

THE APOSTLES WHO WERE ALWAYS SURE

These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know. (1 John 5:13)

One of the outstanding details concerning the New Testament preachers was the certainty with which they delivered their message. They lived in an age when all kinds of doctrines were expounded, but nothing could shake the positive features of the message enunciated by the men who began the task of world evangelism. The verb to know, with its derivatives, was used over thirty times in John's three epistles, but Paul mentioned it even more in his letters to the churches. There was nothing uncertain in the ministry of the earliest Christians; they were sure of their facts and never hesitated to say so.

A Constant Assurance

We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death. (1 John 3: 14)

Writing to the Corinthian Christians, Paul said, "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17). After his conversion, the apostle discovered that the people he was determined to destroy were to become his greatest friends. He was astonished when one of those people addressed him as "Brother Saul" (see Acts 9:17).

Like Paul, John knew the transforming power of Christ. John was one of two men known as "The Sons of Thunder." His fiery temperament was unpredictable; if one were to annoy him, some kind of verbal abuse was inevitable. When the Lord was journeying toward Jerusalem, He paused at a Samaritan village, but unfortunately the attitude of the local people left much to be desired: "And they [the Samaritans] did not receive him, because his face was as though he

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would go to Jerusalem. And when his disciples James and John saw this, they said, Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them, even as Elias did?" (Luke 9:53-54). Under certain circumstances it was easier for John to hate people than to love them. That such a man would be known later as the apostle of love proves something had changed his outlook. When the power of divine love had transformed John and Paul, both men were new creatures in Christ; old things passed away, and everything became new.

The Lord changed His followers, and when that miracle had been performed, onlookers saw its effect in the daily conduct of the disciples. John wrote, "we know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren." It is not always easy to love professing Christians. John encountered a man who was exceptionally arrogant. The apostle said of the awkward church member, "I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church" (3 John 9-10). One wonders what might have happened if the "old John" had encountered the slanderous, objectionable man who thought he was the authorized representative of divine wisdom.

That John could even tolerate the self-righteous dictator indicated something amazing had taken place within the beloved apostle. His love

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for the brethren proved he was a true convert, one who had passed from death unto life. A man without love is a cynic, an unchangeable critic who worships at his own shrine! When a Christian loves the unlovely, it becomes evident that God, who is love, resides in his or her life. This fact enables a believer to say, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Phil. 4:13).

A Continual Awareness

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. (Rom. 8:28)

It is only possible to believe this statement when one's eyes are focused upon God. When life is a tangled mess and everything appears to be distressing, the best efforts of sincere people may end in tragedy. Then it is difficult to believe that all things have been planned by the Lord. It

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is almost incomprehensible that Paul wrote this verse, for of all men, he appeared to have suffered most. He wrote,

Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches. (2 Cor. 11:24-28)

No sane man would claim that all these infirmities and difficulties could work together for his good unless he knew that God was omnipotent! When Peter looked at the rough sea, he began to sink; when Paul continued to trust his Lord, he survived every storm he encountered. It is more important to look at Christ than it is to work for Him. Yet when a man continues to see his Master, he becomes the most willing and efficient laborer in the kingdom of God.

When Sir Winston Churchill was a small boy, his family was invited by neighbors to attend a garden party. The children were playing at the pool when the young Churchill fell into the water and might have drowned had not a gardener working nearby rushed to rescue the lad. Later, when the parents were aware of what had taken place, they offered a reward, but the man refused to accept anything. Somewhat frustrated but deeply grateful, the senior Churchill said, "You may not desire to be rewarded, but is there not some special project in which I can assist?" The gardener confessed that he had a son named Arthur who desired to become a doctor, but unfortunately the cost of medical training was beyond the reach of their income. Winston's father agreed to pay all the expenses for the lad's education, but he could not have known how important his action was destined to be.

Many years later when Sir Winston Churchill was the prime minister of Great Britain, he became seriously ill, and the king requested that Britain's most famous surgeon should attend to his need. Sir Arthur Flemming, the discoverer of penicillin, undertook the task and saved Churchill's life. Sir Winston later said, "It is seldom that anyone has

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to thank another man for saving his life twice." God is remarkably

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skillful in weaving the tangled threads of human experience into a fabric of superlative beauty. Paul and John knew this to be true, but sometimes we do not.

A Celestial Anticipation

For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands eternal in the heavens. (2 Cor. 5:1)

Probably one of the most undesired things in the world is old age; the inevitable introduction to the termination of life. Brilliant scientists continue their search for the secret of rejuvenation, but unfortunately people continue to die. Every year new drugs are offered to the public and vast amounts of money spent by gullible people in their search for longevity. All people realize that ultimately they will succumb to age, illness, or accident. Solomon said the grave is one of four things which are never satisfied (see Prov. 30:15-16). The greatest singers know their vocal chords will deteriorate. The wealthiest people know their money can buy everything except health. The most beautiful women know that wrinkles and other ailments will destroy the qualities that were the envy of their associates. Advancing age is an enemy, and unless people know the secret of attaining to what lies beyond, life may become a miserable experience. There is another side to the subject as an unknown author has expressed:

I shall not mind the whiteness of my hair,
Or that slow steps falter on the stair,
Or that young friends hurry as they pass,
Or what strange image greets me in the glass.
If I can feel, as roots feel in the sod,
That I am growing old to bloom
Before the face of God.

Paul, now an older man, considered the future with mixed emotions. His preaching career was terminating, and his body was beginning to issue warnings that it could not last forever. Once before he had considered the possibility of going home to heaven, but excessive love for the brethren in the faith had overcome his desire for an early entrance into the presence of his Lord. He wrote to the Philippian Christians,

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"For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you" (Phil. 1:23-24).

Years later the apostle wrote to Timothy urging him to come quickly. He said, "For Jam now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing. Do thy diligence to come shortly unto me" (2 Tim. 4:6-9). Paul was fully aware of what was to happen in his immediate future. The beatings and agony he had suffered were about to take their toll. The Living Bible translates his message in 2 Corinthians 5:1-4 in a remarkable manner:

For we know that when this tent we live in now is taken down when we die and leave these bodies we will have wonderful new bodies in heaven, homes that will be ours forevermore, made for us by God himself, and not by human hands. How weary we grow of our present bodies. That is why we look forward eagerly to the day when we shall have heavenly bodies which we shall put

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on like new clothes. . . . These earthly bodies make us groan and sigh, but we wouldn't like to think of dying and having no bodies at all. We want to slip into our new bodies so that these dying bodies will, as it were, be swallowed up by everlasting life.

Paul brought all this teaching to a glorious culmination by saying, "We look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall change our vile [decaying] body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself' (Phil. 3:20-21). These conclusions were not merely ideas within the mind of the apostle; they were inspired facts endorsed by the Lord who enabled the apostle to exclaim, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" (I Cor. 15:55).

A Colossal Aspiration

We know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. (I John 3:2)

The Living Bible translates this verse in a very delightful way: "Yes,

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dear friends, we are already God's children, right now, and we can't even imagine what it is going to be like later on. But we do know this, that when he comes we will be like him." The text reveals the absolute assurance with which we enter the timeless ages. I remember a very old man who prayed, "Lord, I thank thee that thou hast not revealed all the wonders of heaven. If you had, we would all commit suicide to get there faster." I was only a teenager at the time, and did not fully comprehend what the old Christian was saying. Why any person would desire to die was beyond my understanding, but that aged believer was expressing his longing for home.

I shall never forget a great friend of mine who was dying of cancer. He said, "I have always wondered what lay beyond the grave, and now I'm going to find out." It appears to be incomprehensible that human beings will be made exactly like their Lord, but that is the supreme purpose of the Almighty. If heaven is to be without blemish, then all its citizens must also be without "spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing." (Eph. 5:27). God will complete what has been commenced. Many things about the hereafter have not been disclosed, but some details shine forth in celestial splendor: (1) We shall see His face; (2) We shall be like Him; (3) "And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever" (Rev. 22:5).

Many years ago I was the chaplain in Sully Hospital, the most important center in Wales for the treatment of tuberculosis. One day I was informed that a woman on one of the wards had asked to see me. When I entered her room, I saw a woman who evidently was approaching the end of her life. I introduced myself, and she responded by saying, "Ah, Father Powell, I have been waiting for you to come." I smiled and said, "I am not Father Powell; I am just a Baptist minister." She replied, "Who cares? I had a row with Father Nichols, and I told him he could keep his rotten religion, I would get Father Powell's." She was puzzled when I said, "Lady. My religion is no good. It is worse than Father Nichol's religion. You need to know my Savior." Evidently, she did not understand what I was trying to say, so I explained the difference between a dead superstitious belief and the presence of the living Christ who had died to redeem us from sin. With the help of God's Spirit, I succeeded, for she accepted Christ as her Savior and from that moment was completely transformed. I visited her two or three times each week until she went home to heaven.

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Some months later, I received an urgent message asking me to visit the hospital immediately. When I reached the institution, a young woman in the office said, "Sir, there is a lady down the ward who wants you." She told me the name of the woman, and she was a good friend of mine. I hurried to her bedside. My friend was seriously ill, but as I placed a chair alongside the bed I explained I had been away with the young men of my church and had only just received her message. I was sorry to be late. Throughout this explanation, the sick lady stared at me in silence, and for a few moments I wondered if I had disappointed her. Then quite suddenly she said, "Go away!"

I could hardly believe my ears, and replied, "But, sister, I have only just come. I can stay longer." With a slight emphasis, for she was very weak, she repeated her words: "Go away. " I was hurt, and my feelings must have been expressed on my face for she hastened to say, "Oh, no, no, no, Father Powell. Don't be upset. I love you. I have no one else in the world but you, and I love you so much. But don't you understand? I am expecting Jesus at any moment. When He comes, I don't want to be looking at you, nor talking to you. I love you very much, but please go away, so that I can await His arrival."

It was not easy to control my emotions at that moment, but, pushing back my chair, I squeezed her hand and replied, "Little Sister, I will see you in the morning." I walked to the door and turned to wave good-bye, but she had already forgotten me. Somehow, with a great effort, she had propped herself up on an elbow, and the other hand was stretched toward the ceiling. Her mouth was open, her eyes were ablaze with a light from heaven, and she was apparently both astonished and delighted. Her Lord had come!

Standing in that doorway I trembled! I was an inexperienced pastor and did not know whether to kneel or run. I closed the door and walked in a daze down the corridor. As I look in retrospect over the fifty years that have elapsed since that memorable night, I wish I had stayed in the room. Had I not been disturbed I might have lingered to watch and wonder. My friend was meeting the Lord who had rescued her from sin, sickness, and misery. Had I stayed, I also might have seen His face. Alas, I was upset, awed, and a little bewildered, and I did as she requested—I went away.

The same privilege for me cannot long be delayed.

Some day, `till then, I'll watch and wait,
My lamp all trimmed and burning bright:

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Then, when my Savior opens the gate
My soul to Him may take its flight.

And I shall see Him face to face,
And tell the story Saved by Grace.
And I shall see Him face to face,
And tell the story, Saved by Grace.

ÄFanny I. Crosby

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