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Quarter-Centennial

—OF THE—

PITTSBURGH

R. P. Congregation.

1866 to 1891.

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OF THE

COVENANTER CHURCH.

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R. J. George, Prof. D. B. Willson, D.D., and the Rev. D. C. Martin. In all 243 communicants sat down at the Lord's table, while many looked on with deep interest, among whom were an unusually large number of little children. In the evening the following Memorial Sermon was preached by Dr. R. J. George.

Memorial Sermon.

THE HEAVENLY VISION.

BY THE REV. DR. R. J. GEORGE.

"I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision."—ACTS 26: 19.

Words are sometimes deceptive. This phrase, "the heavenly vision," suggests visions of glory, such as the shepherds had, when the flaming seraphim swept across the midnight sky and sang the rapturous song of the nativity; such as came to the beloved disciple in the isle of Patmos, when he saw a throne set in heaven, and he that sat thereon was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone, and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald." But Paul's "heavenly vision" was very different from these. He is telling again for the hundredth time the story of his conversion; and he describes it by this significant term, "the heavenly vision." It was "heavenly," because it came from heaven; it revealed heavenly things; it led Paul into a heavenly way; and through him it brought multitudes to the heavenly home.

Religion delights in reminiscence. A memorial service is profitable because the believer's life is *full of God*. It is made up of three things: what God has wrought *for him*; what he has wrought *in him*; and what he has wrought *by him*. There

are also crisis periods in every life, to which the mind delights to turn in the retrospective hours. Moses always went back to the burning bush, aflame with God. That was his heavenly vision. It involved all that followed: the miracles of Egypt; the dividing of the sea; the smitten rock; the tables of testimony. So Peter remembered the mount of transfiguration, and the woman of Samaria the well of Sychar, and Paul the road to Damascus. In the memorial services of this past week, you as a congregation have been going back to your heavenly vision, when God came into your life, and called you into your lifework.

This Memorial Sermon is not to be a biography of your first pastor, Dr. A. M. Milligan; you have had that over and over. Nor is it to be a history of your congregation; that has been told all through the week, with wonderful interest by those most familiar with it. Let it rather be the duty of this hour to seize upon this congregational life and character of both pastor and people, and hold it forth as a vision of God, and seek to interpret it as a divine plan, and purpose, and work, and result. I will first seek to unfold the significance of the heavenly vision as it came to Paul; and then in a brief memorial service apply the truths to your congregational life and history.

I. What did this heavenly vision include?

1. *It was a vision of truth.*

Paul was a learned man; educated, cultured, disciplined to think. He was familiar with the truths of history, of philosophy, and of the sacred Scriptures; and yet until he obtained this vision, he was ignorant of all saving truth. This vision of truth was threefold: first, the truth concerning *himself*; second, the *way of salvation*; and third, the truth concerning *the kingdom of Christ in this world*.

(1.) It was a vision of the truth concerning himself. Up to

this time Paul was a self-satisfied, self-sufficient, self-seeking, self-righteous Pharisee. His life revolved about himself. But his judgment of himself was utterly false and misleading. On his way to Damascus, a glorious light, above the brightness of the sun, flashed down upon him out of heaven. Its lightning flash sent him reeling to the earth, and was followed by the thunder tones of rebuke: "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" Then for the first time did Paul know the truth concerning himself. He learned that he was a sinner, helpless and undone; that he was a murderer in heart, and an enemy of God. This was the dark back ground of his vision of glory.

(2.) It was a vision of the truth concerning the way of salvation. There would have been little value in the discovery of the truth concerning his sins, if there had not been at the same time a revelation of the divine plan of salvation. What he was to declare to others, he learned first experimentally for himself; and this is declared in verse 18: "To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive the forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them that are sanctified by faith that is in me." This was the unfolding of the whole plan of salvation. When at the close of his life Paul declared, "I have kept the faith," (2 Tim. 4:7,) he did not mean that he had kept his personal belief in Christ, but that he had kept that *system of truth* which had been entrusted to him as a revelation, and which he had maintained and defended and preserved unimpaired to the end. This vision of the truth concerning the way of salvation he summarizes beautifully in the words: "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am chief." (1 Tim. 1:15.)

(3.) It was a vision of the truth concerning the kingdom of Christ in the world. This he expresses in verses 22 and 23:

“Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing, both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come; that Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should show light unto the people and to the Gentiles.” The remarkable thing here is this: that Paul, a learned and zealous Jew, had such a revelation given to him of the kingdom of Jesus of Nazareth, that he saw fulfilled in him all the glorious prophecies of the Old Testament Scriptures concerning the Messiah. Hence the Lord said to Ananias concerning him: “He is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel.” (Acts 9:15.) This heavenly vision was, first of all, a glorious vision of TRUTH.

2. *It was a vision of the personal Christ.*

Amazed at the strength of the grasp in which he was held, and awed by the majesty of the voice that spoke to him, Paul asked: “Who art thou, Lord?” and received the answer: “I AM JESUS.” This was the beginning of a personal acquaintance, which grew closer and closer to the end of his life, and which death itself had no power to interrupt. This was what made Paul’s faith so realistic. It did not rest upon abstract truth, but upon the living Christ, whom in this heavenly vision he saw. When Barnabas introduced him to the brethren at Jerusalem, he told them “how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him.” Oh, beloved, it is not strange that Paul turns to this meeting with the glorified Jesus, and calls it “the heavenly vision.” For him the cross of Christ was not a gilded crucifix to be worn as an ornament, but an *altar* upon which Jesus had died for him, and upon which he was ready to be offered as a sacrifice for Jesus.

It is related of a world-renowned sculptor, that he undertook to carve an image of the Saviour. After he had wrought for

years, he brought a little child into his studio, and asked him if he could tell who it was. The child looked at it thoughtfully, then said; "I think it is some great and good man, but I cannot tell who it is." Again the sculptor prayed, and wrought at his work for years; then brought another one to look upon his image, and the child gazed upon it with rapt vision and said: "I think it is the One who said, 'Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not.'" Then the great artist knew that his work was successful; he had made the marble speak. But afterward, when they asked him to carve an image of the goddess of Love, he absolutely refused, for he believed that in a vision he had seen the face of Jesus; and he said that one who had looked upon the face of the Lord, could not degrade his high art to carve the image of a heathen goddess. This was what made it forever impossible to degrade the life of Paul—he had seen the Lord.

3. *It was a vision of duty.*

Paul's "heavenly vision" was the vision of a LIFE WORK: "But rise and stand upon thy feet; for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness, both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee." (Verse 16.) Dr. Phillips Brooks, has a sermon entitled "VISIONS and TASKS." It is founded on the words, "While Peter thought on the vision, the Spirit said unto him, Behold, three men seek thee." The vision was that which taught Peter that "what God had cleansed he should not call common or unclean." The three men were the servants of the Gentile, Cornelius, coming to ask him to visit their master. The vision was for the sake of the men. Peter stood between his vision and his task. So it is here with Paul. This heavenly vision summons him to a life-work. The *world of truth* is on the one side of him, and

the *world of men* is on the other, and he is standing between. His life-work is to bring the truth to the men, and to persuade the men to accept the truth. Christ had laid hold of Paul for a purpose. The "heavenly vision," therefore, comprehends these three things—TRUTH, CHRIST, DUTY.

II. What did this heavenly vision require?

Evidently it demanded obedience: "*I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision.*" But what was the obedience to which it summoned him? Writing to the Galatians, the apostle explains what it was, and the prompt readiness with which he responded to it. "But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace, to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; *immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood.*" He was not like Festus who said, "Go thy way for this time, and when I have a convenient season I will call for thee;" nor like Agrippa, who said, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian;" nor like Moses, who demurred, saying, "O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant; but I am slow of speech and of a slow tongue." To the call of Christ Paul sent back the ready response, "*Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?*" From that moment, for him to live was Christ. His life had been full of plans. He was a born leader. He was conscious of his power. He was ambitious for self. Now everything was changed. *Self* was lost sight of. Christ was all and in all. "I follow after, if that I may lay hold of that for which also Christ laid hold of me." (Phil. 3:12). This purpose of Christ included three things:

1. *To declare the message of salvation to the perishing world:* "Delivering thee from the people and from the Gentiles unto whom now I send thee; to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God,

that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me." (Verses 17, 18.) As we read these words we begin to catch a glimpse of the glory of Paul's heavenly vision. There lies the poor, blind, lost race of men; *he* is "to open their eyes." They are plunging away into outer darkness; *he* is "to turn them from darkness unto light." They are held as captives under the power of Satan; *he* is to break that power and "turn them to God:" and all this that they might "receive the forgiveness of sins, and an inheritance among them that are sanctified." How it thrilled the apostle's heart to find himself with such a mission as that. "To me," he says, "who am less than the least of all saints is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles, the unsearchable riches of Christ." And surely it ought to be a glad service to carry the tidings of salvation to the perishing. Only last week it became my sad duty to carry a heavy message to one of our families. The husband and father had gone to Colorado, in hope of finding, in a change of climate, relief from a disease that was incurable by medicine. But he had gone steadily down, and was coming home to die in the bosom of his family. He was expected on an early morning train, and friends were at the station to welcome him; but the train pulled in, and pulled out again, leaving no passenger, and no message. A few hours after a telegram came announcing that he had died on the way and would be brought home in a casket. This was the message I was to carry to his waiting, expectant wife, and eight children. On my way I met his little daughter, three years old, his very pet, who every morning since her papa started away, had prayed to Jesus to bring him back. She came bounding to meet me, and giving me her little hand, she lifted her beaming face to mine, exclaiming, "Papa didn't get home this morning, but he is coming home to-night; and skipping on one foot and

tossing the other in childish glee, she danced along at my side. I felt as if my heart would break with the heavy message of death which I bore. Oh beloved, how different it is to bear the message of life, eternal life to the dying world. Forgiveness of sins! Victory over death! Eternal blessedness! Eternal glory! The apostle's soul thrilled to its inmost depths as he realized how this vision of his had to do with a world's salvation. "I determined not to know any thing among you save Jesus Christ and him crucified."

2. *To be a witness for Jesus Christ:* "To make thee a minister, and a witness, both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee." The testimony was to be progressive. Paul did not know to what it might lead. He was to bear testimony to all classes of men, "witnessing both to small and great." Some would not witness to the poor because of their pride; nor to the rich, because of their fear. But Paul was a witness to all. He was fearless and faithful as he stood before the learned men of Athens, and exposed their weak philosophies by the touchstone of death and eternity. He witnessed to Lydia; to the barbarians on the island; to Lysias, the chief captain; to Felix and Drusilla; to Festus and Agrippa and Bernice; at Ephesus, at Corinth, and at Rome. He not only bore testimony to all classes, but for the whole truth—"the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow." The cross was the stumbling block to the Jew, and foolishness to the Greek, but Paul declared it, saying, "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ."

3. *To suffer for his name:* "For I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake." (Acts 9: 16.) Christ does not deceive his servants as to the cost of following him. When he chose his followers on earth he told them distinctly what it would cost them to be true to him. So he did

with Paul. As he bade farewell to the elders of Ephesus he said: "And now, behold, I go bound in the Spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there; save that the Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying, that bonds and afflictions abide me. But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God." (Acts 20: 22-24.) And now he is standing before Agrippa, a prisoner in chains, pleading not for his life, but for his Lord; and he adds this testimony: "Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day." A little further on, his heavenly vision came to its completion. He was standing between two worlds, and looking backward and forward. The heavenly vision opened into the vision of heaven as he uttered the triumphal words: "I have fought a good fight; I have finished my course; I have kept the faith: and henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord the righteous Judge will give me at that day."

MEMORIAL ADDRESS.

Beloved Brethren: This quarter of a century of congregational history, of which the services of the past week have been a fitting memorial,

I. Existed first of all as a HEAVENLY VISION.

I can think of nothing more calculated to solemnize and exalt your minds to-night, than to realize this truth.

1. *It was so in the mind and purpose of God.*

The purposes of God, like the Hebrew Bible, are read backward. This is what we are doing in this memorial service. Dr. Bushnell has a sermon entitled "Every Man's Life a Plan of God." It is just as true that the life of a congregation is a plan of God. Jesus said: "To this end was I born, and for

this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth." (Jno. 18: 37.) Not less definite is the purpose of God in every other life. As you have reviewed these twenty-five years, the purpose of God in your existence must have become very clear to your minds.

(1.) It was seen in the character of the men who founded the congregation. The men who were laid as living stones in the foundation of this spiritual temple were prepared of God. These men were trained under the pastorate of the now aged and venerable Dr. Thomas Sproull, upon whose sainted face may be seen this night the reflected glory of another heavenly vision. We cannot forget with what a steady, consistent, unwavering fidelity, he stood for more than half a century, the uncompromising advocate of a covenanted testimony, which will only be finished when all this world is brought to the feet of Immanuel. To these men thus prepared, God gave a heavenly vision, just as he did to Paul—giving them glimpses of the possibilities of their work, "both of the things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee." Whereupon they "were not disobedient unto the heavenly vision."

(2.) It was seen in the character of the pastor God gave to them. God, having prepared a people for himself, prepared a pastor for the people. Dr. A. M. Milligan was a man of most distinct and marked individuality. There was only one such minister in our body. But there was a most marked correspondence between his qualities as a minister and their characteristics as a people. They seemed made for each other. It is not extravagant to say, that no other minister could have accomplished what he did—God and he. The bringing together of such a pastor and such a people is a revelation of the divine purpose in the work to be wrought. When Dr. Milligan's work was done, and he entered into his rest, the hand

of God was not less clearly marked in the choice of his successor. The congregation set its heart upon men of marked ability and eminent success, but whose after-course in life proved that in their convictions of truth and duty they were not in harmony with you or your life work. Had either of these men become your pastor, you would either have been diverted from the course hitherto marked out for you, or your energies would have been wasted in resisting his influence over your lives. But God did not permit his purpose to be thus thwarted. He led you to the choice of a pastor to whom he had given the same heavenly vision that he had given to you, and whose life was devoted to the same glorious cause to which your congregation had been consecrated from the hour of its birth. Under his noble leadership you are following with unwavering lines, in this crucial hour of the church, the banner that is inscribed "For Christ's Crown and Covenant." In view of these facts, you must believe that you are working out a divine destiny.

II. Your heavenly vision embraced the same elements as Paul's.

1. *It was a vision of truth.*

There was given to you a banner "to be displayed because of the truth." Besides the common doctrines of Christianity as held by all evangelical Christians, you have a heritage of truth that is distinctive; truth that is most intimately connected with the honor of Christ, and the coming of his kingdom in this world. This is as truly a part of the heavenly vision given to you, as it was to Paul on the way to Damascus.

2. *Yours was also a vision of the personal Christ.*

Your reminiscences have revealed how wonderfully near and intimate has been your fellowship with Christ as a personal friend. This was a most distinctive characteristic of Dr. A. M.

Milligan. All of you will recall his rapt devotion in prayer, and how he talked with God face to face, as a man talketh with a friend. It is this feature of his religious life which I would seek to revive in your memories. My mind recalls a little incident of his boyhood which I heard him relate when I sat with you under his ministry. It was this: He had gone out gunning, perhaps for the first time. As no game appeared, he resolved to inquire of God, and knelt by a log to pray. Presently a quail, seated near, called to its mate. Rising from his knees, by a well directed aim he brought it to the ground. Quickly seizing the dead bird, he ran home, filled with awe at the thought that he had been so near to God.

It was my privilege to travel with him in soliciting funds for Geneva College. On one occasion we were benighted; and in an unknown mountainous road were overtaken by a most terrific thunder-storm. It was a night of peril. We could not see each other's face in the dense darkness, but his voice was calm and trustful, as if he had been sitting by his family on a Sabbath evening. A mighty peal of thunder would shake the everlasting hills; and when its reverberations ceased I would hear the sweet music of his voice repeating,

" A powerful voice it is that comes
Out from the Lord most High.
The voice of that great Lord is full
Of glorious majesty."

Again the wheels of the vehicle would drop down until we seemed about to be hurled over the precipice; and as they rose again to the level road I heard these words: "For he shall give his angels charge over thee to keep thee in all thy ways; they shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone." (Ps. 91: 11, 12.) That night I learned to know him as I never had known him before.

It was my privilege to hear his last sermon, preached when

we were in New York in the interest of the College, which lay so near to his heart. His text was, as one who had lived in such intimacy with Christ, "I know that my Redeemer liveth." Oh! I wish I could help you to see him as he looked that night. Truly we beheld his face as it had been the face of an angel. His voice was weak, but his tone was triumphant. He seemed to stand on the pavement of sapphire stones.

In harmony with the character of your first pastor has been the life of the congregation. You have had a very remarkable history in your communion with God. Those seasons of great trial through which you have passed, were seasons of great grace. Well might you be called *Israel*—for as a Prince you have wrestled with God and have prevailed. And you might call your sanctuary *Peniel*, for here you have seen the face of God.

3. *Yours was also the vision of duty.*

(1.) To carry the gospel to all people. Yours has been both an evangelistic and a missionary congregation. The gospel has ever been proclaimed with power from your pulpit. Your Sabbath school, your Mission Sabbath Schools, your Chinese School, your provision for the instruction of a large mute class—all bear testimony to your Pauline zeal in seeking the unsaved. Your pastors have stood as the champions of missionary enterprise to the freedmer, the Chinese, the Indians, and to Syria—in every field and to all races of men; so that to-night you, as a congregation, are in closest sympathetic touch with the laborers in every mission field in home or foreign lands.

(2.) To be witnesses for Jesus Christ. Paul was called not only to be a minister, but also a witness; and so also are ye. Dr. Milligan was a true witness-bearer. His bold testimony against human slavery came near winning for him the martyr's crown. When John Brown was sent to the gallows, he dared

to avow himself his friend. But the crowning work of his life was the testimony he gave for the royal claims of King Jesus. If there is any one thing to which this congregation of Eighth Street, Pittsburgh, is sacredly pledged by all the past, it is to be loyal witnesses for Jesus Christ. TRUTH, CHRIST, DUTY --these three.

By the sacred memories of the past. I charge you to be true to your HEAVENLY VISION. I cannot close more fittingly than by recalling to your memory these touching words, from the letter written by Dr. Milligan to you, his dear people, when, having decided to submit to the surgeon's knife, he prepared for death: "I wish to bear my testimony to the truth and importance of our whole Covenanted System, and my confidence that substantially it will ultimately prevail. Although in my boyhood I shrank from the cross, yet in my manhood, I have gloried in it. And I trust, whether I am spared longer or shorter, whether I am permitted to stand in my lot and see it triumph or not, *that my congregation*, like a fortress frowning defiance, with its banner for Christ's crown bravely floating, will stand as a monument to the fidelity of him that founded it, till it catches the first rays of the rising Sun of Righteousness, and flashes back the glory of the kingdom of light and of God's dear Son."

During the war of the Rebellion, when northern soldiers were being starved in southern prisons, one avenue of escape was sometimes offered to them, viz., that they should renounce their allegiance to their country and enlist in the southern army. It is related that in one of these prisons there was a young soldier boy, on whose immature manhood the hard prison life told severely, so that he was reduced to a skeleton, and was nigh unto death. One day he was seen tottering toward the barracks where the recruiting office for the rebel army had been opened. An old soldier recognized him, and

surmising his purpose, he crossed his path, intercepting him. "Charlie, where are you going?" he asked. "Oh," said the poor boy, "I cannot endure this any longer. My strength is all gone. I am going to die if I do not get out of this dreadful prison. I will never see my home again, nor look upon the face of my mother. I cannot stand it. I am going to enlist in the rebel army." The old soldier took the trembling boy in his strong arms, and drew him close to his heroic soldier's breast. Then he drew forth from his pocket a little silk flag, the stars and stripes of the union; and holding it before his eyes, he said to him: "Charlie, can you forsake the flag?" The young soldier took the little banner in his emaciated hand; he pressed it to his thin, white lips, and the tears gushed from his eyes. Then handing it back to the old soldier, he said: "No, no; I cannot forsake the dear flag of my country." Then tottering back to his place *he lay down and died.*

Oh, beloved! beloved! in this testing hour of our church's history, when so many have grown weary and faint-hearted in bearing the cross and the reproaches of our Lord; when they are casting aside their testimony which, as witnesses for King Jesus, and as soldiers of his cross, they had solemnly sworn to maintain and defend;—if in this crucial hour the temptation comes to any of you to abandon your profession, and to prove "disobedient to your heavenly vision," then would I hold up before your eyes this banner inscribed "For Christ's Crown and Covenant," bought with his own precious blood, and baptized in the blood of thousands of his faithful witnesses and martyrs, and I would press upon you the question of the old soldier: "Can you forsake the flag?" Oh, no! no! NO! rather like the true hearted boy, go back to your place, and if duty demand it, yield up your life rather than yield the truth; assured of the fulfillment of his promise, "*Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.*"

And now the day is done. While I speak these closing words another *heavenly vision* passes before my eyes. I am thinking of the departed—the dear old Pastor, and the many sainted dear ones who from this congregation have gone to be with God. You are naming them over now in your hearts. And as we think of them, and their faces come before us in memory, the heart grows tender; a strange home-sickness comes over us, and we are ready to cry out like Peden at the grave of Cameron, “Oh to be wi’ Ritchie”—“Oh to be with them.” Weep not; the separation will not be long.

“Though wild is the tempest and dark is the night,
 Soon will the day-break be dawning;
 And the friendships of yore shall blossom once more,
 And we’ll all meet again in the morning.”

The concluding services on Monday evening, May 18, were well attended. Four addresses in all were delivered this evening—two by ministers of the Covenanter church, one by a representative of the United Presbyterian church, and the closing address by a representative of the largest body of the Presbyterian faith. All these addresses, except the last, are given here. The address of Dr. I. N. Hays was a high tribute to the fidelity of the Covenanter church in general, and specially to the Pittsburgh congregation, for fidelity in maintaining sound doctrine, and for zeal and activity in promoting every good work bearing on the welfare of the nation. It is to be regretted that this address cannot be given with the other three.