

"Achievements and Rewards"

Sermon preached before the "Victory Convention" of Southern Baptists, meeting at Washington, D. C., May 12-17, 1920.

The Text, II John 1:8-"Look to yourselves that ye lose not those things which we have wrought, but that ye receive full reward."

The Second Epistle of John illustrates the disposition of the Holy Spirit of God to take advantage of the sweet familiarities of men. Other sections of the New Testament show expressed purpose of holy writing, and the stage is all set for it; but here is something different, peculiar, and very impressive.

In the happiest, most personal way, the apostle sets out to write a note to his friend, probably a widowed Christian mother of Ephesus, about some of her children he had recently seen. All is very intimate, confidential and exceedingly pleasant. But in the seventh verse there is an interruption. The smooth and easy movement lapses swiftly into battle army. A sinister figure has suddenly and menacingly stalked between him and his friend. In a bound the writer is in the apostolic arena full tilt, changed into towering preacher and blazing prophet. He raises there a passionate warning which sounds beyond the "Elect Lady" and her children, and its protest becomes a message for the ages. It vibrates this moment in the ears of this Convention:

"Look to yourselves that ye lose not the things which we have wrought, but that ye receive a full reward."

The Background of Deeds

The first significance of the text is the background of achievement. "The things which we have wrought." No mistaking the ring of certainty in these words. Something had been wrought. It was something honorable under God, worthy of Christ, and to be cherished and conserved. It is also something definite in fact-there is no doubt about it-there it is. It is the base-line for courage and for conscience which he, and all who were with him in the Christian enterprise, could stand on, facing the enemy of souls and a frowning world.

We may find here a practical light on the character and conduct of the apostolic Christians. They have always impressed the world with a certain noble dignity, unlike, and so not accounted for in the herologies of men. It is the attitude of conscious superiority which they carried into all their contact with the mighty and unfriendly forces about them. It has been variously considered by friends and foes, but all have agreed that there was something in the apostolic characters which constituted a distinct phenomena of courage. Half in derision, Renan wrote of the way they stood apart in their times, "As though they alone had the right to be brave, lofty and resigned." Before Renan, Julian, the apostate, unwillingly, in letters to his followers, confessed that there was something very wonderful and most baffling about these people who followed Christ. In a later age, the Duke of Alva, reporting results from the Inquisition, told the King of Spain that he found a strange light in the faces of those people which he had not been able to stamp out. The Christian brotherhood of the first century, by all accounts, had created a new aristocracy in the earth—the Aristocracy of the Kingdom of God.

Now I am finding in this text a light upon it, which, if not the highest light, is very steady. When we read John's words, "The things which we have wrought," we begin to understand that this sense of Christian advantage was not fanaticism, the high glee of moral defiance, nor what is called religious optimism, the patient expectations of a faith which has put a bad present against a good future. These men were enthusiasts and they were optimists, but they were also men of remarkable common sense. We begin to appreciate that they do not justify pity, and do not invite sympathy. The odds were against them, but they did not seem to be so much impressed by it as we are. We mostly think of Paul in prison, of John, a lonely exile, of James, brutally beheaded. That was not the dominant consciousness of these men at all.

What was their point of view? I believe it was an intelligent consciousness of achievement, advantage, power, and victory. They had acute sense of things wrought, of deeds done, and of powers loosed through them upon the world that had

shaken it to its foundation. We express wonder that they did not compromise with Judaism and with the generosities of the Roman Empire. Why should they? Such an exchange would have been gold for pewter, distinction for commonplace. It was a cool calculation. They could put this against that, and that against this, and the balance was all in their favor. The things which had been wrought were so very calculable. It stirred their blood to reckon up what they had seen and felt and done in the seventy-five years of Christ. It was far greater and historically more powerful in effect, and they knew it, than a thousand years of Roman heroes had wrought. We may be sure that when John's pen is poised to write the words, "The things which we have wrought," he is comprehending the Christian enterprise imperially.

We are not forgetting that an apostle's review of the great series of facts in their record of achievement would include Christ's presence with them. That is what we are recalling exactly. It is the main fact. But it is to be pointed out that their courage is not fatuous. It is built on deeds. Dr. Glover, explaining the triumph of the early Christians over the pagan world, says that "they outthought" it, "outlived" it, "and outdied" it; and then moves deeper to explain them. "They were the sons of fact," he says.

This is something to remember as we come to consider the cause committed to our trust, in the light of apostolic example. We, too, are "the sons of fact." Christianity has gone forward always from an inspiration of deeds. An unconquerable Christianity has existed in every age, dark as some ages seem, and the line of its advance in each is marked by the things wrought for the welfare and salvation of mankind. The background of achievement which pushed the apostles fearlessly into the face of history has from them moved up the centuries. The array of facts, of sufferings endured, of transformations effected by Jesus Christ through his people has never been broken, never pushed back, and it has been constantly reinforced. The front line of Christianity is always its base-line. Some one has said that every Christian society must hold itself ready to go back to its first creative

impulse. That is true, but the way to do that is to keep doing apostolic work in the apostolic fashion. The spirit of victory cannot live without substance to feed on. The up-to-date New Testament spirit brings New Testament achievements up to date. Our faith and our works go together, and one cannot go without the other. Faith without works is dead. Why? Because works are Faith's food-the substance of its vitality.

The Shadow of Failure

The startling significance of the text is "the shadow of failure" indicated in the words, "that ye lose not," Unless John's reference to the things wrought is trivial, the suggestion that they could be lost is appalling. But it is not anti-climax. It is the law of Christian experience in the New Testament. I have spoken of the apostolic mood of victory. Here is another characteristic-their fear of defeat. When you hear them say, "Rejoice, rejoice!" you may listen to hear them say, "Watch, watch!" When you hear their shout, you may listen for their whisper. Side by side in the New Testament, the shout and the shadow. Where did they get the idea and the habit? They learned it from Christ himself. Who can estimate the part Temptation played in the discipline of Jesus? Temptation to Him meant peril or it meant nothing. He certainly left His followers in no ignorance of the dangers along their way as very real dangers. We should not, therefore, be surprised to find the most victorious Christians the least presumptuous. The possibility of failure dogged the steps of the disciples at their best, haunted the path of the apostles at their best, and it is the ominous inheritance of those who have come after them. "Look to yourselves that ye lose not the things which we have wrought."

What does that mean for us? It means that there are not successes which may not be spoiled. It means that there is for us nothing guaranteed in religion unconditionally. It means that we are Christ's instruments, subordinate to a sovereign purpose, and the Divine cause will set us aside when we cease to be effective for its uses. It means that the Christian life needs be the most careful,

and that Christian service is the most sensitive engagement in the world. It means that a church or a denomination may not build its confidence on sacrosanct security. It means that the Christian way is a struggle, a conflict from which suspense is never lifted. It is a good fight right up to the edge of the tomb and right up to the gates of glory.

If the vivid emphasis of apprehension in Paul concerning himself, and the warnings of John to the churches, were not convincing of this truth, the actual history of Christianity supplies enough. Its records are cluttered with the belated fragments of broken armies. More than the records show, the unacknowledged spiritual fact fills out the truth of tragic ecclesiastical failures. God was going on, whether Judaism went or not. That is what Paul told the Jews. And there they are struggling along in the rear of the Divine movement in the earth. What does the Protestant Reformation mean? It means that God took a Roman Catholic priest and tore him loose from the church and said to them, "I have found me a man. I have a people. I am going on." He took John Wesley out of moribund English Christianity and said, "I have found me a man. My people shall go on." He took William Booth out of a recalcitrant British Methodism and said, "I have found me a man. I am going on with him, and if you go with us you will have to catch up with the line." If Judaism had its Paul, Roman Catholicism its Martin Luther, Anglicism its John Wesley, Methodism its William Booth, the Baptists, so far fortunate, may profit by the examples.

God does not run off with people into tangents and side-lines. When they palter and tarry with a loitering banner, He does not sit down and wait for them to come up. That accommodating arrangement never works. No, our God is marching on. His trumpet calls no retreats, makes no dainty music for dallying reviews, and furnishes no spiritual jazz for the raucus ecclesiastical pugilisms which divert the Christian army from its one passion. We can be left behind and not know it. We are left behind whenever we lose the fighting edge of a definite front-line simplicity that is toward Christ and the goal of His desire. The slogans of the New Testament are of victory, but not more surely did the slave in the chariot of Scipio whisper to the conqueror,

"Remember, you are mortal," than its word attendant on our achievements asserts our peril of defeat. The great charges of the apostles are still ringing, "Fight the good fight of faith." It was a fighting faith; it had to be. "Keep that good thing committed unto you by the Holy Ghost." Keep it, because you may lose it. "Strive to enter in at the straight gate," for few get in, and none who do not strive. "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling," because fear and trembling means watching and working. "Except ye repent, ye shall also likewise perish." Who? Why, you, preacher; you, church; you, people of God. "How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?" The answer is, simply, we won't. "Therefore, we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard."

The Pivot of Victory

The concentration of the text and its most urgent word is upon the exhortation, "Look to yourselves." On the human side--and that is where our responsibility lies--Christ's enterprise was from the beginning pivoted on the individual. This is another peculiarity of New Testament religion. Its solitudes are intensely personal. The sympathies and anxieties of Jesus are not about the group. His exigency is the individual soul. The multitudes seemed to disturb Christ. He never got much out of them. The crowd seemed to baffle the divine method. The implication of that fact is profound. It suggests that the passionate individualism of the Gospel is somehow related to the eccentricity of God's revelation of Himself in a man.

The human mind is not yet capable of grasping the full significance of the Incarnation, and we are still only grasping at it, but there is one conclusion from it the simplest mind cannot miss. It is, that a man--a single human being--is somehow indispensable to God, and that through a man only His kingdom can be established. It is a short step of logic to what the New Testament is always insisting on, that the propaganda of the gospel of Christ begun in the world by "The Man" is carried on only through men who have a first-hand experience with it. Wherever that experience is lacking, the gospel halts; and wherever that experience is present, it moves.

Experience is the norm of Christianity. Christ is channelled for the salvation of all men through other men by the heart route. Experience, crystallizing in character, is the pivot-the human pivot-on which the kingdom of God swings.

The value of that is in knowing exactly where we must put the emphasis and where we must keep the emphasis. There can be no question where the point was in the pentecostal period when only a few Christians were carrying the banner of Christ. The organizing idea of all our enterprises, is to bring as many people as possible individually into an experience with Christ and to guide them to fulfill that experience in Christly characters. "Therefore, look to yourselves." The victory we won yesterday, the sums of money we may accumulate for the Kingdom tomorrow, should not absorb the first passion of churches and conventions. How soundly we are laying the foundations of such victories and achievements of the future in Christian experience and character matters first of all. The movement of grace inward is bound to mean a movement of the gospel outward. The movement of the gospel outward alone, however ambitiously projected and organized, like branches without the vine, will shrivel and fall.

Reichel was conducting the final rehearsal of his great choir for the production of the "Messiah." The chorus had sung through to the point where the soprano solo takes up the refrain, "I know that my Redeemer liveth." The soloist's technique was perfect-she had faultless breathing, accurate note-placing, flawless enunciation. But after the final notes, all eyes were fixed upon Reichel to catch his look of approval. Instead, he silenced the orchestra, walked up to the singer with sorrowful eyes, and said, "My daughter, you do not really know that your Redeemer liveth, do you?" "Why, yes," she answered, flushing, "I think I do." "Then sing it," cried Reichel. "Tell it to me, so I and all who hear you will know, and know that you know the joy and power of it." Then he motioned the orchestra to play it again. And this time she sang the truth as she knew it in her own heart-sang it with no thought of applause-sang it so gloriously that all who heard forgot the craftsman's work and wept under the spell of the singer's soul. Again the old master approached

her, not with sorrowful eyes, but with joyous, tear-filled eyes, kissed her on the forehead, and said, "You do know, for you have told me."

And it is so; no matter how many there are of us, nor how "letter-perfect" we may be in religious arts and organizations, we cannot tell what we do not know, we cannot do for others what has not been done for us, and there is no power to thrust the gospel upon the world an inch further than our own experience of it. Dr. James Denny quotes a distinguished missionary as saying, "Some people do not believe in missions; they do not believe in Christ." That went to the root of the matter for them and for us. The measure of a man's capacity for service-is the Experience of God. "He to whom little has been forgiven loveth little." Christ implied what He did not express, that he therefore does little. "But he to whom much has been forgiven loveth much," and therefore that man will be able to do much.

The Full Reward

The last word is the prophetic note which follows the warning, "that ye may receive a full reward." Here is still another apostolic peculiarity. The best was always yet to come. The restless, homeless Christ would have nowhere to lay His head, nor could be tempted by men or devils from His consummate joy. Since then there has been no room in Christianity for complacencies. Peter, foolish man that he was, thought the mountain top, with Moses and Elias and his transfigured Lord, was the place for them all to stop and stay. But it is not for Christians to be perfectly satisfied with themselves anywhere, or with their achievements. The security of what they have done depends upon their doing well what remains, and there is always something remaining. It is a war we have enlisted for-Immanuel's war, not a campaign and not a battle merely. Yet ours is the happiest life, because it is Life with its face forward endlessly.

I have read these words over, and over, and over again. I have repeated them to myself a hundred times, "that ye may receive your full reward." What is the full reward of it all? It is like a lad in the school. He is on time with his lessons and he gets a smile from the teacher that brightens his day. A monthly

report wins him distinction from his father and mother that sweetens his life. He wins a prize, and the applause of his friends is like music. He is promoted upward, and a dear, solemn little record is cut in his heart. He graduates with honor in the high school, and his face is limpid with conscious success. In college at repeated stages he wins his goal. He stands on commencement day surveying what he has wrought, but it is only commencement day. His life reward is a flying goal. Youth, success, old age! He has done well with it all. The time of his departure at length arrives, and it is commencement day again. Seventy years have not given him the full reward.

You ask me then, what is the full reward of the Christian life—the full reward of this great company of souls? I cannot tell you, for I do not know. Is it to rest? No! Eternal life is not to rest. Is it to luxuriate in bliss? No! Is it to wear a crown amongst a million crowns? No! Heaven is rest, and heaven is plenty, and heaven is glory; but these are not for the Christ-passioned soul the full reward. What can it be? I will tell you what I think it may be. I think it is some time to look into the face of Christ and to realize that He has seen the travail of His soul and is satisfied. I think it is to see with undimmed eyes the Father drawing his children all about Him and saying, "These were lost and are found." I think it is for the King immortal, eternal, invisible, to wave His sceptre of vindicated love over His redeemed world.

Can you imagine Paul at the end of his life's desire anywhere so long as there remains unconquered a spot in that Europe and Asia for which he so agonized? I do not see how John Knox can know perfect bliss until Scotland is redeemed. I cannot understand that the full reward of the missionary can be assigned until all the harvest for which he sowed the seed of prayers and toil is gathered in. The engagement with Christ is for the eternal passion of a lamb slain before the foundation of the world, on to the day when the one hundred and forty and four thousand shall sing the exultant chorus of the Christian's full reward, "Worthy is the lamb that was slain to receive honor, and power, and dominion forever and ever."