

The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF REVELATION.

REVELATION XIV. 13.

'And I heard a voice from heaven saying, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; for their works follow with them.'—R.V.

THE BEATITUDE OF THE DEAD.

I. The occasion of the Beatitude.—This Book of Revelation was written in a time of martyrdom—whether, as it was generally supposed, in the reign of the Emperor Domitian; or, according to the view recently favoured, a generation earlier and shortly after the persecution of Nero to which Peter and Paul fell victims, in the epoch which commenced with the burning of Rome and closed with the fall of Jerusalem, when the Roman Empire passed through the most terrible convulsions. St. John's vision is livid with the colours of an age of slaughter and devastation. 'Blood and fire and vapour of smoke' fill his strange pictures. You hear the groans of 'souls underneath the altar, slain for the word of God and the testimony which they held,' perpetually crying, 'Lord, how long?' You see them 'coming out of the great tribulation,' with blood-washed robes. 'Blood is given' for drink to those who have 'poured out the blood of saints and prophets, for they are worthy.'

Throughout these scenes of horror, in which the world's sin reaches its natural issue and judges itself by its fruits, the seer discerns the course of redemption and the victory of the Messianic kingdom; he watches the swift advance of Him who sits upon 'the white horse,' whose name is 'Faithful and True,' and who 'in righteousness doth judge and war.' St. John's book is an apocalypse of fiery ruin for the corrupt and cruel powers of the earth that hate the Church of God and strive to drown her in blood, as they would fain have done her Lord; and it is an apocalypse of heavenly comfort to the afflicted and decimated flock of Christ. Amid its mighty thunderings, the sounding of its trumpet blasts, and the pouring out of its bowls full of the unmixed wrath of Almighty God, there comes this tender and consoling sound.

For a moment the storm ceases, the trumpets are hushed; a single, clear celestial voice is heard, like that which announced the glad tidings to the shepherds: 'Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth.' With what soothing power this music of the angels came to the hearts of those first martyr-mourners, as hurriedly at night, stealing forth in timid bands, they gathered up the mangled forms of their dead recovered from the wild beasts in the arena or the executioner's axe, or haply left charred and half-consumed at the stake!¹

2. The Beatitude.—There are seven Beatitudes in the Book of Revelation. Four of them are closely linked together and refer to the future glory of the Redeemed (14¹³ 19⁹ 20⁶ 22¹⁴). This is the first of the four. The next is 'Blessed are they which are bidden to the marriage supper of the Lamb' (19⁹). The allusion plainly is to our Lord's Parable of the Marriage Feast of the King's Son. The third is 'Blessed and holy is he which hath part in the first resurrection' (20⁶). The reference, says Dr. Findlay, is to the passage from death to life of the believing soul in this world. In Jn 5²⁴ Christ says, 'He that heareth my word, and believeth him that sent me, hath eternal life, and cometh not into judgment, but hath passed out of death into life.' Then He continues, 'Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour cometh, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and they that hear shall live.' The last of the four Beatitudes is in 22¹⁴: 'Blessed are they that wash their robes, that they may have right to come to the tree of life, and may enter in by the gates into the city.' These four promises together give an enchanting view of the felicity of the dead in Christ.² Our text contains the first of the four. Take its words separately.

1. Blessed.—The Greek word thus translated means 'happy.' To most minds the more theological word 'blessed' does not convey so much meaning as the more familiar word 'happy.' Christ began the Sermon on the Mount with Beatitudes; so that the first word in the manifesto of the Kingdom of Heaven is the word 'happy.'

¹ G. G. Findlay, *The Things Above*, 170.

² *Ibid.* 161.

And it is a deliberate, vital, inevitable word. Christ could not have begun with any other word. He did not wish mainly to gain the world's ear. He came to solve the world's problem. And the world's problem is always a question of happiness. Accordingly, as Christ's first word was 'Happy' in the Sermon on the Mount, 'Happy' is His last word here in the Book of Revelation.¹

Some time ago I saw in London one of the most tragic pictures ever painted. The last rough slope of a mountain leading to the edge of a precipice, at the foot of which one caught a misty glimpse of a graveyard. The slope, packed with a dense crowd of men and women, some in evening dress, some in the garb of toil, some in rags, all struggling to gain a foothold on the highest point, all of them tearing at and treading upon one another, all of them going upwards, where the filmy, beckoning, mocking figure of Pleasure floated out of reach. The picture was called, 'The Pursuit of Pleasure,' and in that grim, ghastly, sunless canvas the artist had not painted one happy face. Not a smile, not a flicker of gladness; nothing but fear, hatred, selfishness, and pain.²

2. *Blessed are the dead.*—This attitude to death is new. Hitherto it had been regarded in one of two ways.

(1) It was simply dreaded. This is the attitude of nature to death. Our great poet is her mouth-piece when he says:

The weariest and most loathed worldly life
That age, ache, penury, and imprisonment
Can lay on nature, is a paradise
To what we fear of death.

That witness is true. Men may disclaim it or reason against it as they will: they are all their lifetime subject to bondage through fear of death.³

(2) But there was another attitude to death. Even pagans have called death blessed. Blessed, they said, are the dead, simply because being dead they are done with this life. The Hindu has given the most emphatic expression to this state of mind. If he believed in the transmigration of souls, it was not as a privilege to the good, but a punishment to the bad. The blessedness of the dead consisted in getting rid of this world, in having no more share in aught beneath the circle of the sun.⁴

¹ See P. C. Ainsworth, *The Blessed Life*, p. 47.

² *Ibid.* p. 51.

³ See G. G. Findlay, *The Things Above*, p. 167.

⁴ See G. Matheson, *Sidelights from Patmos*, p. 206.

But here the blessedness is not attributed to all the dead, only to the dead who die in the Lord.

3. *Who die in the Lord.*—It is no exaggeration to say that this phrase 'in the Lord,' or 'in Christ,' is the most important single phrase in the New Testament. It is the key to all the Epistles. Christ is imagined as a great Divine sphere, vast as the love and grace of God. He who by faith enters into that sphere crosses the line of circumference that separates a state of sin and condemnation from a state of justification and holiness. 'There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus.'

But the phrase has two great interpretations. This redemptive interpretation is the first. The second is that the life of the believer is taken into the life of Christ, his work into Christ's work; his destiny into the destiny of Christ. So St. Paul says (Ro 14⁷⁻⁹), 'None of us liveth to himself, and none dieth to himself. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; or whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died, and lived again, that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.'⁵

'In Christ' is a common expression to signify a condition of safety: 'He hath made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus'; 'And be found in him.' The old Methodist preacher, John Jones of Holywell, used to remark prettily on this latter word: 'When a doctor or lawyer changes his office, he puts a notice on the door or in the window, saying where the business is carried on. And so Paul here puts a notice in the old place he has left—"And to be found in him" henceforth!' 'There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.' Having once been found in Christ, there is no going out any more—they 'die in the Lord.'⁶

'This little preposition "in" signifies a vital union as distinguished from a superficial connection. The superficial connection with the Lord may be credal, or formal, or ecclesiastical, or denominational, and in all these there may be a fatal absence of all vital fellowship with the Lord. Vital union with Christ is essentially an incorporation. It is not a connection effected by some ecclesiastical knot, some denominational tie, some ritualistic ligament; it is the living union of the branch with the vine; it is a communion in whose mystic channels there flows the deepest life of men and God. It is a union so vital and so immediate that if Christ be alive the soul must live in Him.'⁷

4. *From henceforth.*—This difficult expression has been explained in many different ways. (1) It

⁵ See A. T. Pierson in *Christian World Pulpit*, xli. 82.

⁶ D. Roberts, *A Letter from Heaven*, p. 7.

⁷ J. H. Jowett, *Our Blessed Dead*, p. 14.

has been suggested that the reference is not to the bodily dead, but to those who are dead to sin. Blessed are the dead who are dying in the Lord (the participle is present) from henceforth. That is to say, hitherto those who became dead to the law through Christ have had to suffer persecution. But now the persecutor is himself to be destroyed; and from henceforth the condition of those who die with Christ will be a happy one, being free from tyranny and torment.¹

And there is no doubt that, as Swete says, the message in the first instance is for a particular age, and that it is an encouragement to those who were being called to suffer for their faith. But on the other hand it must be admitted that this is not the natural interpretation of the words 'who die in the Lord.' There remain two explanations worth considering.

(2) It is suggested that from this time forth a change actually takes place in the condition of departed believers. This is how the change is expressed by Canon F. C. Cook: 'The state of good men who died before the coming of Christ appears to me to be always spoken of in the Old Testament as one of true, but very imperfect, blessedness; a period, not indeed of unconsciousness, but of dim expectation. It was scarcely looked forward to with joy by those who trusted confidently in the power and love of God. At the best they would but be "prisoners of hope" still, waiting for their appointed change—for the morning which, after an unknown length of night, would usher in the day of restoration. But when Christ came, when He had accomplished His work, when the blood was shed which atoned for all repented guilt, when His body had hallowed the grave, when His Spirit had burst the bars of the pit and preached to the spirits in Hades, a mighty change was effected—light shone into the pit, the prison became a palace. The future restoration, though not as yet effected, was anticipated; and while all the great spirits of old, who in darkness and trembling had passed into the shadow of death, were filled with a new joy, henceforth all who departed hence in union with Jesus, entered at once into a state of conscious blessedness, knowing, like St. Paul, that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord—present with Him in no dim visionary region, but present in Paradise.'²

¹ See H. Crosby, in *The Homiletic Review*, xiv. 37.

² F. C. Cook, *Church Doctrine and Spiritual Life*, p. 168.

(3) The third method is to treat the words 'from henceforth' as referring, not to a new condition in the state of the dead, but to a new revelation of that condition.

It is not, says Dr. Matheson, that from henceforth the dead are to be more blessed, but that from henceforth we are to *think* of them as more blessed. It is the proclaiming of a new revelation on the subject, which is to be incorporated for the future with the sum of human knowledge. To the Old Testament Hebrew the dead were not blessed. Death was a penalty; the state of the dead was undesirable. His hope for the departed was that they would come back again. But the devout Christian believer does not wish to bring back his dead. They have departed to be with Christ, and he knows that that is very far better.³

Which of these interpretations is the true one? Probably the third. This is the climax of a series of revelations, and, as Swete says, it needed a Voice from heaven to proclaim it. St. Paul, speaking by revelation (1 Co 15¹⁸), had taught that the dead in Christ were not to be the subjects of a hopeless grief. St. John (Rev 6⁹) had 'seen the souls of the martyrs under the Altar crying, How long?' and had heard them bidden to rest awhile. This Voice carries these revelations a step further. Those who should die in the Lord henceforth, as the martyrs did, were to be happy because of the rest on which they entered and the works which followed them into it.

When Mrs. Browning died, her husband wrote—and the words are doubly impressive when one remembers how wonderfully close had been their attachment (for years they never had a meal apart)—'God took her to Himself as you would lift a sleeping child from a dark, uneasy bed into your arms and the light.'

3. **The Response.**—'Yea, saith the Spirit.' The Spirit in the mind of the Seer responds to the Voice from above him. Yea, he answers, they are blessed, to rest (as they shall) from their labours.⁴ The Voice said, 'Write'—that is, the voice of God as it sounded from above; and the Spirit said, 'Yea'—that is, the spirit of inspiration and obedience, as it answered from within, ever keen to discern the heavenly revelations, and prompt to perform the heavenly will. That is the picture presented us here,—a something that discloses, and a something that assents,—the announcement

³ See G. Matheson, *Sidelights from Patmos*, p. 204.

⁴ H. B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, in loc.

of an objective truth, and the presence and the sympathy of a subjective response. It is the same still. For a divinely-appointed plan there must be a divinely-wrought acquiescence. Deep must call unto deep,—the deep of a God that reveals to the deep of a God that complies. Whosoever the Divine voice speaks, and whatsoever the Divine voice says, whether it be, 'This write,' or 'This believe,' 'This do,' or 'This suffer,' the Spirit within men may answer 'Yea,' and no answer is acceptable save the 'yea' which the Spirit returns.¹

In making this response the Spirit within the Prophet gave two reasons for the blessedness of the dead in Christ: (1) they rest from their labours; (2) their works go with them. These two great reasons are not revealed from without. They are the Seer's own discovery. And yet they are not his own, but are made to him by the Mind of Christ now dwelling in him.

1. *Rest from labour.*—'They rest from their labours.' The Greek word (*κόποι*) has invariably the sense of trying and distressing labours, exertions which, whether effectual or not, involve a painful strain, efforts often baffled, ever-exhausting, ever reminding us of the condition into which man falls when he deliberately sets his own will against God's will.² Even after forgiveness, even after the Christian escapes from the dominion of sin, sin is still there. It meets him everywhere; he is never safe from it. He is pained by its contact; he is humbled by its force; he is grieved by its outbreak. Work is joy; but labour is work's distress. The law of work has its dark shadows—fatigue, infirmity, too great tension, ill-health, disappointments, mistakes, waitings, suspensions, sins. There is the miserable depressing sense of inadequacy for the task; there is the perplexity of what is the line of duty; there are all the entanglements of self. The Greek word has for its root the verb to *cut*; labour cuts to the heart.³

They that sleep in the Lord rest from such labours. They rest (1) from the *toil* of labour. They rest (2) from the *woe* of labour. They rest (3) from the *faults* of labour. They rest (4) from the *discouragements* of labour. And they rest (5) from the *disappointments* of labour.⁴

¹ W. A. Gray, *The Shadow of the Hand*, p. 28.

² F. C. Cook, *Church Doctrine and Spiritual Life*, p. 169.

³ J. Vaughan, *Brighton Pulpit*, Ser. 544.

⁴ C. H. Spurgeon, *The Everlasting Gospel*, p. 384.

At the very heart of this word 'labours,' says Mr. Jowett, there is a sense of faintness and exhaustion. It is a word of burdensomeness, wan and drooping, like a stricken plant. The outstanding significance of the word is not the work, but the weariness of the work. Yes, it is a tired word which has lost its spring! 'And Jesus, being *wearied* with his journey!' There you have it, the identical word, carrying the sense of 'spentness,' of limitation, of exhaustion. And, therefore, when we are told that 'the dead in Christ' 'rest from their labours,' we are not to take it as meaning that they rest from their work, but from the weariness of work, which is a far nobler emancipation. To take away the faintness is infinitely more gracious than to take us out of the crusade. The redemption of our blessed dead is redemption from tiredness, redemption from the limitations which arise from small capital; it is redemption from the drooping and the withering; it is entry into the tireless life.

There everlasting spring abides,
And never-withering flowers!

That is the word which carries the grace of the evangel—'never-withering'—the land where the inhabitants never say, 'I am sick.' And so we might very accurately paraphrase the familiar sentence in our Beatitude as follows: 'They rest from the laboriousness of labour,' and great services become their native delight. 'They serve Him day and night in His temple.'⁵

It is not difficult to name some of the things which make present labour so laboursome, and from which the blessed dead have found their freedom. There are the *limitations of the body*. We so soon begin to encroach upon our physical capital, and the labouring body becomes a drag upon the eager spirit. 'The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.' Even the evangelization of the world must tarry while 'Jesus, being wearied, sat thus by the well.' How much more we could presumably do for the kingdom if the vital flame did not so speedily smoulder and flicker down into its socket! But it is evident that here our very tiredness is a necessary factor in the campaign, and that the frailty of the body is the mysterious servant of the spirit. But our blessed dead 'drop the robe of flesh,' because its ministry is ended, and 'they rest from the labour' and travail of physical infirmity.

But there is a second element of laboriousness which burdens our temporal service, and that is the seeming *fruitlessness of present labour*. We toil at the wilderness for years, and it appears a wilderness still. And because

⁵ J. H. Jowett, *Our Blessed Dead*, p. 19.

we cannot see flowers and fruits we become despondent about growth. Because we are not always seeing results we become dubious about processes. 'And we grow faint and weary, and the song goes out of our work, and the gay service becomes a humdrum task. Such despair is ever our peril, but it need never be our necessity. There have been men who have toiled and toiled at their desert-patch, and even when no green blade has appeared to cheer the grim waste they have 'endured as seeing Him who is invisible.' But, apart from this, we have not the eyes as yet to see the sure ministries of spiritual processes going on in the secret place. Our eyes are holden, there are necessary veils, earth-clouds form about us, and 'we walk by faith, and not by sight.' But our blessed dead, when they pass behind the veil, become superior to the veil, and every veil becomes transparent. They look 'with other eyes than ours,' they see the first awakenings of mighty destinies, they trace the river from its spring, they 'know even as also they are known,' they have the open vision, and they rest from the laboriousness of uncertain service.

And there is one further element in the burdensomeness of present labours, and that is *our broken correspondence with God*. God is not always real enough to be impressive. Sometimes He seems so gloriously real and immediate that the intervening veil is only like a bridal-veil, and we can almost see His face! 'In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord.' But the alien season returns, and the bridal-veil becomes a fog, and the soul cries out, 'Oh that I knew where I might find Him!' And the seeming nearness or distance of the Lord makes all the difference to the buoyancy or the weariness of our work. But our blessed dead know neither bridal-veil nor fog. They have died into the open glory, into the fellowship where there is no night, the land of which 'the Lamb is the light thereof,' and where service is always in the sunshine, 'and sorrow and sighing have passed away.' They see God, and they rest from the laboriousness of broken communion.¹

2. *Resumption of Work*.—There is a contrast between the two words 'labours' and 'works.' The labours of the saintly life end in the grave, but not its works; its processes, methods, habits, results, remain, and follow the saint into his new life. The Greek is literally 'they rest from their labours; for their works follow with them.' The contrast, says Swete, is latent in the 'for': 'they shall rest from their labours—I say not from their works, for their works go with them.' 'In his own redeemed spirit,' says Findlay, 'in his chastened and ripened character, the dying Christian takes with him the essential part of his life's work. The residue will follow in those who follow him as he followed Christ, in those whom his teaching and his example have led into the way of peace, in the souls saved, the lives uplifted and purified, by his life and words.'

¹ J. H. Jowett, *Our Blessed Dead*, p. 22.

But the thought may be broken up into two parts. (1) Their works follow with them. That is, as Dr. Findlay suggests, the works they do here are permanently theirs. They are accepted by God, and rewarded by Him. 'The saints,' says Jowett, 'enter the land of glory like monarchs with princely retinues. Their retinue is the radiant assemblage of good works which they have done in their pilgrimage through time.'

To many a humble saint there will be a moment of wondering thankfulness when he sees these his 'children whom God hath given him' clustered round him, and has to say, 'Lord, when saw I thee naked, or in prison, and visited thee?' There will be many an apocalypse of grateful surprise in the revelations of the heavens. We remember Milton's noble explanation of these great words which may well silence our feeble attempts to enforce them:

Thy works and alms and all thy good endeavour
 Stood not behind, nor in the grave were trod,
 But as faith pointed with her golden rod,
 Followed them up to joy and bliss for ever.

So then, life here and yonder will for the Christian soul be one continuous whole, only that there, while 'their works do follow them,' 'they rest from their labours.'²

Carlyle quotes the text at the close of his description of Cromwell's death, and says, 'Their works follow them.' As, I think, this Oliver Cromwell's works have done, and are still doing! We have had our 'Revolutions of Eighty-Eight' officially called 'glorious,' and other Revolutions not yet called glorious; and somewhat has been gained for poor mankind. Men's ears are not now slit off by rash officiality; officiality will, for long henceforth, be more cautious about men's ears. . . . Oliver's works do follow him! The works of a man, bury them under what guano-mountains and obscene owl-droppings you will, do not perish, cannot perish. What of Heroism, what of Eternal Light, was in a man and his life, is with very great exactness added to the Eternities; remains for ever a new divine portion of the sum of things; and no owl's voice, this way or that, in the least avails in the matter.'³

2. The other thought is that they resume in glory the work which they have been doing here, but which has been interrupted for a moment by death. They who die in the Lord are not in a state of dim unconsciousness, nor merely in a state of ecstatic trance, visited by gleams of heavenly splendour, or visions of a more glorious hereafter; they are in a state of action, doing works which differ from their works in this life mainly in that the element of struggle, of painful effort, of an all-but perpetual sense of failure and disappointment, is withdrawn,

² A. Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*.

³ *Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*, by T. Carlyle, p. 375.

and replaced by a sabbatic rest—a rest not of idleness or vacuity, but of unbroken, untroubled action.¹

Is it a fantastic speculation, then, to imagine that the rest of the other world, while a rest from worry, will be a rest not *from* work, but a rest *in* work, the doing of work which it is a joy to do, and which is the reward of all honest effort, which gives full scope not only for such facilities as you have acquired here in the service of your Lord, but for all the pure energies which were checked and hampered here by the body, by circumstances, by the worries of our mortal life?

And I shall thereupon
Take rest, ere I be gone
Once more on my adventure brave and new:
Fearless and unperplexed,
When I wage battle next,
What weapons to select, what armour to indue.²

I recently heard a story, well authenticated, regarding the late G. F. Watts, the great painter, which beautifully illustrates the thought as we have it in the Revised Version: 'Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord . . . that they may rest from their labours, for their works follow with them,'—the thought here being, surely, that the rest of the blessed dead will be the full satisfaction of their natures in God's presence hereafter on *the lines of their toil and aspiration here*. A distinguished living musician met Watts when the latter was well advanced in years. The two were congenial spirits, and became fast friends. The great master of music spoke to Watts, the master of a sister art, of a curious fact illustrating the kinship of the beautiful in all spheres, namely, that if a line be drawn through the written notes of a perfect melody, it will take the form of a perfect curve. Watts was intensely interested. Some time later the great Christian artist passed away, and his friend received a letter from a near relative of the deceased painter in which he recalled the conversation about the beautiful curves. It would interest the musician to know, the letter said, that Watts, just before his death, when he had sunk into a state of unconsciousness at length opened his eyes, and exclaimed, 'I have seen the Almighty, and the curves are all right!'

¹ F. C. Cook, *Church Doctrine and Spiritual Life*, p. 172.

² E. B. Spiers, *A Present Advent*, p. 189.

The Great Text Commentary.

The best illustrations this month have been found by the Rev. A. R. Howell, M.A., Manse

of Kincardine, Perthshire, to whom a copy of Wilson's *How God has Spoken* has been sent, and the Rev. F. V. Pratt, M.A., Augaston, S. Australia, to whom a copy of Geden's *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* has been sent.

Illustrations for the Great Text for February must be received by the 1st of January. The text is Rev 20¹².

The Great Text for March is Rev 21¹—'And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth are passed away; and the sea is no more.' A copy of Dykes's *Divine Worker in Creation and Providence*, or Walker's *Gospel of Reconciliation*, or Forrest's *Christ of History and of Experience*, will be given for the best illustration.

The Great Text for April is Rev 21⁵—'And he that sitteth on the throne said, Behold, I make all things new.' A copy of Walker's *Gospel of Reconciliation*, or Holborn's *Architectures of European Religions*, or Geden's *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, will be given for the best illustration.

The Great Text for May is Rev 21²⁷—'And there shall in no wise enter into it anything unclean, or he that maketh an abomination and a lie: but only they which are written in the Lamb's book of life.' A copy of Walker's *Gospel of Reconciliation*, or of Scott's *Pauline Epistles*, or of Wilson's *How God has Spoken*, or of Dykes's *Divine Worker in Creation and Providence*, will be given for the best illustration.

The Great Text for June is Rev 22^{3, 4}—'And there shall be no curse any more: and the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be therein: and his servants shall do him service; and they shall see his face; and his name shall be on their foreheads.' A copy of Walker's *Gospel of Reconciliation*, or Downer's *Mission and Ministration of the Holy Spirit*, or Lecky's *Authority in Religion*, will be given for the best illustration.

Those who send illustrations should at the same time name the books they wish sent them if successful.