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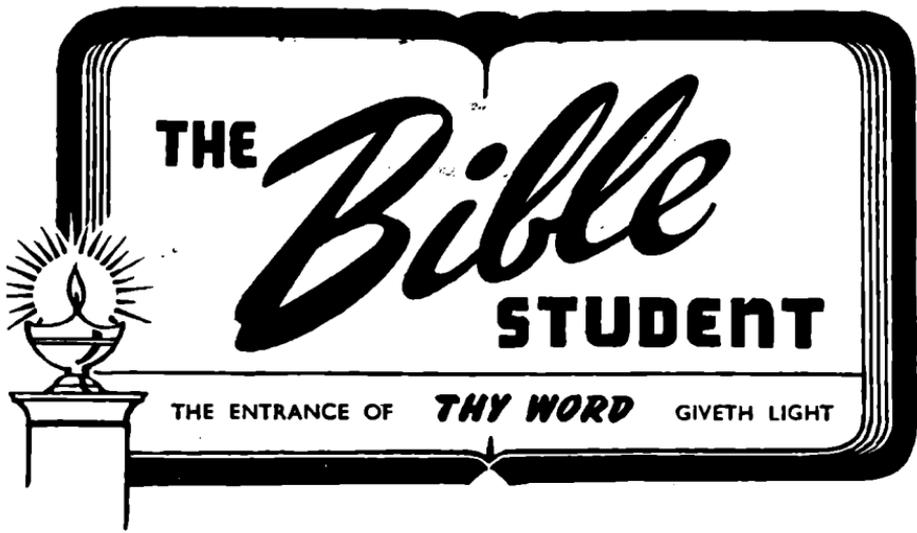
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A table of contents for *The Bible Student* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bible-student\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bible-student_01.php)



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CONTENTS

AN EXPOSITORY STUDY OF ST JOHN'S GOSPEL	...	49
THE DEATHLESS HERITAGE	... ..	55
THE PROPHECY OF EZEKIEL	... ..	61
'THE HEIGHTS OF THE HILLS ARE HIS'	... ..	71
'WRITTEN THAT YE MAY BELIEVE'	... ..	76
THE PAIRED WORDS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT	...	83
SEVEN OLD TESTAMENT FEASTS	...	89
NOTES ON HEBREWS	... ..	95
THE NECESSITY OF THE CROSS	... ..	99

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# THE DEATHLESS HERITAGE

F. W. BOREHAM, D.D.

When Bunyan's Christian first set out on pilgrimage, two of his former neighbours—Pliable and Obstinate—hurried after him, hoping to induce him to abandon his hare-brained project and to return to the City of Destruction. But Christian's mind was made up. Indeed, instead of discussing the question of retracing his own steps, he endeavoured to persuade his old friends to accompany him. 'But', objected Obstinate, 'what are these things that you seek, and to find which you forsake everything?'

'I seek', replied Christian, '*an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that fadeth not away*, reserved in heaven for those who diligently seek it! See, read of it here in my book!'

Christian's homely evangelism divided his critics. Pliable decided to join him on his splendid quest, but Obstinate turned back in disgust.

Within sight of his hundredth birthday, Thomas Sidney Cooper, the eminent though self-taught animal painter, whose works adorn some of the finest salons and academies in the world, including our own Australian galleries, felt the end approaching. 'Mr Cooper', said his doctor as he sat beside the old artist's death-bed, 'everyone is asking how you are. What shall I tell them? They are greatly concerned about you?' 'They are very kind', replied the dying man; 'but I am less anxious that they should hear about my health than that they should hear that I am exulting in the prospect of *an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that fadeth not away*, reserved in heaven for me!' And, still glorying in the possession of such fabulous wealth, the good old man passed peacefully and triumphantly away.

The words so rapturously quoted by the pilgrim and the painter occur in Peter's first Epistle. Peter, an erstwhile fisherman, is writing to a band of scattered and persecuted refugees. To look at him, or to look at them, you would never suspect them of owning a princely estate. But you never can tell. W. C. Burns, under whose preaching in Mr McCheyne's pulpit at St Peter's, Dundee, there broke out the revival that stirred all Scotland a century ago, afterwards became the flaming apostle of the Chinese people. He

died preaching the redeeming love of Christ to the handful of Chinese attendants who surrounded his bed. When, afterwards, they made an inventory of his property, they found that it consisted of a Chinese Bible, an English Bible, the clothes that he was wearing when he took ill and his writing case. 'He must have been very poor!' exclaimed a little Chinese girl, sympathetically. It certainly seemed so. But it only *seemed* so!

When, in the office of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, Mr W. T. Stead heard of the Liberator crash—the financial collapse that involved thousands of hard-working and deserving people in utter ruin—he hurried into the city to learn all the facts of the tragedy. Everywhere he heard the most pitiful stories of confiding men and women who had lost every penny of their frugal savings in the disaster. But at one street corner he found a Salvation Army meeting in progress. In the centre of the ring a lassie in uniform, waving her hands ecstatically, was singing with shining face:

I'm the heir to the kingdom above,  
A kingdom of light and of love;  
I'm richer by far  
Than the Kaiser or Czar,  
I'm the heir to the kingdom above.

'She has the best of it!' said Mr Stead to himself as, after listening for a minute or two, he went on his way to witness the misery into which the loss of money had plunged so many homes.

I. '*An inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that fadeth not away*'.<sup>1</sup>—The words are obviously an echo. Peter was a member of that little group of disciples who, on a green hillside in Palestine, listened to the immortal utterance that we know of as the Sermon on the Mount. 'Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth', Jesus said, 'where moth and rust can corrupt and where thieves break through and steal; but lay up for yourselves

<sup>1</sup> For the help of younger students the following references in the New Testament are given, all of which are related to theme of this article: turn them up and study them. 1 Peter 1:4, 23; 3:4; 1 Corinth. 9:25; 15:52, 53; James 1:27; Hebrews 7:26; Matt. 6:19, 20, 21; Rev.ch.21.—Ed.

treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through and steal.'

In one of the noblest passages of *Sesame and Lilies*, Ruskin deals with these haunting sentences about the treasures of the *Court*, which a moth can corrupt, the treasures of the *Camp*, which rust can defile, and the treasures of the *Counting-house*, which thieves can steal. These are the treasures of Place and Power and Pelf—moth-eaten robes, rusty swords, and rifled coffers. But suppose, says Ruskin, that there should arise a *fourth* kind of wealth—a web made fair in the weaving by Athenia's shuttle, an armour forged in divine fire by Vulcanian force, a gold mined from the sunset on Delphian cliffs—moth-proof robes, rustless swords, treasure incapable of theft!

Standing there that day, Peter listened intently to that great word about the robes of office that moths cannot corrupt, about the swords of power that rust cannot defile, and about the shining hoard that thieves cannot steal. And, long afterwards, the three sets of treasure were obviously running in his mind when he himself wrote to these scattered and persecuted Christians concerning the inheritance that is *incorruptible*, because no moth can corrupt it; *undefilable*, because no rust can defile it; and *inalienable*, because no thieves can steal it. And, to that vivid memory of the old days in which he accompanied with Jesus, we owe our text.

II. This sentence about the deathless inheritance is like a lovely casket containing three flashing jewels. Those three jewels are three very beautiful words—*aphtharton*, *amianton*, *amaranton*.

One is inclined to pick them up and finger them fondly, as a boy who has just left school fingers his first wages, as a girl who has just become engaged fingers her ring, as a hero, just decorated for valour, fingers his medal.

(a) *Aphtharton*—incorruptible. We hear much nowadays of the fifth-columnists—the enemy within. In actual fact most of our deadliest enemies are within. In every hair of my head, in every pore of my skin, in every drop of my blood, there swarm millions of secret agents, working day and night to compass the disintegration and decay of my entire body. Every nerve and tissue and sinew and vein is corruptible. 'What shadows we are and what

shadows we pursue' exclaimed Edmund Burke as, on his electioneering platform at Bristol, he received news that his opponent had suddenly died. Some of Doré's finest painting faded and perished because the colours were mixed with faulty ingredients. The germs of corruption lurk everywhere.

But *aphtharton!* This inheritance is flawless; and what is more, incapable of developing a flaw. The exquisite word occurs in other connections. In that noble passage to which we resort for consolation at every burial service, we are assured that '*the dead shall be raised incorruptible.*' Who can imagine the most microscopic particle of corruptibility in the radiant body of the risen Saviour? Who can imagine the most infinitesimal atom of corruptibility in the glorified bodies of His risen people?

The *second* occasion on which this fascinating word occurs is in this very chapter. '*We are born again*', Peter declares, '*not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible*'. Is it conceivable that that which is born of God, born of the Spirit, born of the Word which liveth and abideth for ever, can have within its divine structure any element of corruptibility? 'You have an inheritance', Peter assures these harassed and hunted Christians, 'you have an inheritance as incorruptible as the resurrection body, as incorruptible as the new and divine life that regeneration brings!'

(b) *Amianton*—undefilable! Not only undefiled but incapable of defilment! It was the name of a precious stone to which nothing unclean could adhere. Dust would not settle on it. Filth automatically fell from it. The breath would not cloud it. It was like those snow-white flowers that flourish in the English coal-mines: although the grime and the dust are blowing about them all the time, not a single speck settles upon their lovely petals. It reminds us of that great saying of Jesus: '*Satan cometh and hath nothing in Me.*' Like this deathless inheritance of ours, He was undefilable.

(c) *Amaranton*—unwithering. It was said of the amaranth that, in any atmosphere, however stifling, it would indefinitely preserve its dewy freshness. Other flowers might droop and wilt and fade, but the amaranth retained its pristine beauty.

Proud were the mighty conquerors crowned in Olympian games.  
 They deemed that deathless honours were entwined about their names.  
 But sere was soon the parsley wreath, the olive and the bay,  
 Yet the Christian's crown of amaranth shall never fade away.

So there you have these three words of consummate elegance and grace in which Peter describes the celestial inheritance to which these fugitives are the heirs. *Aphtharton: amianton; amaranton!* It is incorruptible, indestructible, and imperishable as to its *substance*; it is stainless, untarnishable, and undefilable as to its *purity*; it is fadeless, unwithering, and unshrivelling as to its *beauty*.

III. I said that Peter was standing on that grassy hillside listening with all his ears to his Lord's arresting words about the moth-proof robes and the rustless swords and the treasures that no thieves can steal. But John was there, too. And, long afterwards, whilst Peter echoed the utterance of his Lord in stately prose, John, amidst the dazzling imagery of his Apocalypse, wove it into a gorgeous poem. For John's walls of jasper and streets of gold and gates of pearl are, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the very things of which Jesus spoke on the Mount, the very things of which Peter wrote to his persecuted refugees.

Robes, says *Jesus*, that no moth can corrupt; swords that no rust can defile; wealth that no thieves can steal!

An inheritance, says *Peter*, uncorrupted and incorruptible; unsoiled and undefilable; inalienable and inviolable!

Walls, says *John*, that have in their composition no germ of crumbling decay—*walls of jasper!* Streets that, unlike the grandest of earthly streets, can never be defiled by material or moral mire—*streets of gold!* Gates of immaculate purity and impregnable strength, gates that neither Goths nor Huns nor Vandals can storm—*gates of pearl!*

Thus, then, in each of these three cases, you have the same conception, expressed in each case in the phraseology most natural to the speaker.

And now, by way of epilogue to this rambling and discursive study, let me point out that there are only two master-forces in this world—Right and Might—and that these unlikely-looking heirs hold their inheritance in virtue of *both* of them.

They hold it by *Right*. They were born to it. 'Blessed', writes Peter, '*blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who, according to His abundant mercy, hath begotten us again to an inheritance incorruptible and undefilable and that fadeth not away.*' My boast, exclaims Cowper:

My boast is not that I derive my birth  
From loins enthroned or rulers in the earth;  
But higher far my proud pretensions rise,  
The son of parents passed into the skies!

But Cowper knew, as Peter knew, and as we know, that the inheritance incorruptible and undefilable and inviolable cannot be inherited from pious parents. Cowper knew, as Peter knew, and as we know, that except a man be born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, he cannot even *see* the kingdom of God.

They hold it by *Might*. Peter assures them that it is being kept for them, and they for it, by the omnipotence of the Living God! *Reserved in heaven for you who are kept by the power of God!*

This was the sublime secret that flooded the joyous soul of Mr Stead's Salvation Army lassie:

I'm the heir to the kingdom above,  
A kingdom of light and of love;  
I'm richer by far  
Than the Kaiser or Czar  
I'm the heir to the kingdom above.

Since then, the Kaisers have all disappeared and the Czars have all vanished, but the inheritance of which she so rapturously sang still abides—the inalienable heritage of those who, born of God, are kept by His power for its everlasting enjoyment.

(From the author's book *A Late Lark Singing*; by arrangement with The Epworth Press, London: copyright.)