

Some Thoughts on the Seven Epistles.

IV.

THYATIRA, the city whose mission-church and its "angel" come next in order for our study, is mentioned, in a connexion full of interest, in the Acts. The place was not eminent politically or historically, like Ephesus or Sardis; we need to note one fact only in its public story, that it was a "colony" of Macedonian foundation; and we remember that Greek colonies were wont to maintain a close connexion, at least of intercourse, with their places of origin. It is this which gives significance to the note, so passingly made by St. Luke (Acts xvi. 14), that when Paul, with Silas, Luke, and probably Timothy, visited the *Macedonian* town, Philippi, they found there, apparently as a resident, busy with her purple-trade, one Lydia, a merchant-woman from *Thyatira*. I do not dwell here on the beautiful picture of her conversion, drawn in few but living lines by St. Luke; the "prayer-house" (*proseucha*) by the side of the river Gangas, the congregation of Jewish or proselyte women, and the touch of effectual grace which opened Lydia's "heart," her whole inner being, to the message of a Saviour's glory, and then the warmth of the new believer's invitation to the missionaries to make her house their home at Philippi. It is enough to instance this memorable incident, compared with our knowledge otherwise of the origin of Thyatira, as one of the countless illustrations of the firm historical texture of that wonderful book, the Acts—a book the perusal of which, with open eyes and open heart, has been to myself, over a long series of years, one of the main abiding affirmations of the fact that our supernatural faith and hope stands encompassed by a rampart of history, steadfast as the everlasting hills.

As regards Lydia, it has been suggested that she was the first messenger of the Gospel to Thyatira—on the assumption that she was an *itinerant* trader, who soon crossed the sea

again to Asia and her old home. It may be so. But the narrative of Acts xvi. suggests rather, I think, that she was a settled dweller at Philippi, to which no doubt the ties of "colonial" connexion had previously drawn her.

For our present purpose this suffices, as regards the place where dwelt and laboured the "angel" to whom the glorified Lord sends this fourth Message. Let us come to its terms without delay.

As always, the Sender first sets forth Himself; Him it well becomes, as it utterly misbecomes any servant of His, however great, to make prominent and large His own glory. It is a *formidable* glory here, formidable to all that is unfaithful or disloyal. He is "the Son of God, who hath His eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like unto burnished [or, perhaps, 'glowing'] brass (χαλκολιβάνω)"; features of His Person which are prominent in the original vision (i. 14, 15). The eternal *majesty* of Sonship, as He is God the Son of God, rules the whole view; and the eyes and the feet make prominent respectively His intuition into the inmost darkness of motive and will, and the resistless weight and might of His steps when He acts in chastening or vengeance—steps in which the mass of metal and the power of fire are combined to bespeak the working which can "subdue all things to Himself."

Let us sometimes reverently ponder this aspect of the glory of Christ, its side of awe, its challenge to our dread—not the dread which shrinks away, and asks for other mediators, the dread which has too often, as in Romanist thought, interposed the tenderness of the Mother as a *safeguard* against the wrath of the Son.¹ No, but the dread which feels to the very soul His eternal greatness, and the unutterable contrast between His holiness and our slightest sin, and the reality of His sinless "hatred of the abominable thing." Far too much we have allowed this range of truth to drop away from our heart's creed

¹ I once read, in a beautiful little village church on the Continent, in which there was much to attract Christian sympathies, a prayer to the Virgin, written on the fly-leaf of a Prayer-Book: "I fear not my judge, Jesus Christ, for one word of thine is sufficient to appease Him."

about the Christ of God, if we may judge from many current utterances in book and sermon. Let us seek for just such a renewal of the true insight, in consciousness and in teaching, as will not indeed for a moment obscure "the joy of the Lord" in the humbled believer's heart, but will keep him very much, in the spiritual sense, *upon his knees* as he rejoices.

And now this Being, in all His majesty, amidst all the awe He claims, speaks first with the accent of that love which, as we know across all our dread, is His essence. The angel of Thyatira, as those eyes see through him, is tenderly, benignly, praised for what they behold at the centre of his life. "I know thy works, and thy love, and faith, and ministry, and patience," thy fidelity in persistent service, "and that thy last works are more than thy first."

Happy the pastor whom He of the eyes of fire can thus see and thus address! Happy the servant whom this Master, all-knowing, but also *all-generous*, can thus recognize as a true "worker," living, not mechanical; as truly "loving"; as truly a man of "faith"; as plying a ministry amidst his brethren which is, in the noble Christian sense, "patient," that is to say, not merely submissive under wrong and sorrow, but so renewed always from within, from above, that the man evermore rises up and goes on, serving, watching, sacrificing self, for the sake of the Beloved. Happy he whom the Son of God can thus describe as working better and better, more and more fully, as the days advance to their end. Alas, how often, even in worthy pastoral lives, the experience is rather that which we saw in the Ephesian "angel," where diligence may be maintained indeed, but rather as by a machine running on by its own momentum, apart from the real driving power, while that power, the fire of first love, the original joy and strength of a discovered and trusted Saviour, has declined and is declining. Here, at Thyatira, was a very different story. This "angel" must have lived near his Lord in loving worship, in watching, in the fellowship of prayer, and in the exercise of that "meditation on His statutes" which is the fuel of love and zeal. And so, and only so, his life did

not sink to its second best. He did *not* teach and preach rather from his reminiscences than his present experiences. He did *not* drift into that sad monotony of reiterated formula and phrase which is wholly different from the accent of unswerving fidelity to an unchanging Saviour and an eternal Gospel, a fidelity firmer always to the last, without shame, without reserve, whatever fashions of thought may supervene around—yet filled and warmed with the living sympathies of a soul kept alive by its Lord, and so able to speak to the heart of a new generation.

I cannot but dwell on this bright and noble side of the Thyatiran message. To me it comes as an utterance eminently in point for the Christian ministry of our generation. All too many present influences in the religious air tend to wither this undying freshness, this youthfulness in age, of the true pastor's work and witness. What is the secret of the danger? Sometimes perhaps the modern multiplicity of organization, the *multa non multum* of perpetual and somewhat mechanical activities. Sometimes perhaps the undue concentration of thought, speech, and action upon the social and temporal aspects of the Christian message, aspects of noble significance, things essential among the "results of Christ," but never for a moment to be confused with the "pulse of the machine," the regenerate soul's love to the Lord Jesus Christ, or with the ultimate goal of the work of the Gospel and the Church, the eternal life of praise and service above. Sometimes perhaps the hindrance comes from undue developments of the idea of the Church, till the Bride almost takes the place of the Bridegroom in ideals and in teaching. But, however, the risks, whatever be their origin, hover around us to-day. No pastor is free from the peril of decline in the soul of his ministry. May He who is as gracious as He is all-seeing grant us such contact always with Himself that He may speak of even us as of the Thyatiran angel. He will rejoice to do so, if it is true.

But now comes up the darker, and alas, it is the larger,

paragraph of the Letter. I shall not try to comment upon it (ver. 20-24) in detail, as I have done upon this happier passage. Not that I want to slight its urgent lesson of warning. But that lesson can be stated, in its essentials, briefly yet with adequate emphasis.

It concerns the presence in the Thyatiran mission of a woman, apparently a professing Christian, and probably a claimant of prophetic gifts, such as the daughters of Philip, for example, possessed (Acts xxi. 9). She is called, beyond doubt mystically, Jezebel. Her influence was akin apparently to that of the tremendous queen of Ahab, who, exercising (or at least claiming) magical, and probably prophetic, powers, made complete the apostasy of northern Israel from the LORD to Baal and his impurities. The Thyatiran "Jezebel," standing in some sense within the Church, was all the while the voice of Satan. That mysterious trend, sadly apparent in very early Christian days, as every one of the Apostolic writers (except the Writer to the Hebrews) indicates, the trend towards an immoral theory, based partly on the tenet of the badness of matter, partly on a vile perversion of the doctrine of grace, was active in and through her to the ruin of faith and life at Thyatira. She would have the converts "rise above" old rules of sexual morality, and above the "rigorism" which would have nothing to do with idolatry and its convivial rites. Such things were a bondage, the mere swaddling clothes of a faith which, rising into the higher form of knowledge (*γνώσις*), ought to expatiate in a large liberty of the spirit, leaving the flesh to its own ways!

Taught with specious semblances of an esoteric discovery, and with the hot allurements of a passionate womanhood, such suggestions were taking hold. One and another of the mission congregation was listening to this "Jezebel," who still called herself a Christian. They termed her "mother" (see the word "children," ver. 23). They admired her "depths" of insight and occult suggestion. And they were far gone with her down the broad road which slopes to the precipice of perdition.

We gather that some warning judgments had fallen already on the infected circle, or at least on their leader. The Lord had "given her time to repent," apparently after some sudden chastening, or exposure. But it had been in vain. The "depths," though they were in fact depths from the abyss beneath, depths "of Satan" (ver. 24), were too alluring for their willing victims, and the Avenger of His own holiness was about to put out His hand in severer judgment. The evil woman was to be "cast into a bed" of pain and death, physical, spiritual, or both; and her "children" into "great tribulation"—"except they repent of her works." For all the while "His wakened wrath doth slowly move, His willing mercy flows apace." He would fain see even "Jezebel," even her "children," fall at His feet in shame and tears. Will they shut the door of mercy on themselves? Will they pluck down on their own souls a lost eternity?

Then follows a word of love and appeal to the faithful. They are happy in their ignorance of "the depths"—"the depths of Satan." And the Lord has one "burthen" only to lay upon them—to remain thus ignorant, by holding fast to Him. "That which ye have," My Name, My Cross, My holy love, My holy glory, "hold fast, till I come."

We find nothing here of a special warning, or special appeal, to the "angel." But he has had his rebuke, tender and penetrating, already. "I have this against thee, that thou sufferest the woman Jezebel." He had been all too tolerant; that was his wrong and failure. His loving ministry had lacked the element of protest and discipline, as, in measure, that of his brother at Pergamum had lacked it. What the Son of God would do with him, when His feet tread down the wicked at Thyatira, we do not hear. But surely the pastor would suffer. And the lesson is for us. Let us never fail to be loving, humble, self-censuring. But never, by the grace of God, let us condone evil, cloaked as it may be even in religious theory. "The Lord our God is holy."

The Epistle closes with remarkable and even surprising

promises to "the overcomer," to the disciple who "keepeth the words" of the Son of God "unto the end"; the "words," evidently, of this Thyatiran message. To him his Lord will hereafter "give power over the nations, and he shall shepherd them with a sceptre of iron, as the potter's vessels are broken to shivers"; as He also "hath received from His Father." Nor this only, but a further glorious gift:—"I will give him the morning star."

That last bright image is not difficult of interpretation, when we remember that in this same book (xxii. 16) the same Person says of Himself, "I am the bright, the morning star." So He will give HIMSELF to His dear "overcomer," in a special and immortal impartation; Himself, in all that this glorious metaphor connotes, the supreme embodiment of what is pictured by the splendour of the sparkling planet in the dawning skies. The transcendent *opposite* of decline, decay, age, death; the soul and substance of spring, and youth, and morning, of promises always fulfilling, of rapturous anticipations always rising to full fruition; such will be the Christ of glory. As such He shall be "given" to the overcomer.

The promise of dominance over the nations, the stern rod and staff of the conquering "shepherd of the people," subduing them to the victor, and to the victor's cause, is far more difficult to explain. Reverently here I would "teach my tongue to say, *I do not know.*" The event will "declare" it, as it will "declare" such kindred mysteries as the promise that "we shall judge angels." All that I would suggest is that its inner meaning must bear some special relation to the matter of the Thyatiran Epistle. With this in view, *something* of the fulfilment must lie in the direction of the moral ascendancy and dominance, in Christ, of *victorious virtue*. The "overcomer" has won his Commander's praise here below by an invincible refusal to "know the depths of Satan." He shall stand out hereafter and for ever as one

" Whose strength is as the strength of ten,
Because his heart is pure."

He shall be used, as holy angels in Scripture are seen to be used, to tread down enemies under his feet with a supernatural mastery, strong in fidelity and holiness, in the prevailing Name. He shall shame spiritual rebellion into surrender ; He shall conquer territory for Christ, it may be in unknown regions of existence, among the " nations " of another life.

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