

EXPERIMENTAL RELIGION

"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; .. That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full." I John 1:1, 3-4.

"My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." I John 2:1.

"These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God: that ye may know that ye have eternal life." I John 5:13.

John's objective in writing the gospel that bears his name was "That ye might believe." His purpose in writing this epistle was three-fold, that Christians should be a glad people; that they should be a good people; and that they should be a sure people.

In this epistle we have an old man's musings about life. He is looking out into the great world, and having had experience he knows what men and women need, and he knows that the thing for which they strive is happiness. So he pens the words, "These things write we unto you, that your joy may be full." Not only is joy our heritage, but fullness of joy is our right. He does not mean the joy of circumstances, but rather the joy of a life at rest in God's love, the joy of a life at peace in God's will, and the joy of a life at work in God's purpose.

John knew full well that happiness is the result of certain conditions. "These things write I unto you, that ye sin not." Sin is the great "kill joy" in the world. So, if you would be happy, then do not sin. "And if any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." John thus admits the possibility of sin. No allowance is made for sin, but there is a Divine provision in case we do. "We have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." But this does not excuse sin, any more than because a building has a fire escape should you set the building on fire for the sake of using the escape. Or any more than provision of lifeboats on a vessel allows you to sink the ship in order that you may find occasion for using the lifeboats. But in case we do sin, we have an Advocate to see us through.

One day, as he looked at the trials and superhuman events that lay ahead, Jeremiah asked God's people this important question: "How wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?" What are you going to do when you come to that swollen stream and find no bridge over it? And one day Jesus asked His disciples: "What is your spiritual house going to do when the rains descend, the floods come, and the winds blow and beat upon it?" It will either stand or fall; and it will stand or fall accordingly as it is built upon Christ, the eternal rock of the ages, or upon the shifting sands of time.

Some of the storms and fiery trials, even death itself, will one day hit the road upon which we are travelling. When these severe trials come, and come they will, you and I will want something that will give us peace of mind, poise of soul, and patience of hope; something that we can cling to and something that will adequately sustain us.

In the last analysis, there are but two kinds of religion: one is theoretical and the other is experimental. Theoretical religion is a religion that we have read about and others have talked to us about, while experimental religion is one which we have experienced: heard with our own ears, seen with our own eyes, handled with our own hands, and felt in our own heart. The experimentalist says with the blind man, "Once I was blind, but now I see."

Let me ask: Is your religion theoretical or experimental? Is the Lord real to you, or has He been relegated to the realm of the mystical? Dr. Sangster said, "The religion of the Average man is nothing more than decency." Millions today know nothing about experimental religion, about being "born again." But just being decent is not enough, as James plainly told Nicodemus, "Ye must be born again," and as He said to the rich young ruler, "One thing thou lackest."

In our text John tells us that he had experience with the Lord Jesus Christ in three realms:

I. The Realm of Sound.

"That which we have heard."

John tells us that he had experienced the Lord first in the realm of hearing or sound; that he heard the Lord calling unto him and saying, "Follow me." John experienced Him in the realm of hearing, which is the way the Lord expresses Himself to most of us. Through Sunday School and church services the Lord is calling us to accept Him as Saviour and Lord.

The sinner cannot hear until the Lord unstops his ears. The Holy Spirit, therefore, takes the initiative in our salvation by unstopping our ears. We are saved by grace through faith. Grace is God's part, the first part in salvation, and faith is man's part, the second part. God quickens us, moves upon us, and then says, "Hear, and your soul shall live." Happy the individual who can say, "I heard the Lord calling me, and I accepted Him as my Saviour, was buried with Him in baptism, united with the church, and have been on the Lord's side ever since."

II. The Realm of Sight.

"That which we have seen."

John tells us that he saw the Lord with his own eyes. One day John the Baptist was standing on the street corner talking with two men when Jesus passed by and they saw Him, and John exclaimed, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." They looked at Jesus, and that look changed them and changed the whole world for them. They never were the same men again, nor was the world the same world. They were changed, and they went forth to change the world by telling about the changeless one whom they had seen.

To doubting Thomas, who wanted physical evidence, Jesus said, "Reach hither thy finger and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed." Have you seen Him? Not with my natural eyes, but I have seen Him with the eyes of my soul. Who of us has not seen Him hanging on that rough old cross, and has not recognized that He was "wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities"? "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all." It was my transgressions, my iniquities, my sins that helped nail Him to the cross. He suffered for me. He died for me. He atoned for my sins; and every one of you can say the same things. I have never seen the Lord with my physical eyes, but I have seen Him as God's only begotten Son, dying for me, and have accepted Him as my Saviour and Lord. I, therefore, know something of that happiness the Lord spoke about when he said. "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed."

III. The Realm of Sensation.

"That which we have handled."

John tells us that he experienced the Lord in the realm of feeling: that he felt Him on the inside and on the outside, as he shook His hand, leaned upon His bosom, and felt the touch of the Lord's hand upon his shoulders.

When you open your heart's door and let the Lord come in, you will experience something that you cannot explain. You actually feel something. Christianity is a heart-felt religion. Christ changes our heart life. When He comes He finds a hard heart, but He makes it tender; cold - warm; rebellious - surrendered. Oh that we might feel Him and be able to sing:

O happy day that fixed my choice.
On Thee, my Saviour and my God!
Well may this glowing heart rejoice,
And tell its raptures all abroad.

Happy day, happy day,
When Jesus washed my sins away!
He taught me how to watch and pray,
And live rejoicing every day.

What are some of the things which this experimental religion does for us?

1. It gives us light.

We must ever remember that Jesus "was the true light which lighteth every man that come into the world." He lighteth every one who comes to Him by faith and then says: "Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid."

2. It gives us courage.

After we have experienced the new birth, or received Christ into our hearts, we shall be fearless. We shall have courage to live daringly, even dangerously, for Christ our Saviour and King. When the early disciples were told not to speak nor to teach in the name of Christ, they said: "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things we have seen and heard"; and they went right on with their God-given work. Stephen was stoned, James was beheaded, and Peter was arrested and imprisoned, but these tragic deeds did not keep the followers of Christ from going on with the work their risen Lord had bidden them to do. A great persecution was carried on against the church at Jerusalem, a persecution that scattered the disciples abroad, but they went everywhere preaching the Word.

We cannot have Christ and fear within our hearts at the same time. When Christ comes, in, fear goes out. When light comes in, darkness goes out. The consciousness of a genuine experience with Christ makes one courageous, daring, and powerful.

3. It gives fellowship.

If we are saved by grace through faith, we shall enjoy fellowship with the Lord and with His children. "If we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin."

There is nothing more beautiful and satisfying than true Christian fellowship. David said, "Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity." And after Pentecost, the saved ones came together and "continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers." They

stayed together, they prayed together, they are together, and they had beautiful fellowship together.

Fellowship -- what a blessed experience! Fellowship with God the Father, when we pray; fellowship with His redeemed ones when we come together to worship. It is hard for me to understand how any genuine Christian can wilfully and regularly absent himself from the fellowship of the saints in the house of God.

4. It gives assurance.

John says, "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren." Do you love Christ, your Saviour and Lord, and do you love all His children with a love that makes you supremely happy when you are meeting with them, praying with them, and planning with them for obeying His commands? Do you enjoy their fellowship? If you have had a real experience with Christ, you will be happy with God's children.

5. It gives a sense of responsibility.

"That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you." "This, then, is the message which we have heard of Him and declare unto you, that God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all." According to John, we are to publish, to announce, to tell to the world that which we have actually experienced. If we are conscious of a wonderful change in our lives, we are bound to tell what the Lord has done for us.

What this dark world needs today is an army of twice-born men and women who will let their lights shine for Christ; who will declare that God is love, light, life, and liberty, and that in Him is no darkness at all; that "if we walk in the light," our joy will be made full; and at the end of life's journey, we will be welcomed into our Father's big and beautiful home where we will live forever.

We must not only experience Christ, but we must also declare Him to the world. Yes, by light and life and lip and labor we are to declare that we have heard Him and seen Him and felt Him and been changed by Him; and what He has done for us He can and will do for others. Turn, therefore, from Satan who enslaves to the Saviour who sets free; turn from bewildering darkness to the fadeless light of Christ and go on unafraid; and turn today. This is the only way our joy in Christ can ever be full.