spurgeon began manifesting several characteristics that would be prominent in his entire Christian pilgrimage. He saw this truth about himself and gloried in the power of these early impressions: ‘For one, I bless God that I knew the doctrines of grace from my youth; they have been the staff of my manhood, and I believe they will be the glory of my old age. So far from being ashamed of the election of grace, it commands the enthusiasm of my whole being.’⁶

Principled Commitment to Providence

Spurgeon saw everything in light of the divine purpose and measured his response externally and internally in light of biblical doctrine. In an early sermon on providence Spurgeon, reflecting on the vision of the wheels in Ezekiel, said: ‘The eye of God is everywhere; Providence is universal.’ Again, he emphasized, ‘In all seasons, at all times, in all dangers, and in all climates, there is the hand of God.’ Even to the end of history and into eternity, all events are ‘forever fixed by the eternal decree of the mighty God’. These events include the most apparently inconsequential things to those that are most powerful and devastating. ‘The creeping of an aphid over the rosebud is as much fixed as the march of the devastating pestilence – the fall of sere leaves from a poplar is as fully ordained as the tumbling of an avalanche.’⁷

5. SS 1:vii.

6. SEE 7:35.

7. SS 2:194, 197, 201.