

GOD'S ANSWER TO THE HUMAN PROBLEM

"Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?"

Matthew 19:16

It may be a truism to say that there comes a time in every life when we are made to face the supreme human problem of having our lives rightly related to the purpose for which they were created. That such a relationship is possible is a recognized and established fact. Men down through the ages have borne testimony to the fact and reality of a new life in human experience made actual and real, not by human effort, but by Divine intervention-God coming into the life. The Christian message is not primarily concerned with a number of things, but with the one comprehensive and infinitely precious gift of life, and while this includes a variety of aspects, it is above all a spiritual unity in a personal experience of Christ.

I wish to direct attention to a young man who faced the supreme human problem and found himself at the feet of Christ. Here I would have you note his prayer:

"Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?"

"What shall I do?" The history of man is the history of enquiry. Man down through the ages has been out on a great quest, the sum of which is to know God. Away back in the distant past Job cried: "Oh, that I knew where I might find Him!" (Job 23.3). I would go as far as to say that the initiative of the honest Soul is not towards self-realization but towards God-realization, and in this verse of Scripture we have the language of a young man in search of reality. He is tired of the tinsel and toy of earth's vain show. Indeed, with Solomon I believe that he, too, would cry: "All is vanity and vexation of spirit" (Eccles. 1.14).

I. Notice his Convictions: I wish to suggest that he was arrested by two fundamental truths: (a) Man in his natural state is not in possession of eternal life, and (b) There is in man that which is immortal-his soul.

I wonder, where do we stand in relation to this young man's convictions? Has it dawned upon us yet that our great need is life? I wonder whether we have yet with understanding and sincerity faced this question? Have I life-eternal life? There is one truth that this incident brings home to me, i.e., that I may be a good man according to the world's standard of goodness and yet be destitute of the true principle of life.

Here is a young man who, according to the Scripture, kept the commandments referred to by Christ. He could say: "All these have I kept from my youth up. It is also

of interest to note that when he made that statement, Christ did not contradict him. Here was a young man, moral, respectable, upright. In the language of today we would speak of him as an excellent character indeed; a good man. Yet we have got to recognize that natural goodness is not Christian virtue. I could squeeze together all the natural goodness in the world and yet not find in that great whole that which would constitute one true Christian character. Some years ago, when assisting at a Convention in the town of Oban, I remember an elderly man coming to tell me, after one of my addresses, that he did not at all agree with my theology. In course of conversation he told me that as a babe he was christened, and at the age of eighteen he became a member of the church at the invitation of the minister. Here may I say, God have mercy on ministers who invite to the Lord's table people who are strangers to saving grace! Such was the case with this man. He went on to tell me that at the age of twenty-one he joined the Good Templars, and at twenty-seven became a Freemason, and then he added, "Surely that is enough to secure for me an entrance into the Kingdom of God!" Poor man! I quoted Paul's great passage: "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost which He shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour" (Titus 3.5, 6); but it was quite obvious that this dear man knew nothing of that experience. He was building for eternity on his own good works. What if all our respectability, morality and goodness is but the beautiful mounting on a beautiful coffin that carries a corpse! Let us believe as the poet said:

"Upon a life r did not live,
Upon a death r could not die;
Another's life, Another's death,
I stake my whole eternity".

2. Again notice his belief in the Continuity of Life: "Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may inherit eternal lift?" He wanted lift, but life with reference to eternity.

I remember some years ago sitting beside a young lady whom I knew to be a member of a neighbouring church. She was on her way to a dance, on the evening of the preparatory service in the church to which she belonged. I could not help saying to her, "Your Communion is on Sabbath, and this is your preparatory service?" She quite understood what I meant, and said, "You must not be too hard on the young people; after all, we live but once!" of course, I understood what she meant. On returning home that evening I began to ponder over what she had said: "We live but once!" and suddenly found myself saying, "No greater lie was ever forged on the anvils of hell!" It is true that we live but once in the body, and once under present conditions; but the

body is not all, and the end of present conditions is not the termination of life. Here let me quote the poet:

"Tell me not in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream;
And the soul is dead that slumbers,
And things are not what they seem.

"Life is real, life is
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul".

Some day this world will grow crazy with age, and there are ominous signs that it is happening now. The day will come when the sun will wax dim in its orbit, and the stars will fall like leaves in autumn. The world will fall, will break and burn; but the deathless soul within my bosom will survive the wreck of a million worlds.

No, this young man did not believe the damnable doctrine of universalism, nor did he believe in conditional immortality, which tells us that if we do not accept Christ we shall die like our dogs. He believed that he had within his bosom a soul that had in it the breath of eternity, and could say with a wiser man: "Thou hast put eternity in man's heart" (Eccles. 3.11, trans.).

3. Notice further, to Whom he is Guided: Scripture tells us that he ran and knelt at the feet of Jesus, and here he confronts reality. I believe that in the experience of all there comes a moment pregnant with possibilities. Such a moment came in the life of Agrippa when he said: "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian," and that moment came also in the life of Felix who simply said: "I will hear thee again of this matter." I presume that in the case of this young man there was but a step between him and life. How true are the words of Shakespeare: "There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, if taken at the flood, leads on to fortune: omitted, and all the voyage of life is lost in shallows and misery."

4. Mark the Burden of his Prayer, emphasized in the words: "Good Master". In these words we have suggested the modern approach. Let Christ be an example, a leader, an inspirer of noble deed—a master! Let Him be the leader of a new social order that will proclaim the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, so that "Man to Man the world o'er shall brothers be for a' that" (R. Burns). The man who makes that his philosophy of life is in a fool's paradise! Christ is Master; He is the Inspirer of noble deed; He is the great Example, but He is infinitely more than that! What man needs is

not an example, but life, and that is what this young man recognized. What did Jesus say to him? "One thing thou lackest."

Here I would suggest that Jesus is saying that it is not ethical direction, nor education, nor agitation; but God coming into the life. "Go," said Jesus, "sell that thou hast, and give to the poor . . . and come and follow Me. " In other words-"Do something about it, but see that you do the important thing!"

One thing which surprises me in the life of Christ is the selective power which He manifested. He had no time to waste over things that were not vital. See about the thing that matters! Real strength of moral and spiritual character is both derived and conserved by the refusal of the unimportant. What was the important thing? Was it not to face the Cross? Here I would suggest that this man's difficulty was not in parting with his possessions, but the way in which the world would interpret his act. What would his associates say about the sanity of a man who would follow an unpopular Leader, of whom it was true that He had nowhere to lay His head?

Reflections cast upon the balance of our mental powers is harder to bear than pillows of stone, and it would appear that having faced the issue, he was unwilling to follow or do what Christ commanded; so at the feet of the Saviour he made his choice. Back to his possessions; moral, respectable, but without Jesus; and here let me say to my young reader - you cannot have the best now and in eternity. I would remind you of the words spoken of Moses: "Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season" (Heb. 11: 25). No doubt you have heard of the incident that happened during Napoleon's march on Moscow. A young Russian soldier was captured by a few French soldiers. As they gathered round the young Russian, one said; "Come and let us make him a Napoleon's man." So they took a red-hot iron and branded the letter 'N' on the palm of this young Russian's hand. Suddenly, a gleam of light came into the eye of the soldier, and before the Frenchmen realized what was happening he took an axe, cut off the palm of his hand on which the letter 'N' was branded, and threw it into the midst of the French soldiers, saying at the same time: "Take what belongs to your Emperor; as for me, I will follow my Czar!" I wonder who will say today: "Take what belongs to the world; as for me, I will follow my Saviour!"

5. What Forced the Issue? You have it in these words: "Come and follow". Jesus, in effect, is saying, "Eternal life is yours if you are agreed upon two things": (a) Come. What we need to understand and make basic in our experience is that salvation is not a system or intellectual speculation, creed, religion, philosophy or theology. All that is but the reflection of the mind. Eternal life is my relationship to Jesus. Vital religion is deeper than all well-ordered belief of the intellectual. It is the soul that is reborn.

Salvation is not a philosophy but an experience. We are not called upon to reconcile its principles with human reason, but to test them as working principles of life.

During the first world war I lay beside a young Cameron Highlander who was mortally wounded. In his last hour he kept repeating:

"The dying thief rejoiced to see
That fountain in his day;
And there may I, as vile as he,
Wash all my sins away".

Here you have a statement that is beyond philosophy, and the man that can rest his faith on a truth so great has the future in his hands.

Following the word Come you have the word (b) Follow, suggesting that the act of coming must be followed by the act of obedience. Jesus is quite emphatic on this point: "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me." This is a fundamental condition that can never be evaded or disregarded. An isolated act of surrender will guarantee nothing unless that act is initial to an attitude of surrender, continuous obedience and faith. Here let me state clearly what I mean by faith. Paul speaks of the "faith of the Son of God". Here is a faith that has in it a quality other than mere human faith. It is God-given. I have heard preachers of the Gospel say when illustrating faith: "You go into a train or a plane, and you expect that train or plane to take you to your destination," i.e., you exercise faith in the plane or train. This, of course, is the faith we live by, and without it could not exist, but that is mere human faith, and not saving faith. Calvin is clear on this point: "We are saved through faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone."

Let it be a settled conviction with us, that the hand that lays hold of the promise is a God-given hand. He gives "grace to welcomed grace, where reigned the power of sin." Is this the life you desire? Then

"Burdened on; why will you longer bear
Sorrows from which He releases?
Open your heart, and, rejoicing, share
Life 'more abundant' in Jesus!"