
PREACHING TO THE SPIRITS IN PRISON.

I PETER iii. 16.

“**H**AVING a good conscience:” Here is a great point. Suffering is unpleasant, and suffering for righteousness’ sake is what the inflictors of it should be ashamed of; but the Christian having a conscience void of offense toward God and man, may console himself, with the assurance, that if suffering be allotted to him, it is better “to suffer for well doing than for evil doing.”

In such case he has the high example of Christ, the great Benefactor, and Example of men; who suffered the just for the unjust; the just instead of, in the place of, the unjust; that he might lead the unjust to God, to

be reconciled to Him, to be blessed and saved. And this suffering, Christ assumed, took upon himself voluntarily: it not being what he could not avoid, but what he had come down from heaven to undertake: and to demonstrate the malignity of those for whom he suffered, men, the elect nation of men, the nation honored of God above all others (*Deut. x. 15*), were eager to be the agents of his suffering and death.

What a noble sufferer was this! Meriting the sympathy, and eternal gratitude of those blasphemers, scourgers, and murderers, who suitably represented not only the Jews, but all our race; he submitted to be led as a lamb to the slaughter. "He closed his eyes, to show us God." His object was to bless us: to do this he had to endure suffering: he did endure the suffering, in all the needed amount and intensity: and the suffering was for well doing. Had he borne that punishment for his own evil doing, it would not have availed for us. It was nobler in him, and unspeakably better for us, that Christ suffered the just for the unjust. There was no smooth road by which he could have brought sinners to God.

It is necessary that Christians have a good conscience: it is better that they suffer for well doing, than for evil doing: and in both these particulars they have the high example of Christ. These are the great points with the apostle in his instruction, and exhortation. In a word, they are to live as Christians should: letting their light shine; exhibiting among themselves and toward unbelievers, the mind and spirit of Christ; embracing every opportunity of doing good; striving by the purity and gentleness of their loving lives, at all cost of personal contumely and persecution, to win sinners from the error of their ways, as did the divine Master.

In setting this perfect example before them, Peter describes the suffering of Christ as utterly unmerited

(the just); as the highest possible grade of benefaction (for the unjust, and to bring them back to God); as the most extreme suffering (being put to death as to the flesh). Yet the result was victory, life. The great well doer was not kept a prisoner in the realm of death: the heavy fetters were broken: the Christ had life in himself; and when he had drained the cup of death in behalf of the unjust, he arose. "His own arm brought salvation to him." "I lay it down of myself: I have power to lay it down; and I have power to take it again."

"By which (*en hooi*) also (*kai*):" It seems to be generally admitted, that *en hooi* relates to "the Spirit," *pneumati*, in the preceding verse. This merits some attention. In the 16th verse, *en hooi* is rendered *whereas*. In ch. iv. 4, it is rendered *wherein*. "That, whereas (*en hooi*) they speak evil of you," etc. "Wherein (*en hooi*) they think it strange that ye run not with," etc. In our passage, *pneumati* being neuter, and the relative *hooi* in the neuter form, it might be taken as relating to *pneumati*, and so to signify "By which (Spirit) also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison," etc. But this involves the statement in impenetrable obscurity. Did he go by that Spirit, leaving the body in captivity to death, and preach to the spirits in prison; the preaching terminating very early in the morning of the first day of the week? In which case, some thirty hours, or so, were devoted to evangelizing those spirits. Or, did he wait for the quickening of the body, and then go upon his mission to those spirits? Then, as Luke declares that he lingered on earth, some forty days, shewing himself alive, and that by many infallible proofs, to his disciples, speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God, assembling with them, etc., until he was taken up from them, in their sight, into heaven (Acts i. 1-9); we are amazed that Luke should have

omitted all mention of such a fact, as this most important mission to *hades*. Is it possible that such an item could have escaped the ear of the Evangelist, who had so great desire to imitate the many, in declaring "those things which are most surely believed among us;" and who had "a perfect understanding of all things from the very first." Or, that if he had ever heard of it, he would have omitted all, even the least, mention of it from his Gospel, or his Acts? And is it not passing belief, that such a fact could have been made known to the Apostles, and no lucid statement of it should have been recorded? As to Paul's "lower parts of the earth," *Eph.* iv. 9, supposed by some to refer to *hades*, read "lower parts, the earth." *Winer*, § 59. 8. a.

Then, too, how are we to account for the fact, that he should have preached only to those "who were disobedient in the days of Noah?" Of all the generations, were these the only infidels who required or needed a second call to accept the divine mercy? It is impossible for us to conjecture, why the mission of Christ was limited to those of the days of Noah; who had been favored with the ministry of that "preacher of righteousness," and yet had not been persuaded. One might have expected, that as on earth the gospel was provided for all; then, were a mission to the lost projected, those of the days of Noah might have shared in the benefit: but that such a mission should be limited to them, to us is incredible in the absence of some clear Scriptural statement.

If it be supposed, that a more general provision is stated in ch. iv. 6; "For for this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead (*nekrois eweggelisthee*) that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit:" it is impossible to regard this as a clearer, or less ambiguous statement than that of ch. iii. 19, 20. If we consider

“them that are dead,” to mean all the dead, we are puzzled by the certainty that they were not all judged according to men in the flesh; and by the clear revelation of the impassable gulf, forever yawning between those who die impenitent, and those who are carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom. *Luke* xvi. 19–31; *Matth.* x. 28; xviii. 8, 9; xxv. 41, 46; *Mark* ix. 43–48; are much clearer passages, than these from Peter; and true criticism reads the ambiguous by the light of the clear; and wisely refuses to shroud the clear in the gloom of the ambiguous.

The success of the gospel preached to the living, glows on the page of the sacred history; but, while our hypothesis mentions the preaching the gospel to the dead, not one word as to success is uttered, nor a single trophy exhibited: so, while we may have some basis for a discussion of the fact of the preaching to the dead; there is certainly not an inch of ground for the affirmation that one of those spirits in prison ever escaped from it. We have no trace of any such fact, in all the divine history; and our knowledge in the case is absolutely limited to that sacred book. Supposing then the mission to have occurred, it was utterly fruitless of good; and as a doctrine it is certainly without promise of good, and may tend to harm, by inclining some to await the process of evangelization in the future state.

Our Lord’s parable, *Luke* xvi. 19–31, most certainly excludes all idea of any evangelizing beyond the grave. The rich man died, and in hell he lifted up his eyes being in torment; and Abraham’s colloquy cuts off all prospect of any favorable change in his condition. It is demonstrated by that parable, that the Sacred Scriptures are a sufficient instrumentality of salvation; superior to the ministry of one from the dead; and the infidels of Noah’s day, having rejected the gospel from the lips of that “just man, who was perfect in his generations,

walking with God, and a preacher of righteousness ;” it is a contradiction of the teaching of our Lord in the parable, to suppose that Peter meant, that himself, Jesus, after his death, went to preach to those, whom he knew to have rejected the word, faithfully preached to them for more than a century.

But there were other generations, after the days of Noah, who had not the word declared to them ; and why they all should have been overlooked, and the mission restricted to infidels of the Noachic age, who had been favored with, and had rejected, such superior advantages, is incredible, in view of our Lord’s lucid teaching, as to the several responsibility of the informed and uninformed. “And that servant, which knew his lord’s will, and prepared not, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required : and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.” *Luke* xii. 47, 48. Yet contrary to this avowed principle, the generation that had the most abused its privileges, was dealt with leniently, kindly, mercifully ; and those who had offended less, and in ignorance, were left unvisited by mercy.

Again ; “ Then began he to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not: Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say unto you, it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you. And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom,

it would have remained until this day. But I say unto you, that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee." *Matth.* xi. 20-24. But our hypothesis makes it infinitely preferable to be such as Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, in the day of judgment, than to be as Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom. Therefore it is unreliable. It leads, logically, to an absurdity.

We prefer taking *en hooi*, ver. 19, not as "by which," but as a conjunctive phrase, "because," "inasmuch as," etc., connecting "he went and preached," etc., with "For Christ also" in ver. 18; thus presenting us with a second instance of Christ's submitting to indignity, while engaged in well doing; laboring through the instrumentality of Noah, to convert the infidels of a generation, from which only eight souls were saved. When Peter wrote, those spirits were in prison: but in the days of Noah, when they would not be persuaded, they were on earth; and had the advantage of the preaching, prophesying, and example of that just man; who received from the Lord (Jesus, the Word, who was in the beginning, who was with God, who was God, and by whom all things were made: *John* i. 1-3) the direct revelation of his extreme disgust, at the exceeding wickedness of men; so that "it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. And the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth," etc. *Gen.* vi. 5-7. All this revelation the preacher made known to those of his day, but they would not be persuaded; they were *apeitheetesantes*, unpersuaded, "disobedient." The time of their disobedience is distinctly stated by Peter: "which (spirits) sometime were disobedient (*apeitheetesasin pote*, disobedient once, at a certain time) when once the long-suffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing,"

etc. This is very specific as to the time of their refusing to be persuaded; and when they refused to be persuaded, was the time when they were preached to.

If the "spirits in prison" are supposed to be, necessarily, the departed from this life, we refer to Dr. Clarke's enumeration of passages, where the word "spirits" must refer to living men: "—the spirits of just men made perfect, *Heb.* xii. 23, certainly means righteous men, and men still in the Church militant; and the Father of spirits, *Heb.* xii. 9, means men still in the body; and the God of the spirits of all flesh, *Numb.* xvi. 22, and xxvii. 16, means men not in a disembodied state." *In loco.* Dr. Parkhurst gives as a definition of *pneuma*, the word rendered "spirits" in our passage, "x. A religious teacher who pretends to divine inspiration or authority, whether truly or falsely," and cites "—in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits (*pneumasi*), and doctrines of devils." *I Tim.* iv. 1. "Beloved believe not every spirit (*pneumati*), but try the spirits (*pneumata*) whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit (*pneuma*) that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: and every spirit (*pneuma*) that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God:" *I John* iv. 1-3. The "spirits" here referred to, were false teachers, disturbing the Church. The "spirits in prison" referred to by Peter, were disembodied sinners at the time of his writing, but were embodied at the time of their refusing to be persuaded, by the preaching of Noah.

The history of Christ, the Lord striving with them, the bearing with them one hundred and twenty years, their resisting, and destruction, all this, we have in the sixth and seventh chapters of Genesis. And by this

light we should understand Peter, not to be referring to any divine visitation to these men, above all other lost ones, in the world of spirits: but to the history of their evil doing and infidelity, in the days of their flesh; their wickedness and provocation borne with by the Lord so long; and resulting in the rescuing of but eight souls, from the destruction of the whole race of man. Only eight saved from an entire generation of the human race; because only those eight were *peittheesantes*, persuaded by the divine voice. No generation, since "the days of Noah," has existed with but that small number of believers. So, that the picture of the Lord's suffering grief over human stubbornness of opposition, as drawn by Peter; and his success, so seemingly small, yet so astonishingly great, in saving the seed of humanity, for the re-peopling of the globe, with men who have never exhibited a generation so unpersuaded, as to contain but eight believers; accounts for their being mentioned, above all others, in this connection.

So we read; "Having a good conscience; that, inasmuch as they speak evil of you, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conduct in Christ. For better, if the will of God be that you suffer, that it be for well doing, than for evil doing. For Christ hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God; having been put to death as to the flesh, but quickened as to the Spirit: (and he hath suffered) also, inasmuch as he visited, in the days of Noah, those spirits now in prison, who then resisted all persuasion, when the long-suffering of God waited while the ark was being prepared, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water."

This theory conforms to the divine history, and to the general Biblical doctrine: in which latter we have no clear statement of any probation or offer of mercy beyond the grave: but very distinct teaching, that,

at death the impenitent go directly to a place of torment, from which there is no escape. *Luke* .xvi. "To be cast into everlasting fire (*to pur to aioonion*)," as the result of a sinful life, *Matth.* xviii. 8, is too clear and positive to be set aside by ambiguous expressions. Our Lord teaches plainly in the passage from *Matthew*, that we should get rid of incitements to sin, at any sacrifice, rather than "to be cast into everlasting fire:" and in the citation from *Luke*, he describes the course of a sinner with entire distinctness, as sinning, dying, and lifting up his eyes in hell being in torment, from which flame he is told that extrication is impossible: the tormenting flame is the everlasting fire. The two lessons are altogether consistent, teaching the same doctrine. And after all the objections alleged, as to the insufficiency of present probationary opportunities; the inequality of those privileges, growing out of social position, educational advantages, and corrupting influences; the awful excess of the punishment, over the peccadilloes of this brief life, etc.: it is only necessary to take the whole subject into fair and full consideration, to be convinced, that, "As for God his way is perfect."

The sinner is gifted, every sinner is richly gifted by the Creator, with mind, heart, will, impulse; and no man is fixed by providence, where he cannot do right, if he will. The history of our race absolutely sparkles, glows, with instances of men beginning their career in obscurity, poverty, unkindly and adverse influences of all sorts; and making their way to the most eminent position of power, and fame. Our Lord puts the matter fairly: "Light is come into the world, and men love darkness rather than light." *John* iii. 19. He that laments the absence of opportunity to improve his condition is the man who is sinfully neglecting the opportunity in his possession; like the man with the one talent. And why should God or man give a man ten talents,

when he shows himself incapable, unwilling to undertake the managing of one? Every man has one talent.

And shall a man who will not deny his propensities to evil, and take up his cross though none so heavy, for a moment, a mere handbreadth of time, to secure to himself an eternity of perfect bliss; dare to mutter from amid the hopeless gloom and horror of the pit, that his punishment is disproportioned to his offense! What was the offense? He was offered eternal bliss, on condition of momentary cross bearing; and he refused the offer! He would not flee the wrath to come, on that infinitesimal condition! To have accepted the cross would have made him a better, more useful, more noble, happier man: he refused. The refusal was a dishonor to his own mind, a plague to his own heart; it minified him; degraded him; all around him whose opinion was worthy of respect, were grieved at it; only the vile were pleased at it; and yet he refused. Should he then complain of the eternal horror from which he refused to escape upon such a simple, possible condition; it will not in the least tarnish the perfection of the divine administration.

To sum up: Peter is seeking to encourage Christians, suffering as they were in that day, by persecution for their faith and good conduct. He reminds them of the support and comfort of a good conscience; and points to two instances of suffering on the part of their Lord — one after, the other before, he assumed flesh — both instances being recorded in the sacred history; the former in the gospels, by Matthew, Mark, Luke, John; the latter in Genesis vi. and vii. by Moses. In Gethsemane, according to Matt. xxvi. 38, he said, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death:" while with reference to the infidels of the days of Noah, Moses declares, "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of

the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart." Yet, in each instance, the result was grand. The anguish of Gethsemane and Calvary resulted in life, "quickened as to the Spirit;" while the "long-suffering" during the one hundred and twenty years, of the divine grief, resulted in life to the post-diluvian world, by the saving of the eight souls in the ark. And so the Christians of Peter's day, were in Christ the true ark, and amid the roaring deluge of persecution, would be tided safely on, to spread the faith for which they were suffering, for the blessing and salvation of the coming generations. Of which we are part, and well may we be grateful, and rejoice that the sufferers maintained their integrity, and sent on to us the precious faith, to cheer us in our struggle for life and salvation.

THE ELDERS.

I PETER v. 1-4.

"THE elders (*presbuteros*, sometimes this word signifies advanced age; more usually, in the N. T., office; as is the case here) I exhort, who am also an elder (*sumpresbuteros*, a fellow-elder, not so well rendered by 'also an elder: ' fellow-elder is more expressive than 'also an elder: ' the apostle meant to signify his sympathy, kind regard, equality; as making it reasonable and proper, for him to exhort them to the course of official duty, suitable to their office. There is no trace of a gradation of orders, from deacon, to elder,

to bishop, to apostle, or any thing similar, in the N. T. ; so as to lead us to suppose, that Peter had come up to the apostolate, through the lower orders ; and, therefore, comprehending all the functions of those orders in the highest, the apostolate, he might very properly style himself a fellow-bishop, fellow-elder, fellow-deacon. The history is, that he was placed by the Head of the Church, at once, in his position of apostle : and as he tells us here that he was a fellow-elder, a *sumpresbuteros*, we can but infer, that, at the time of the writing, he had been elected an elder of some congregation and was engaged in the exercise of his functions ; having but rare occasion, now, for the peculiar functions of his apostolate, the witnessing to the Christ's death and resurrection. Even in our day, we have known a bishop to be called to the rectorate of a special congregation ; exercising his episcopal functions as occasion required : and we suppose Peter, to have been quite as capable of similar obligations. According to his own statement, he was a fellow-elder ; and as there was no mode of becoming an elder, in those days, except by an election on the part of a congregation ; we take it for a probability that such was the case : *i. e.* he had been so elected, and was a *bona fide* fellow-elder to the "Elders which are among you").

"Feed the flock of God which is among you." *Poimante*, from *poimeen*, a herdsman, a shepherd, one who tends herds or flocks : and, so, not a mere feeder, or a mere guardian, but one who attends to all that the flock needs, food, protection, general care of pasturing and folding. "But which of you, having a servant, plowing or feeding cattle, will say unto him by and by, when he is come from the field," etc. *Luke* xvii. 7. In this citation, it is evident from the entire drift of thought, that the servant was at some all-day employment, and would be weary in the evening when returned

from the field. "Feeding," *poimainonta*, then should be substituted by "tending;" or, if we had such a word "shepherding:" for "feeding" does not so well express the sense of *poimainonta*, officiating as a shepherd, as tending, herding, shepherding. There is no "cattle" in the original; "feeding cattle" being used as the translation of the one word, *poimainonta*, a participle of the verb *poimainoo*, which expresses the action of the *poimeen*, a herdsman, shepherd, one who tends flocks.

Thus the *presbuteros*, the presbyter, the elder, is exhorted by his fellow-elder, experienced in the matter, to shepherd the flock; and that as having no superior, but the owner of the sheep. To a flock, the shepherd is the highest in office. And so "taking the oversight" is really unnecessary, and the word *episkopountes* (the word rendered "taking the oversight") is omitted by some of the best copies of the N. T. If the word be retained, however, its rendering is well enough, except that it being a participle of the verb *episkopeoo*, to oversee, superintend; which with *episkopos*, an overseer, superintendent; and *episkopee*, the office of an overseer, superintendent, all derive from *episkeptomai*, to visit, to go or come to see with the purpose to assist or benefit, etc.; and should have a consistent, uniform rendering, so as to be unembarrassing to the mere English reader. Then if we make *episkopos*, bishop; we must have *episkopee*, the office of a bishop (as *Acts* i. 20); and *episkopeoo*, to bishop, to exercise the functions of a bishop. But bishop in one place (*I Tim.* iii. 2), and overseer in another (*Acts* xx. 28); visitation here (*I Peter* ii. 12; *Luke* xix. 44), and the office of a bishop there (*I Tim.* iii. 1; *Acts* i. 20); looking diligently now (*Heb.* xii. 15), and taking the oversight then (*I Pet.* v. 2); really this looks as if there is something out of joint in this matter of the episcopacy. Christians

have been too much concerned about something, of which there is very little mentioned in the N. T. The officer, occurs four times ; the office, four ; the act of the officer, twice : a small sum.

It is easy to see, that the bishoping, *episkopountes*, is included in the *poimanante*, shepherd ye, act as the shepherds of the flock. No bishop has any higher office than that. So if *episcopountes* be omitted from the text, our argument that the elders were the shepherds of the flock, remains uninjured : but if retained, so much the better for our point.

“Not by constraint, but willingly:” by constraint (*anagkastoos*) being opposed to willingly here, must signify unwillingly ; and intimates that the eldership, the true episcopacy of Peter’s day, was not a very inviting position : was not sought after : the congregation had some difficulty in persuading an elder or bishop elect, to accept the office. It is likely the feeble powers, slender emoluments, and meagre pomp of that officer, did not overbalance the risk in persecution, and the onerous duties, involved in its acceptance. Yet there were emoluments, either of salary or fees ; for the fellow-elder further exhorts :

“Not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind:” Not in a manner to show that you are actuated *only* by the salary, or fees, which would vilify such emolument, and change it into “base gain,” here expressed as “filthy lucre ;” for though a decent support might have been given by the congregation, and received by the pious and faithful elder or bishop, in all honor and propriety ; to one who had sought the position for the pay, and not with “a ready mind,” i. e. a mind disposed, and desirous, to do good ; it would be all one as with, here and there, a blatant patriot, who, under various pretenses, pushes himself into an office, to be used in the filling of his pockets.

“Neither as being lords (*hoos katakurieuontes*, as lording it, acting as lords) over (God’s) heritage (*toon kleeroon*, lots, portions falling to persons by lot).” This word *kleeros*, a lot, die, anything used in determining chances; a part or portion assigned by lot, occurs in the N. T., twelve times: of which, six times in the first sense of casting lots; and the rest, in the second sense of a portion assigned as by lot. Among the latter we rank the *toon kleeroon*, the lots, portions falling to persons by lot. The respective congregations, or churches presided over by their respective elders or bishops; and the proportion of a church or congregation to a bishop, then, was one to many; those churches are referred to by *toon kleeroon*: and the elders are exhorted not to lord it over them, as though they owned them as property fallen to their possession; as if an elder were something more than a brother; or other than a mere salaried officer, for the common weal.

“But being ensamples to the flock:” As the elder would be frequently seen in their assemblings, and in their families; instead of appearing in the false form of a lord, a proprietor, a master, he should come in his true form a brother, called to office as a servant, but yet a kind, loving, careful, sympathizing brother, sharing in their happiness or affliction. He should be a model to the brethren. For Christian sheep are very superior to the simple animals, to which they are likened in the figure. They are very susceptible to moral impressions, for good or for evil, as good or evil examples come before them. So, let them see in you a pious brother.

“And when the chief Shepherd (*tou archipoimenos*, the archpoimeen) shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.” Demonstrating that the elders who were exhorted, to “Feed the flock,” (*poimanate to poimnion*) were the *poimenes*, the shepherds of the flocks, the churches; and were responsible not to some human officer; but only to the chief

Shepherd, who would reward their faithful discharge of duty. The churches, since that day have chosen to have above the elder, the bishop, the archbishop, and others. Whether it is better, is questioned by many thoughtful and pious thinkers. The simplicity of the churches, in the day of the apostle, who was a fellow-elder, was very beautiful.
