

~Other Speakers M-R: Thomas Reade:

57. EXPERIMENTAL RELIGION

"I know the one in whom I trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until the day of his return." 2 Tim. 1:12

To talk about Christian Experience is, by some people considered little short of enthusiasm. To try to enlist the affections on the side of Christianity is by others deemed extravagance. In their view, the sober-minded Christian is one who attends to the duties of his station, is a strict observer of religious ordinances, and distributes of his substance to the poor and needy. To speak to them about the corruption of the heart, the inward conflict, the power of faith, the energy of love, the work of the Spirit, the grace of the Savior, is like talking about an unknown region.

It was not so with the blessed Paul. He could say, "I know the one in whom I trust." He was taught of God to know, by sweet experience, the efficacy of Christ's atonement, the sufficiency of his grace, and the prevalency of his intercession. His ardent desire was "to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; if by any means he might attain unto the resurrection of the dead."

John also, being taught of God, was well acquainted with spiritual knowledge and religious experience. His first epistle abounds with the most delightful proofs of this. He seems to rise, as he writes, on the wings of an assured faith and hope; "You have an unction from the Holy One, and you know all things." "We know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is." "You know that he was manifested to take away our sins." "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren." "We know that he abides in us, by the Spirit which he has given us." "Every one that loves, is born of God, and know God." "Hereby we know that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit." "We have known and believed the love that God has to us." "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments." "If we know that he hear us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him." "We know that whoever is born of God sins not." "We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in wickedness." "We know that the Son of God has come, and has given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true; and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life."

O! what a blessed knowledge is this. How deeply it enters into the experience and feelings of true believers. Here is nothing cold and calculating, nothing frozen or formal, all is warmth and energy. Happy are they who can say with Peter; "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." With John; "We love him, because he first loved us." And with Paul; "The love of Christ constrains us."

With such declarations of the Apostles, recorded in the Sacred Scriptures for our encouragement and pursuit after holiness, we need not be ashamed of Experimental Religion. The world's shame is the Christian's glory. Such was Paul's triumph. "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ; for it is the power of God unto salvation, to every one that believes." "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world."

They know little of the religion of Jesus Christ, who cannot follow him through evil report as well as good report; who cannot deny themselves or take up their cross, bearing his reproach. "If we deny him, he also will deny us." The fear of man, and the love of the world, are the bane of our profession, and the ruin of thousands. The words of our Lord should be impressed on the hearts of all his followers; "This is life eternal, that they might know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." So deeply did the Apostles enter into the intercessory prayer of their divine Master, that their hearts' desire was, that the knowledge of Christ crucified should become universal.

Paul prays for the Ephesian converts, that the blessings of spiritual illumination, spiritual strength, and faith and love, might be imparted in rich abundance. "I have never stopped thanking God for you. I pray for you constantly, asking God, the glorious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you might grow in your knowledge of God. I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can understand the wonderful future he has promised to those he called. I want you to realize what a rich and glorious inheritance he has given to his people. I pray that you will begin to understand the incredible greatness of his power for us who believe him." If this do not be experimental godliness, where is it

to be found?

But the tender-hearted Apostle does not rest here. He still prays, on his bended knees, for an increased outpouring of the Spirit upon his beloved children in the faith; "When I think of the wisdom and scope of God's plan, I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will give you mighty inner strength through his Holy Spirit. And I pray that Christ will be more and more at home in your hearts as you trust in him. May your roots go down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love really is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is so great you will never fully understand it. Then you will be filled with the fullness of life and power that comes from God."

For the Philippians, he prays in the sweetest spirit of ministerial affection; "God knows how much I love you and long for you with the tender compassion of Christ Jesus. I pray that your love for each other will overflow more and more, and that you will keep on growing in your knowledge and understanding. For I want you to understand what really matters, so that you may live pure and blameless lives until Christ returns. May you always be filled with the fruit of your salvation—those good things that are produced in your life by Jesus Christ—for this will bring much glory and praise to God."

For the Colossians, he has the same overflowing tenderness of desire; "So we have continued praying for you ever since we first heard about you. We ask God to give you a complete understanding of what he wants to do in your lives, and we ask him to make you wise with spiritual wisdom. Then the way you live will always honor and please the Lord, and you will continually do good, kind things for others. All the while, you will learn to know God better and better. We also pray that you will be strengthened with his glorious power so that you will have all the patience and endurance you need. May you be filled with joy, always thanking the Father, who has enabled you to share the inheritance that belongs to God's holy people, who live in the light. For he has rescued us from the one who rules in the kingdom of darkness, and he has brought us into the Kingdom of his dear Son. God has purchased our freedom with his blood and has forgiven all our sins."

For the Thessalonians, he also pours out his heart before God; "And may the Lord make your love grow and overflow to each other and to everyone else, just as our love overflows toward you. As a result, Christ will make your hearts strong, blameless, and holy when you stand before God our Father on that day when our Lord Jesus comes with all those who belong to him."

Let a minister of the gospel pray and preach in this fervent, exalted, spiritual, heavenly strain, and he would be branded by many, yes, it is to be feared even by some who call themselves "the successors of the Apostles," as an enthusiast. Would holy Paul have escaped such a censure, had he lived in these days? Is there no danger, lest spiritual religion is not to be once more buried beneath the superincumbent weight of those errors and idle ceremonies, from which we were happily delivered by our martyred Reformers?

There is in all men, naturally, a thirst for power. Every age has its "Diotrephes, who loves to have the pre-eminence, prating against us," says John, "with malicious words; and not content therewith, neither does he himself receive the brethren, and forbids those who would, and casts them out of the church." What is the advice of the Apostle to such holy, yet excommunicated believers? "Beloved, follow not that which is evil, but that which is good. He that does good is of God; but he that does evil has not seen God."

The Christian's path then is plainly marked out. He is to take up his cross daily. He is to count the cost. If he is faithful to his Savior, he must be a partaker of his Savior's sufferings; so said our Lord; "If the have persecuted me, they will also persecute you." It is a painful truth, but one which cannot be concealed, because it is emblazoned in colors of blood on the page of Scripture, and on the page of the Church's history, that the greatest persecutors of Christ, and of his true believing members, have been those who have sat in the seat of Moses (Jews), and in the chair of Peter (Catholics)! Who were so clamorous for the crucifixion of our Lord, as the chief priests, the scribes, and elders of the Jewish Church? Who, in after ages, were so bitter against the sheep of Christ, as those very ministers of the Christian Church who styled themselves Shepherds, but who were ravening wolves. Jesus cautioned his people against such people, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves; you shall know them by their fruits."

Paul foresaw, by the spirit of prophecy, the approaching apostasy; "Take heed," said he, addressing the elders of the Ephesian church at Miletus, "Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he has purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your

own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch."

Yes! we have need to "watch and pray, lest we enter into temptation;" lest we forsake the standard of the cross, through the influence or the fear of man. The times are indeed fearful, when those, who once stood foremost in the cause of Christ, who were valiant for the truth on the earth, now desert his standard; when those, who once preached, in all its simplicity and purity, the gospel of the grace of God, are now drawn into the vortex of a system, which will disfigure our Reformed Churches by Papal ceremonies, and darken them by Papal doctrines. Is it not a presage of evil days, when sacraments are virtually put in the place of Christ? When the doctrine of the atonement is to be sparingly exhibited to the perishing sinner? When the rights of conscience are made to succumb at the feet of an assumed infallibility? When the foundations are thus destroyed, what must the righteous do?

Truly this was not the preaching of the Apostles. Paul "determined not to know anything except Jesus Christ, and him crucified." Peter gloried in the Lamb, who redeemed us by his blood. John gives us the song of the church triumphant in heaven; "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing."

Neither was this the conduct of the Apostles. Paul says to the Corinthian Christians, "Not for that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy; for by faith you stand." Peter exhorts the elders to diligence and humility; "Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock." John asserts the right of private judgment "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world."

And by what touchstone must they be tried? Isaiah informs us, "To the law and to the testimony; if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." While we have the light, may we have grace to walk in the light, and with the noble Bereans, to search the Scriptures daily, whether these things are so.

An awful delusion, a spiritual darkness, is rapidly over-spreading the Reformed Churches. Is there not a cause, when apostate Rome is viewed as an "erring sister, as "the Savior's holy home," instead of the mystical Babylon doomed to destruction.

The judgments of God are evidently lowering over our land. The dark clouds are gathering around us. We have long been blessed with the light of the Gospel, but if we do not repent, the candlestick will be removed from us, and carried to other lands. Our God is the same unchangeable Jehovah. In his word, he has taught us to dread declension from his ways. How awakening are his warnings. "If you will not be reformed by me but will walk contrary unto me; then will I also walk contrary unto you." "I will come unto you quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth." "I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searches the reins and hearts; and I will give unto everyone of you according to your works." "Remember how you have received and heard; and hold fast, and repent. If therefore you shall not watch, I will come on you as a thief, and you shall not know what hour I will come upon you."

The signs of the times indicate the coming storm. Have we not reason to say with Peter, "For the time has come for judgment, and it must begin first among God's own children. And if even we Christians must be judged, what terrible fate awaits those who have never believed God's Good News? And 'If the righteous are barely saved, what chance will the godless and sinners have?' So if you are suffering according to God's will, keep on doing what is right, and trust yourself to the God who made you, for he will never fail you." The storm, which overwhelms the wicked, will purify the saints of God.

Oh! solemn warnings of most just judgment! Lord awaken our slumbering souls; enlighten our darkened understandings; preserve your Church from heresy and error; do not allow the champions for your truth to become, "as when a standard-bearer faints."

The deliverance and journeyings of the children of Israel, form a striking counterpart to the Christian's redemption and pilgrimage to the heavenly Canaan. They were held in bondage by the Egyptian tyrant, and though they groaned under their oppression, yet were loath to leave the iron furnace. Likewise, sinners are kept in awful slavery to Satan and their lusts; and though often wretched to the last degree, still they hug their chains.

The Almighty, by an act of grace, undertook to rescue his people from the power of Pharaoh, by signs, and wonders, and with a stretched-out arm. Likewise, sinners are redeemed from the tyranny of Satan, from the evil

of sin, the curse of the law, and the damnation of hell, by the omnipotent Jehovah Jesus, God manifest in the flesh.

As the Israelites sang the praises of God, when, having passed through the Red Sea in safety, they saw their enemies dead on the shore; so believers rejoice with joy unspeakable, when they experience a mighty deliverance from all their enemies, whom the Lord subdues before them. In heaven they will sing the conqueror's song; the song of Moses and of the Lamb.

The Israelites, before they could enter into the promised rest, had to traverse a long howling wilderness, that their faith and patience might be exercised, and the power, love, and faithfulness of God, exhibited in their preservation and protection. So, believers in Jesus, after their conversion to God, and regeneration through the Spirit, have to journey through the valley of life, amid numberless trials and difficulties, snares and temptations, before they enter the heavenly rest, to prove the reality of their faith, and to manifest the grace of their crucified Lord.

The history of the Israelites in the wilderness, is the history of the human heart. We see in them a faithful picture of ourselves. When all is shining and pleasant, our hearts can feel elated and joyous. When the purse is heavy, the heart is light; but when the purse is light, the heart is heavy. Thus it was with the children of Israel. So long as their outward comforts continued, they were thankful; but when their bread and water began to fail, they murmured against Moses, and rebelled against God.

Is it not thus with us? When our sun is overcast, when storms arise, when comforts fail, when earthly sources of delight are dried up; then sadness seizes upon our spirits; doubts and fears prevail; murmurs escape our lips. In these trying seasons, the faith, even of believers, falters; while the faith of the stony ground hearers, having no root, withers! How destructive is unbelief! How deceiving is the confidence of nominal Christians. "Every branch in me," said our Lord, "that bears not fruit he takes away." It is a fearful truth, one which should make us tremble, that out of the many thousands of Israelites who came out of Egypt, only two were found faithful, and permitted to enter the promised land; all the rest were excluded through unbelief."

Paul applies this fact most forcibly to the Christian Church; "Be careful then, dear friends. Make sure that your own hearts are not evil and unbelieving, turning you away from the living God. You must warn each other every day, as long as it is called "today," so that none of you will be deceived by sin and hardened against God. For if we are faithful to the end, trusting God just as firmly as when we first believed, we will share in all that belongs to Christ." Then, referring to the rebellious Israelites, he adds, "And who made God angry for forty years? Wasn't it the people who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom was God speaking when he vowed that they would never enter his place of rest? He was speaking to those who disobeyed him. So we see that they were not allowed to enter his rest because of their unbelief."

The practical conclusion is then drawn from these solemn premises, "God's promise of entering his place of rest still stands, so we ought to tremble with fear that some of you might fail to get there. For this Good News—that God has prepared a place of rest—has been announced to us just as it was to them. But it did them no good because they didn't believe what God told them."

The visible Church of Christ, like the Church in the wilderness, is composed of a mixed multitude. All men have not faith. Many have the form of godliness, who deny the power. Many say, "The temple of the Lord are we", in whose hearts the Savior never dwelt; and who shall never enter into the temple above. Self-deception is no less common, than it is fatal.

The Jewish priests prided themselves on being the children of Abraham; when our Lord plainly told those who they were the seed of the old serpent! Is not the same delusion still practiced? Do not the priests of the Romish Church boast themselves on being the successors of Peter, though they would persecute, even unto deaths, those who faithfully adhere to the doctrines, and live in the spirit, of the holy Apostles? The history of their Church is written in letters of blood. Romanism lacks the power, and not the will, to root out the heretical tares, to gather them in bundles, as in the days of the Marian persecution, and to burn them!

O! that this leaven of self-deception may never work fatally in our Reformed Churches. The subtle enemy of mankind is ever seeking to darken, if he cannot destroy, the TRUTH. He can transform himself into an angel of light, as well as assume the character of a roaring lion. No, he often combines both, in his warfare against the Church of Christ. Popery is the masterpiece of Satan, which can adapt itself to every state of society. It is the religion of the natural heart. Lord! save me from unbelief; self-deceptions; Satan's delusions; and the fear of man.

I am now a pilgrim journeying through the wilderness. The manna is daily descending; and the water of life continually flowing to sustain and refresh me. Jesus, the true bread from heaven, is freely given; the Holy Spirit, as a living stream, is graciously supplied from the fountain of eternal love. Oh! how great is the goodness, truth, and mercy, of my covenant God, Father, Son, and Spirit, to an unworthy worm of the earth. Lord, make me grateful. Give me a believing and a loving heart. Preserve me from self-will and self-seeking; from self-sufficiency and self-pleasing. Mold my will into yours; and enable me in all things to seek your glory.

Guide me, O great Jehovah, in safety through this desert-land. Shield me by your power. Cheer me with your presence. Uphold my goings in your way. Let me not turn aside into crooked paths; nor dread any danger, while in the path of duty. Keep me as the apple of your eye. Hide me under the shadow of your wings. Impart that spiritual illumination which will direct me aright; that spiritual strength, which will enable me to endure unto the end; that assurance of faith, which will animate me to the conflict; and that experience of your love, which will support me under every trial, and cause me to die, rather than deny you before men. O grant these inestimable blessings, for your own mercy and truth's sake; for you, O Lord, alone are the God of my salvation.

Holy Father! hear my prayer,
As, through Jesus, it ascends;
On You I cast my every care,
Now the day of labor ends.
Soon will sleep my eyelids close,
In Your love may I repose.
All my days are known to thee,
All my times are in Your hand;
Life is like the rolling sea;
Ebbs and flows at Your command
As a plant does bloom and die,
Man is only vanity.
Thus today is swiftly gone,
Solemn witness to appear
At Jehovah's holy throne,
How shall I the judgment bear?
Lord! I shrink with shame and awe,
'Midst the thunders of Your law.
Jesus! clothe my naked soul,
With Your Righteousness divine,
You can make the wounded whole,
Let Your Spirit seal me thine.
Pour Your comfort in my heart,
Never from my soul depart.
Hide me, O Almighty Friend,
Under Your paternal wing,
From the ills which life attend,
Then will I Your goodness sing.
Lord! renew my wasted powers,
Consecrate my waking hours.