

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 Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

The deepest and most urgent question of the seeking soul is: 'How can I be sure of God?' and this question Principal W. J. Moulton, M.A., B.D., of Didsbury College, Manchester, sets out to answer in an admirable little book, published by the Student Christian Movement—*The Certainty of God* (3s. 6d. net). Its central contention is that 'when all possible allowance has been made for what we have gained from our education, from the society in which we live, and from our inherited beliefs, we are brought, in the last resort, face to face with a living God, and that throughout our lives we may receive:

Authentic tidings of invisible things.'

In nine chapters of close but clear argument he proceeds step by step to make good his contention, dealing with the fact of Christ, Christ and History, Sin as a reality, the Meaning of the Cross, Conversion, and the Social Consequences of Salvation. The whole treatment is extraordinarily good, and we cannot think of any book better suited to its purpose

of presenting the case for the Christian religion to a young and inquiring mind.

An admirable review of the work done by the World's Student Christian Federation during the past year is published under the title *Under Heaven One Family* (World's Student Christian Federation; 6d.). The Federation has a membership of over a quarter of a million present students, and the British Student Movement is only one of many bodies included in it. The present report records faithfully the aims of the Federation, emphasizing its definitely Christian character, and reveals the wide and statesmanlike scope of its efforts. There is an interesting section on the Peking Conference, whose watchword gives the title to this report, and special stress is laid on the international aspect of the Federation's operations. The review might be summarized in the phrase which dominated the Peking meetings: 'Jesus Christ and World Reconstruction.' Copies of this report may be obtained from the Student Christian Movement Bookroom, London.

The Breaking-Point.

BY THE REVEREND JOHN A. HUTTON, D.D., LONDON.

'If I say, I will speak thus; behold, I should offend against the generation of thy children.'—Ps 73¹⁶.

You always find the conclusion of a psalm at the beginning. You always find the last word, the result of all the travail, at the very outset. You only need to think for a moment of how a psalm, like any other outpouring of the human soul, comes to be written in order to see that what the man thought *last* he would write *first*.

You will find, if you recall the psalms which are familiar to most of us, that this is not any ingenuity of my own. 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.' That is a conclusion: thereafter the Psalmist gives you the process by which that conclusion was reached. 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the mountains,' says the writer of the 121st Psalm, which once again is obviously a conclusion, written by one who discovered that what had been wrong with him was that he had *not* been lifting up his eyes to the hills; he had been going about the world with his eyes anywhere but on the hills: and

so, lest he should forget it later on, he begins his psalm by committing himself beyond himself.

That, by the way, is a very ordinary introduction to a psalm. A good man sees that there is something which he ought to commit himself to, something which he must abandon or something which he must take up, and, lest he should lose his moral purpose in the rhetoric of his emotional mood, he pledges himself at the very beginning. He vows himself to something and confesses that if he fails *there* he will have put himself beyond the pale. Thus it is that you have any number of psalms which begin with 'I will'; and only thereafter does the good man tell you how it was that he needed so to commit himself.

I confess quite frankly that there are some psalms, and these almost the greatest, which arrive at no conclusion at all, where the poor soul after all his restless tossing seems at the end to see not one whit more clearly, or to feel more comfortable within himself and face to face with life. And I repeat,

these are the psalms which in my own view are the deepest and the dearest—where no conclusions at all are arrived at, where you simply see some man vexed and broken about life pouring out his heart ; and at the end, so far as we see, he has no further light. Now, why do I say that these are the psalms which in my own view are the deepest and dearest ? Victor Hugo in *Les Misérables*, in his description of that incomparably good man, the bishop, says amongst other things this : ‘ He was one of those men who could sit for a whole hour beside a man who had lost his wife—and say nothing.’ Now there are psalms in which I seem to see God simply sitting down by the side of some one who is heart-broken, allowing that one to say all sorts of wild, hard, rebellious things, knowing that it is good for the soul to rid itself of such perilous stuff. In those psalms I see God *listening*, allowing us to have it all out. Perhaps the fact that we can have it all out in a desperate hour is proof that beneath the surface and in the world of the Spirit there is a breast of God.

Well, this psalm is not one of those. This psalm arrives at a conclusion which, let me say again, you find at the outset. And the conclusion is a confession. It begins : ‘ Truly God is good to Israel.’ The man is rebuking himself for having thought otherwise. And then he proceeds to tell us how he himself had been to blame. ‘ As for me, my feet were almost gone ; my steps had well nigh slipped.’ The psalm, that is to say, begins with a confession by a man that he very nearly did something which he thanks God he did not do ; that he was on the point of going over a precipice of some kind, and he thanks God that something occurred to keep him back from its dizzy edge.

Now there is no more lyrical moment in the life of the human soul than the moment when we perceive that we have escaped from something. For those are the great moments in life which have still a touch of their opposite in them. The most lyrical time in any one’s life is a time of escape, a time when we pass out of one condition which threatened us into another condition in which we are liberated. That is the condition of this man. He begins by confessing that he very nearly did something which he did not do, very nearly thought something which he did not express, very nearly went over some precipice from which he thanks God he was delivered.

Let me dwell for a moment on that symbol of

slipping and almost going over a precipice. I remember long ago being in the Isle of Rousay in the Orkneys, which, like all the islands of the western sea, stands up sheer out of the ocean like a kind of table. On the side that faces the Atlantic, the Island of Rousay is precipitous. It is being eaten into by the sea, and in course of time it collapses bit by bit. When you are on the level of the water looking landwards you can see great galleries receding away into the heart of the island, while all around you

The ceaseless billows on the ocean’s breast
Break like a bursting heart and die in foam,
And thus at last find peace.

Walking across Rousay, you come across slits and cracks, some only a foot wide, some a yard wide, some ten yards wide, and some great gaps and chasms. The dangerous ones, obviously, are the narrow ones. Nobody thinks of trying to leap a ten-yard chasm, but many of us think we are able to leap a chasm about a foot wide. That is where the danger lies. If you look over the edge of such a chasm or slit you see the water writhing and wriggling away down beneath. Now, supposing a man almost slipped, almost missed his footing, but fell upon the other side, safe, just escaped. What an agony of happiness would be in that man’s heart ! And if as he rose he rested for a moment on his knees, and if he bethought himself of a psalm like this, surely he could get no better expression for his mood than this : ‘ My feet were almost gone ; my steps had well nigh slipped.’

Well then, what was it this man so narrowly escaped ? If I met a man in the street whose face was radiant, and if he told me that he had just escaped from something, I should conclude that he meant to say he had escaped from some moral transgression which would have publicly degraded him, or from something which would have embarrassed his life-interests. That is what we should think if a man who knew us told us, in confidence and breathlessly, that he had escaped from something which threatened him : we should suppose that he had felt the heat of some powerful temptation, and had almost yielded, but that something had intervened to distract him and to save him. Now the extraordinary and unique thing about this psalm is that this man who is thanking God so passionately for having escaped something, is not thinking about that kind of thing at all. What,

then, is it that he escaped from, for which he thanks God? I can only put it in this way. He thanks God *that he never yet adopted a low way of speaking about life*. But, you say, that is not much. Is it not? I say, weighing my words and in all sobriety, that it is a less heinous thing to fall from an ideal under the stress of some passion than not to be able to fall because you are down already. A low way of *thinking* about life is more disastrous to the human soul than a low way of *acting*, unless the low acting be simply the expression of the low thinking. I am perfectly sure, if we saw things as God sees them, we should feel that the one thing to be thankful for is that, in spite of life's stress and insinuations, we have not fallen into a low way of thinking about things, that we have not adopted the attitude of laughter and cynicism in this great world.

The good man proceeds to tell us how he was tempted to talk in a low way about life. It is the old story. He saw people whom he thought to be bad people getting on prosperously, and he saw people whom he knew to be good people not prospering at all. He describes it in his own inimitable way. 'They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men. . . . Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish.' They have no scruples about God, and if any good man speaks to them about God they adopt a superior tone, and say, 'Tush, how doth God know?'—as though to say, 'My dear sir, I am sorry to find you so out of date.' Such people often thereupon proceed to give us odds and ends about astronomy—the distance from Sirius to the moon, the number of millions of years it has taken to lay the red sandstone—why?—in order to brow-beat simple people out of the faith that God in heaven cares anything about them. 'The thing is preposterous!' But perhaps all religion is preposterous from the purely intellectual point of view. But that need not worry us, for there is no purely intellectual point of view. It is a preposterous thing, if you start from some points of view, to believe that God the creator of heaven and earth cares for you and me; but that is why we believe it, and it is just the kind of thing we are here to die for.

Well, he describes these people. There they were with no troubles. Their children were never taken ill. Their investments never turned out wrongly. Things seemed always to go their way. At the same time he saw, or thought he saw, people who had their scruples, good people, having a bad

time. As he thought about such things he became bitter; and, like all bitter people, he became not a little unjust. He supposed that all these rich people were having a happy time. He did not know that there is really not such a great difference between people when you know them. I myself have known rich people who had great sorrows, who lived with great simplicity, who to casual observers might have seemed proud and self-sufficient, who all the time were carrying some saving burden of pain, or grief. But when we are bitter we cannot do justice to anybody. This man by talking bitterly became more bitter, and by his own language darkened further this world already dark enough, until the awful idea offered itself to him that there is no such thing as goodness in the world, that the hypothesis of a final goodness at the heart of things is merely a desperate human cry. He tells us that as he pondered these people who had no scruples prospering, and the people who had scruples not prospering, he was almost coming to the conclusion that there is no difference between good and evil: his feet, in fact, had well-nigh slipped.

Now if we are right on the ultimate question we are right everywhere, and if we are wrong there we are wrong everywhere. I agree with Mr. Chesterton who is never so serious as when he appears to be merely amusing, that when he is arranging about rooms with a landlady, the first question he asks her is not what are her terms, but what is her total view of the universe; because, as Mr. Chesterton says with perfect cogency, if she is right there, she is right everywhere. In that case the coals will be right, the gas will be right, the food will be right; everything will be right if, to that woman, this world means God, and life means duty. She is right everywhere if her total view of the universe is right. But if her total view of the universe be cynical, that the moral order is something which you can dodge and manage, then because she is altogether wrong she is wrong everywhere.

Now that is what this good man very nearly committed himself to. He tells us he had come to think this; and he very nearly *said* it. But, you say, if a man thinks a thing he ought to say it. No: a thousand times! There are ten thousand things which come to us which we must never indulge by expressing. There are reminiscences in each of us of all sorts of things we have passed through. Waves of thought roll over us; yet in a sense we are not responsible for them. But if I say a thing,

then I have given the assent of my whole personality to that thing : I have made it my own. Thoughts come to me which I cry out against, and shudder at, protesting to God that they do not belong to me. But if I say a thing, no power on earth could have compelled me to say it unless in that region of the will where if anywhere I am myself I had assented.

Now this good man tells us that the thought or idea occurred to him and urged itself breathlessly upon him that the best way to deal with life is—to laugh at the whole thing ; that there is nothing good or evil ; that things are what they are, and that he is a wise man who will not allow a merely moral scruple to spoil his chances in life. He tells us he very nearly said *that*. But something stopped him. Now what was it that stopped him ? Well, there was one thing that half stopped him. He said : ‘ But if I say this thing, if I say, “ Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain and washed my hands in innocency ” ; if I say, “ Surely I have been a fool to try to be a good man, ” —then I should offend against the generation of God’s children. I should have to turn my mother’s portrait to the wall. If I take up this diabolical view of life, that there is nothing in it that relates a man to others and relates him to God, I shall be insulting the testimony of God’s children through all ages and putting myself on the side not only of the sad ones but on the side of the bad ones.’ That, I say, half stopped him. But he still went on thinking about it. The problem was not eased in his soul and he did not know what to say, until he did a very wonderful thing. *He rushed into a church* : ‘ I went into the sanctuary of God.’

There is great art in knowing *where* to put your questions. The fact is there is no real answer in terms of yes or no to any of life’s final questions. But we may be brought into such circumstances that we do not want to ask such questions. There are certain questions which we do not ask in certain places. There are places—the surgical ward of some great hospital, or a theatre where some major operation is taking place—where we would be ashamed to ask any rebellious questions arising out of our own personal fortunes. Perhaps the final virtue of the Cross of Calvary is just there—that Christ died upon the cross to silence our mere querulousness ; for we are ashamed to ask a merely bitter question about life face to face with Christ who without bitterness died upon the cross in love with God and men.

This man went into a church. We do not know what he saw in particular in that church, but in substance he would see just what he would see in any church. He might see some little children being dedicated, as with us in baptism, being brought to the temple as our Lord was brought to the temple in His babyhood, and held up in the arms of father and mother—being offered, as it were, to God. And as he looked at those little children, something may have gone soft within him—just as something went soft in that rich young ruler in the New Testament. For what softened the heart of that rich young ruler was that he saw Jesus laying His hands on little children. Afterwards, when Jesus had come away from the children, this rich young ruler, we are told, ran after Him. ‘ Master,’ he said, ‘ what must I do to get into that kind of secret ? I am only a rich man. There are things I can buy. There are even people I can buy. But I learned a moment ago when I saw Thee stand in the sun with those children that there are some things that money cannot buy. Tell me, good Master, how I can get there.’

It may have been something like that which softened his heart. Or he may have seen some old saint praying in the darkness, such as we might see any day in a Continental cathedral. But, whatever he saw, one big thing came into his mind. He said—these people are right or there is nothing right. They may be wrong in all sorts of ways, in manners and in speech. But they are finally right. In any case I had rather be wrong with them than right with those proud and swelling creatures whose prosperity is indeed the enormous shadow blasting life. Now, that is faith, for faith is the victory over the world.

Thereafter this man did something which none of us does often enough or thoroughly enough. He took himself out a walk ; and there and then said things to himself which no one would have dared to say. ‘ The spirit of a man,’ says the Bible, ‘ is the candle of the Lord.’ What you, in the depths of your soul, can say about yourself is what God is going to say about you later on. In the end of the days God is going to say nothing about you that you would not say about yourself now if you had the courage. It is a deep and awesome saying, that the spirit of a man is the candle of the Lord. Suppose all the lights in the church were extinguished, and I were to bring in a candle and light it, and were to wait. In a few moments, by the light of that

solitary candle, we should all be able to see everything characteristic in the building. We should see all the other faces, for a human face is quick to catch light; and we should see the shape and the principal architectural features of the place. Of course, we should not see everything *clearly*; but what we did see by the candle, by daylight we should see only more clearly. What we see in ourselves in lucid and candid moments God sees with perfect clearness.

And so I say, and the Psalmist is my guide, that it is an extremely good thing to go away by ourselves after one of these crises. We had all indeed better meet our crisis on our knees; but, after we have met and triumphed over it, we would do well to put the enemy to rout by having a walk and a talk with ourselves alone. This good man (for a man is a good man who has become aware even of the good fight)—this good man said—and here I am not really going from the actual text—‘You are a fine fellow; and that was a nice view of life you were philandering with! You made a great to-do about God not governing this world; when the fact is all that had really happened to you was that you were envious of unscrupulous people who seem to prosper.’ As he laid the lash on himself stroke after stroke, he cried, ‘O Lord, it is all true. O Lord, I was as a beast before Thee.’ Now he meant that; he chose just that word *beast*, and we ought not to quarrel with it on grounds of taste, for he knew his own business. He had indeed envied cattle their stoutness and their placidity; forgetting for the moment that you cannot have it every way; that a cow has no sense of the landscape, no understanding of poetry; that Wordsworth will always be lost on

a cow. ‘So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was as a beast before Thee.’

He closes with a fine saying: ‘Nevertheless I am continually with Thee.’ Surely the translation should rather be: ‘Nevertheless I am with Thee henceforth and to the end.’ That is to say—Lord, never again shall I be tempted to speak with laughter and cynicism about this great life of ours. Thou mayst catch me yet in many a sorry byway of the spirit; but never henceforth in that particular corner.

There are two ways of living, two ways of viewing life. There is the laughing, cynical, atheistic, unbelieving way; and there is the big way. There are two ways of playing the game. There is the big way and there is the rotten way. You and I are again and again inclined to think in a poor way about life. We have often very good reason. I do not want to speak easily about life; for life is such a baffling thing that God had to send His own Son into the world to encourage us to hold on. Faith is the substantiation of things hoped for; it is a conviction concerning things not seen. Faith is obedience to the highest possible hypothesis about life—that the best is the truth. Of course faith will always be confronted with an apparently contradicting world. I say of course: for otherwise, deprived, that is to say, of difficulties and obstacles and the haunting menace of its own alternative, faith would die out of the soul.

What then? Shall we whine? Shall we curse? Or—shall we pray?

Meanwhile, the silent lip!
Meanwhile, the climbing feet!

Recent Foreign Theology.

Arabia in the Bible.¹

THE notices of Arabia which occur in the Old Testament have been investigated by numerous savants, among whom the most famous are probably Sprenger and Glaser. Though the work of Dr. Moritz does not mention the Bible in its title, the second half is devoted to a study of Solomon's

¹ Von B. Moritz, *Arabien: Studien zur physikalischen und historischen Geographie des Landes* (Hanover, 1923).

expedition to Ophir, while the first half, though not exclusively Biblical, contains many suggestions for the interpretation or illustration of Biblical texts. The author is one of the few scholars who have travelled in Arabia, and indeed with the camera, which has enabled him to present his readers with a number of successful photographs. But he also brings to bear on his subject profound acquaintance with the literature of the Arabs, which is indeed removed by many centuries from