

‘Whosoever.’¹

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Revelation xxii. 17.

WE study the Scriptures as we study the firmament, now in galaxies, now in constellations, now in one bright particular star, through the attentive reading of which some of the glory of the heavens as a whole may break upon us.

In God’s gracious message to us, as in the sky itself, there are words that, like stars, shine out with a peculiar brilliance, and that seem to us worth pondering by themselves. And this word ‘whosoever’ seems chief among them.

‘Whosoever’ is a late word in the gracious language of God to man. There is no word in that language that is so costly, none that took so long a time to pronounce; no word that the ears of men were so strained to hear; no word that is so slowly learnt, so easily forgotten; and no word which when learnt and acted upon is so far above rubies.

And it is fitting that the word should find a place in the great book with which the Revelation closes. The book is a great lake which many streams have gone to fill. There you have the majesty and sweep of prophetic thought wedded to new and gorgeous symbols; there you have the voices of celestial beings in their ranks and orders sounding out the praises of God’s love to man; there you see the march of history, the conflict of good and evil, the armies of heaven and the congregations of men, the stringency of the Law, the sweetness of the gospel, the lion of the tribe of Judah, and the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. It is fitting, surely, that, ere it closes, this magical word of divine hospitality should there find emphatic utterance.

Slowly, very slowly, the letters and syllables of the word have been brought together. Infinite love, wisdom, and power have gone to the fashioning of it. Can we trace the letters and syllables of this magical word of divine hospitality?

In some rude and childlike fashion I think we can, but only as children who dimly perceive and feebly estimate a Father’s boundless love.

Though it is a late word, it is not an afterthought. Nature has been lisping it since the

¹ Given at the dedication of a church, February 1902.

morning stars sang together. The over-arching sky—the roof of the world,—how hospitable it is, bending over every man and making the elements of a home for him! Be where you may, on land or sea, on the highest peak or in the deepest valley, the benediction of the heavens is over you, and there is no voice or language where this speech is not heard. On saint and sinner alike their blessings descend; the starry heavens and the shining sun seem as if they were spelling out the letters of the word ‘whosoever.’

Consider, too, how hospitable the earth is, how responsive to the labour of whosoever tills or sows or plants. She asks no questions of your descent; she fills your barns; her fruits fall into your lap and crown your year with her goodness. The mother-earth erects no fences, warns no trespasser off. She invites you to rest on her fresh upspringing grass when you are weary, to toil when you are able; and her generosity is out of all proportion to your care and labour.

How hospitable also is the sea that takes all burdens, small and great, on her broad bosom; that lifts the tiny boat and the leviathan of commerce with equal ease—accommodating herself to the needs and wants of man—untiring, unresting, by her million waves on the pebbled shore, seeming to whisper ‘Whosoever.’

The liberal air, the universal dew, the copious rivers, all seem to join in this chorus and proclaim the Maker of them generous, hospitable, accommodating, and comprehensive in His beneficence. Before the word ‘whosoever’ was written, the letters of it were spelt out in the Father’s great book of Nature and of Providence.

But this language, clear as the after-ages have made it, was hard for men to decipher. The very alphabet of it was known only to a few, the full word to none.

We said a little ago that this word ‘whosoever’ was one which the ears of men were straining to hear. They caught faint echoes of it, but they could not reduce it to articulate sound. The syllables could not shape themselves aright. Men could not get their tongues round it nor their

hearts enlarged enough to utter it. The world by wisdom knew not God. But men could not help making guesses at Him. There was that within them, around them, and above them that would not let them rest. The religions of heathendom are guesses at God. We speak of them as the darkened peoples of the earth. The darkness, however, is not anywhere total. Gleams of light run athwart it; some dim foretelling of a dawn there is in every one of them. But just how to get out into the light they knew not. We think of them sometimes as fallen from light and knowledge. Some of them may have. Many never saw the light, deeply though they yearned for it. The inequalities of experience fed this yearning hope. Life itself is so unequal in duration, so uncertain, so full of ups and downs; the relations of men to one another are so inexplicable—the king on the throne, the beggar on the dunghill, the master and the slave, the learned and the ignorant, the rich and the poor, the man of good character and of bad.

On a small scale it was as perplexing as on the large. Some races, proud and valiant, going forth conquering and to conquer; others, mean and cowardly, apparently marked out for submission and slavery, hewers of wood and drawers of water—Pharaoh on the throne, the brickmaker in the field.

Blessings undoubted there were, and deprivations that had to be borne. Out of all this and more sprang what we call false religions, which are only false because they could not reach to the measure of the stature of the true. They could not say or shape to themselves, 'Whosoever.' They could only say, 'Obey the god of your race or land or tribe, render the sacrifices, pay the dues in prayers, entreaties, sacrifices, and render them all in the right way—you may come, and welcome.' But as for the man who is not of our race or tribe, the man who knows not the god, nor his sacrifices, nor his dues, nor how to pay them, let him stand afar off. The heathen was a heathen to his brother heathen. All sought the same thing; they sought the hospitality of God, but they could never find the main door of the House. They sought to enter by side doors, and landed in underground cellars in a yet grosser darkness. The light of nature was not nearly so poor a light as this.

If you could keep man to that light, he would

still be in a darkness, at least in a comparative darkness, but it could not be so dense a darkness as he has made for himself in the search for light. If you could keep men from having a religion at all, it would be better than some of those which by their wisdom they have found out.

This could never be done. Man would have a religion. He must needs have a religion, but he could not extend it beyond his own tribe. His god was just his god, and he was not yours or mine.

The word 'whosoever' had no place in the vocabulary of any heathen religion. We know of languages in which there are no words for certain common virtues among us, and the reason the word is not there is because the thing was unknown.

Until the fulness of time, when God could speak freely to man, no such word as 'whosoever' could shape itself on human lips. Until it could be said, 'Thus saith the Lord,' the best guesses of men were but babblings in the dark.

The voice of the Lord, however, had to be attuned to the ear on which it fell. Israel was a giant in religion when all the rest of the world were but babes. It was not by searching that he found out the Almighty. The voice came to him. He did not catch the full significance of it. The voice of his God was the most powerful voice among all the gods.

But it was long before he reached the conclusion that there was no voice but only his God's—that not only some of the gods, but all the gods, were dumb idols. Slowly the Israelite reached the idea that the nations were something to God other than fuel for the fires of destruction. Slowly he reached, but with much faltering and halting, the idea that the heathen also might have a place. The statutes began to make provision for the stranger within the gate, but over the gate were written restrictions and limitations by which the many were excluded, the few only admitted; and these, as not sons of Abraham, not to the full privileges of the House. When he looked around him, even the man of God of that time—the man who heard the voice—was often amazed and perplexed. He wondered if God saw or heard, and he put his wonder and his perplexity into psalms of plaintive doubt. The burden of the nations pressed heavily upon him, and he called loudly for judgment. He was a child of

God indeed, but a spoilt one. He fretted and fumed at the prosperity of the wicked. In his zeal for Jerusalem he forgot Nineveh with its much people and cattle.

It was not when he looked around him that the Israelite was great. It was when he looked ahead of him and saw the promise of the great Light. It was then that, forgetful of the twilight in which he moved, he saw the Star of the coming day and broke forth into singing. Not until Shiloh came would all the nations be God's, and all peoples and languages be His. Some elect souls there were on whom the Star already shone, but its light was fitful and obscured by clouds of doubt and the rising dust of racial pride and prejudice. 'Whosoever' cannot yet be pronounced, it can only be vaguely hinted at until some divine far-off event shall have come to pass.

After what seems to our wisdom a long time, but what we may be sure was not one instant behind time, came the One who could pronounce the magic word. Neither a son of Egypt, nor of Assyria, nor of Babylon, nor Greece, nor Rome, not even a son of Abraham, but a Son of *Man*, who also is a Son of God, could speak the word for which the world was waiting. No prophet of one race, no spiritual hero of one people, can gather all into one. No one in a relation less close than that of a son can speak for God out of His own experience, and no one can speak to man in a language which not alone this man and that man, but which all men, can hear. Jesus speaks the universal language. His nationality is nothing. He makes tremendous affirmations. They cost Him untold humiliation and suffering, a great part of which came out of the word 'whosoever.' If He could have limited His salvation, if He could have said anything less than 'Whosoever cometh, I will in no wise cast out,' much of His suffering would have been avoided. Said we not rightly that the word is the most costly that was ever spoken? Costly to the Father, costly to the Son—costly to the men who heard and followed Him. 'Preach the gospel to every creature' has sealed the martyrdom of thousands. For wherever they went it was this word which aroused anger and kindled the fires of persecution. If you could let Diana of the Ephesians alone, you might preach Jesus, a new God, from the housetop and the market-place unmolested. It was the universal Saviour, the universal Salvation implied in the invitation of

the Gospel that *made* it a Gospel, but it was that too that made a being crucified with Christ.

Slowly, very slowly, was the word pronounced, slowly was it learnt; but how easily and quickly forgotten! Even Peter had to relearn it in vision, and again at Antioch he forgot it until the sharp rebuke of a fellow-apostle reminded him of it. It is not surprising, then, that the individual man, whose charter of salvation it is, forgets it. It seems to him too good for belief. In his best moments it seems so, in his bad moments it is to him simply incredible. The denser his ignorance, the more flagrant his folly, the deeper-dyed his sin, the less easily will he believe it. He can believe in Christ for the instructed, for the consistent, for the wise, for the holy; but Christ for the sinner, hardened, rebellious, unblushing in his shame! He will believe in anything almost, but not in that. 'Whosoever' is too much for him. Yet God longed to utter it, He suffered for it. His Son suffered for it, the Spirit longed and groaned to say it. Why should you limit it? Why put 'some' in the place of 'all'? Why put 'a few' in the place of 'whosoever'? One bends in awe before the grace of it, but one stands back in horror of amazement at the blindness and folly that would exclude itself from the invitation, 'Whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely'; 'Come unto Me, and whosoever cometh, I will in no wise cast out.' A gospel for the good, who would preach it? A gospel for the righteous, for the ninety-nine that need no repentance! I would not ascend this pulpit stair to give it voice. I stand here only on the ground of 'Whosoever.' Were there any limitation of it in any direction, who would dare to look God in the face, far less to speak for Him? In my darkest hour it is light to me, in sore perplexity it is the counsel of God's wisdom to me. Skill would part from my right hand, hope would die out of my heart, if I forgot it. I carry the word as a talisman to charm away my doubts, my fears, my sins. Why should not you also? Would that one could brand this word 'whosoever' on the heart of every halting, timorous, or callous hearer!

But this individual ignoring of the hospitality of the gospel, disastrous and death-dealing as it is, is not the only one which we have to acknowledge and deplore. Many branches of the Christian Church in many lands, and through the course of many centuries, ignored or obscured it. God's

'Whosoever' was limited to, Whosoever agrees with us on every point of doctrine, of church government, and of worship, is welcome, but whosoever does not shall be walled out and left to uncovenanted mercies. It is well for the Churches to have creeds and forms of worship. They are the citadels on which it falls back in times of attack, but, when these citadels are converted into fences to bar and hinder the free offer of salvation, when they are turned into tests of membership and of communion, they are an evil sore and humiliating, a trial to faith and patience, and a deep discouragement to evangelic zeal. Our own land, as much as any, perhaps even more than any, has for centuries been a stage on which this miserable play of limitation has been enacted. One of the worst consequences of it has been the hindrance to the conversion of the heathen. Had this great word and the infinite love that underlies it been rightly spelt out, would missions to the heathen and the outcast have so long been delayed? How could it have been possible, less than a century ago, for a master in our national Zion, in response to timid overtures on foreign missions, to declare that not until every soul within our own land was converted was it other than preposterous to speak of sending missionaries to the heathen?

How could it be possible in our time for some professing Christians to have lurking in the secret

corners of their minds shadows of doubt as to their duty to the heathen? We have no responsibility for the unbelief of any heathen at home or abroad, but we have a responsibility for his ignorance. We never can forget that the pictures which Jesus drew of His Father's hospitality are drawn upon the great scale of public banquets, and not of select coteries. His main anxiety is that the 'House may be full.'

And this house of God, so spacious and beautiful, what is it but an embodiment of divine hospitality. What mean its wide portal, its tolled bell, its heaven-pointed spire, but just 'Whosoever'?

We have in our country outgrown the childish things of symbolism. We seek no sermons in stones, nor in costly architecture and quaint furnishings aids to devotion. But in many places we are erecting not what an artist would call poems in stone, but seemly and spacious structures not all unworthy of the message we have to proclaim. It is much that we should, as it were, *build* 'Whosoever.' It is more that we should live it and look it. Let us throw open the door of our hearts as well, inviting all and welcoming all. Not to our own glory, but to His who bought us, have we done these things; reminding ourselves that the Lord's portion is His people, and that His people are they of every clime and condition who have hearkened when He spake, 'Whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely.'

The End of the Age.

SOME CRITICAL NOTES ON ST. MATTHEW, CHAP. XXIV.

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I SUPPOSE that, with the exception of some portions of the Apocalypse, no part of the New Testament is the object of so much real though unacknowledged aversion to thoughtful orthodox Christians as this chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel, with its parallels in the other Synoptists. The cause of this feeling is only partially and inadequately explained by the discredit which nineteenth and twentieth century apocalypses reflect back on the masterpieces they caricature. There is a deeper reason,—the fear lest the result of a nearer

acquaintance with Christ's great prophecy of the 'End of the Age' should be the presentation of an alternative from which the mind of the Christian reader shrinks, between the absolute acceptance of the truth of Christ's words and the frank recognition of historical facts. This fear is not, of course, explicitly set out, even in the form of a confession made to oneself in one's own mind; but that it does exist, and does deter the ordinary reader from the study of such parts of the Gospels as deal with the Parousia, there can be no doubt.