

“THEM WHICH ARE ASLEEP”

(I Thess. iv. 13)

Church Association Tract 412

Revd. James Maden Holt, M.A.

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MR J. MADEN HOLT then delivered an address upon “Them which are asleep” (I Thess. iv. 13). He said : Whilst mourning over the loss of our dear friend Mr. Henry Miller, the invaluable Secretary of our Association, the subject selected for this morning’s address is specially appropriate. We all deeply lament his loss to the Protestant cause, which we feel to be incalculable; I cannot find words to express it adequately, though we cannot doubt that his gain is great beyond our estimation. “Eye hath not seen nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him.” The Lord gave him to us; the Lord has taken him away. Let us humbly and devoutly give thanks. Blessed be the Name of the Lord!

I am asked to speak of “Them which are asleep,” a subject of deep and solemn interest to all of us whose mourning for the loss of friends or relatives is accompanied by the conviction that they “have been laid to sleep by Jesus,” and rest “in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life.” In the freshness of our sorrow has not the thought often occupied our minds, Where is the dear departed one? Carried by the angels into the quiet land of rest and peace! Yes; but where is it? Where are the souls of them that sleep in Jesus? Have they any thought of us and our concerns? Are they near at hand or very far off? The death which closed the eyes of the body opened those of the soul to the realities of eternity—solemn and glorious realities beyond human conception. And though our Lord’s parable represents Dives as deeply concerned for the welfare of his surviving brothers, possibly we have no right to press that feature of the story. Yet it does afford some ground for the happy thought that the departed do not forget us in the pleasant land of rest.

Time would fail me were I to notice the multitude of ideas advanced on this subject. I must confine my remarks within narrow limits. We meet today not for controversy, but for edification. I assume that we are agreed that there is an intermediate state of existence where the blessed dead await the resurrection of the body. Very little, however, is revealed in Scripture concerning their condition. It would seem to be purposely veiled in mystery. In treating of it one needs to guard against speculation without Scriptural foundation, as well as against the sentimental figments of a vivid imagination built on hints in Scripture. Sentimentalism may easily land us in superstition as unscriptural as the repulsive dogma of Purgatory. On that subject I would observe that if ever there was need for the cleansing fires of Purgatory, it was in the case of the penitent thief, yet he, with his Saviour, entered at once, not into Purgatory, but into Paradise. Let us keep as close as possible to the text of our Bibles, interpreting it soberly, and bearing in mind that some things beyond our understanding are revealed in symbols. A very few passages convey all we know respecting the present state of “them which are asleep.” Our Lord’s parable of Dives and Lazarus, His gracious promise to the dying malefactor, “Today shalt thou be with Me in Paradise”; St. Paul’s desire “to depart and to be with Christ,” or, as he words it to the Corinthians, “absent from the body, present with the Lord”; his association of Paradise with the third heaven; and the assurance in the Epistle to the Hebrews of “the rest that remaineth to the people of God,” provide us with food for contemplation.

Paradise, be it remembered, is not a Hebrew word. It belongs to the Aryan family of languages. In India or Persia it is used to signify a park or a large, wild, natural garden; and, having been

adopted by the Septuagint and the Vulgate for the garden planted by the Lord God in Eden, it is generally associated therewith. In Jewish theology Paradise was the name for the unseen world which the Greeks called Hades, and that we understand to be the sense in which our Lord used the word on the Cross. We know not where Paradise is. We cannot be certain that the word is not used symbolically. But St. Paul connects it with the third heaven; and it may be that it represents a true Garden of Eden which surrounds the City of God. But the important thing is that, wherever or whatever it may be, it is "with Christ." There is no symbolism or ambiguity about that. How His Presence is manifested in Paradise is not explained. We know that "He ascended up far above all heavens, that He might fill all things," and that "He sitteth on the right hand of the Majesty on high." Yet He dwells by faith in the hearts of His people. The Lord Jesus was with the penitent thief in person in Paradise, and St. Paul's language assures us of a presence which will satisfy the souls that enter into rest. With the Lord! Ever conscious of His presence! And does not the experience of our fickle hearts suggest that some supernatural change must accompany the act of death to qualify the souls of them that sleep in Jesus for their new surroundings? The change from the pollution and darkness of this world to the pure, bright atmosphere of Paradise must be immense, but the exceeding greatness of the power of the Holy Ghost can easily effect all that is required "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye," as in the case of those who remain unto the coming of the Lord. Then the soul, freed from the body and from "all filthiness of the flesh and spirit," must feel more than ever thankful for redeeming love—supremely conscious that salvation is of the Lord.

That being so, one object must absorb the interest and affections of the blessed spirit that enters Paradise—the Saviour, Whose agony and bloody sweat, Whose cross and passion, Whose tender sympathy, Whose sovereign love and unceasing care has delivered the poor helpless sinner, notwithstanding the seductions of the world, the malice of the devil, and the depravity and enmity of a desperately wicked heart from the power of darkness and from the wrath to come. The whole faculties of the enchanted soul must be concentrated on Him Who is our life, our hope, and our exceeding great reward. Humility, gratitude, and adoration must find as free expression in Paradise as in heaven in praise of redeeming love; and the happy spirit must feel more intensely than it did on earth—

"With mercy and with judgment
My web of time He wove,
And aye the dews of sorrow
Were lusted by His love.
I'll praise the Hand that guided,
I'll bless the Heart that planned,
When throned where glory dwelleth
In Immanuel's Land."

To depart, then, is to be with Christ—with that same Jesus "Who remembered us in our low estate, for His mercy endureth for ever"; Who has given us all that we have, and has made us all that we are; Who promised His disciples that where He was there they should be also. Is not that enough? Can His people wish for anything more? But it is no act of imaginary speculation to say that they who are with Christ are—

1. At rest. Whilst the body sleeps in its quiet grave the soul is in the tranquil rest of Paradise. "We which have believed do enter into rest" says the writer to the Hebrews; but they who have "passed the waves of this troublesome world" find in the land of quiet peace and contemplation a still better rest. There "the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary rest" from their labours.

2. They are also in peace. There is no controversy there, no contradiction of sinners, no rough opponents, no anxiety concerning the sincerity of friends, no harassing thoughts as to the mistakes of yesterday, the duties of today, or the prospects of the morrow. Struggle, warfare, perpetual

conflict, distressing failures are over for ever and ever. They enjoy perfect peace of mind in the abode of God's quiet rest.

“No rude alarms of raging foes,
No cares to break the long repose,
No midnight shade, no clouded sun,
But sacred high eternal noon.”

3. They that are asleep also enjoy freedom from all that is evil: freedom from the burden of the flesh, with its weakness and sympathy with sin; from spiritual trials and temptations; freedom from self in every form. No more pride, no more self-righteousness or self-seeking, no wanderings of heart, or distractions of mind, but perfect holiness, perfect rest, perfect peace, perfect freedom.

As to the occupations of Paradise, we cannot doubt that there is a continuance of spiritual service, without any failure or fatigue. I have already dwelt on the service of praise and adoration based on past experience and an increased sense of the perfections and goodness of God. No jarring notes mar that music; no want of sincerity spoils that song. There is no need for rehearsals to perfect the harmony of that choir of happy souls.

But the Scriptures give us to understand that the blessed dead will not enjoy perfect happiness until they attain unto the resurrection of the body. Then “the tabernacle of God shall be with men”; they shall see His face, and His Name shall be in their foreheads.” “I shall be satisfied,” said David, “when I awake with Thy likeness.”

Thus then we think of “them which are asleep.” They are in peace for evermore. We are still in the flesh; and in proportion as we can say with St. Paul, “We that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened,” we shall find ourselves able to share his desire to depart and to be with Christ. Alas! “how we grovel here below, fond of our earthly toys!” But unless the Lord's coming prevent, each of us must pass through “the grave and gate of death” into the world of spirits. Hence this subject has a very practical application for you and me. It is clearly revealed that “each one of us must give account of himself to God.” It will be an awfully solemn moment—a moment for deep self-abasement—when we realize, as we have never done before, our intense helplessness, our depravity and weakness before God. But by His mercy, for which we praise His Name, “we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous, and He is the propitiation for our sins.” “His blood cleanseth from all sin,” and assures us of that “perfect love” which “casteth out fear and gives boldness in the day of judgment”; and for our support and comfort we have His own most gracious assurance, confirmed by that solemn asseveration, “Verily, verily, I say unto you,—he that heareth My words and believeth on Him that sent Me hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation, but is passed from death unto life.” “I am the resurrection and the life.” Whilst we groan under the law of sin and death we are constrained to join in St. Paul's cry, “O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me?” By faith we join him in thanking God, through Jesus Christ our Lord, that “the law of the Spirit, the law of life in Christ Jesus, has set us free from the law of sin and death.” He assured His disciples, “Because I live ye shall live also.” Thus “death is swallowed up in victory! O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? “By faith we may humbly thank God that He “giveth us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord”; and whilst we “bless His holy Name for all His servants departed this life in His faith and fear,” let us pray for “grace so to follow their good examples that with them we may be partakers “ of His heavenly Kingdom.

“BUT I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the Archangel and with the trump of God: and the dead in

Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words."

I Thess. iv. 13-18.