

SOUTHERN
PRESBYTERIAN PULPIT:

A COLLECTION OF SERMONS

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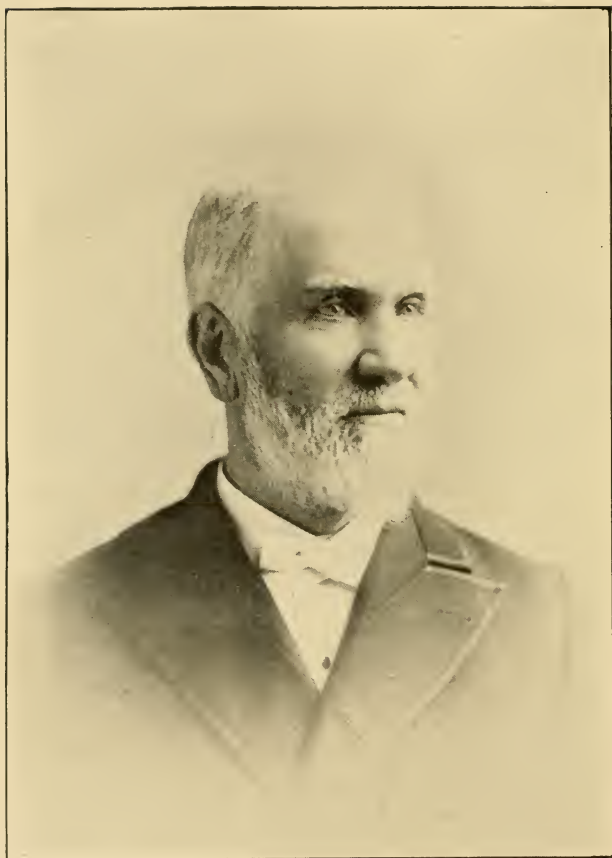
MINISTERS OF THE SOUTHERN PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH.

Richmond, Va. :
THE PRESBYTERIAN COMMITTEE OF PUBLICATION.



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1896.

PRINTED BY
WHITTET & SHEPPERSON,
RICHMOND, VA.



WHY BELIEVERS SHOULD "NOT FEAR."

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"Fear not, I am the first and the last : I am he that liveth and was dead : and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen : and have the keys of hell and of death."—REV. i. 17, 18.

THE Apostle John was a prisoner on the island of Patmos for the sake of the gospel when he received this wondrous revelation of Jesus Christ to the churches. His companions in the apostolate had all passed away, and in a little while he, too, must go hence. From the rocky crags of Patmos, he could look across the beautiful waters of the Ægean, and see the coast line of Asia Minor, and almost to the sites of churches planted by apostolic hands. For him, the outlook was dark and dreary, and doubtless this last of the apostles had his seasons of fear and despondency.

He was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks he saw one walking like unto the Son of man. He was clothed in full priestly garments, and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength. The vision was so majestic, so overpowering, that John fell at his feet as dead ; then the glorified Redeemer laid his right hand on his servant, and said unto him, "Fear not." And through John he has said to every believer, and says to us to-day, "Fear not."

Years before, this august being had appeared in visible bodily presence, and with audible voice had spoken to Saul of Tarsus, and had chosen him to be a witness unto all men of what he saw and heard. Now once more he appears to the beloved disciple, who leaned upon his breast, and delivers a message, not only to him, but, through him, to all believers until the end of the age, when he shall return in glory from the skies. "Fear not," he says to John; "Fear not," he says to us.

Finite, incomplete, and dying, with eternity before us in such a world as this, we cannot pass through life without many fears.

One person has an intense dread of physical pain, he shrinks with horror from the mere thought of being laid upon a bed of sickness to be racked, week after week, with pain. Another is haunted with apprehensions of poverty; he fears that he will lose his place, his office, his occupation; that his income will be cut off; that he will be left, in his old age, helpless and penniless. Another is constantly looking forward with the most dismal forebodings to the hour of death. How shall he meet that dreadful enemy? How shall he pass safely through the gloom of the grave? or else, he is thinking of the dread issues of the invisible realm, and the awful realities that lie beyond the veil.

Let the weak, fearful, desponding child of God take courage; to every dread and anxiety and apprehension there comes to him from his Lord and Master, from his Friend and Brother, from him who has encountered every enemy, who has endured every possible human agony, and who has come off conqueror and more than conqueror over them all, "Fear not: I am the first and the last: I am he that liveth and was dead: and behold,

I am alive forevermore, Amen, and have the keys of hell and death.

In every congregation there are some weak and wearied ones, some tried and tempted ones, some heavy-laden, burdened ones, some doubting, desponding ones. To all such the Lord himself sends a word of cheer and comfort; and then he gives the reasons, and they are all found within himself, why believers should "fear not." Let us state and analyze the four reasons given by our Kingly Priest why his people should be of good courage:

I. "*I am He that Liveth*"; or, *I am the Living One*. These words do not simply mean that he who spake to John was at that time a living person, for this he must have been to be able to speak at all. They mean infinitely more than this: it is a claim made by this august person to the possession of an underived, an independent, and an eternal life.

Of all the mysteries in the universe, nothing is more inscrutable and mysterious than life. What it is, who knows? or, who can tell? Of its essence we know absolutely nothing. Life in the flower that to-day is and to-morrow dies; life in the animal, the man, the angel. We know something of the manifestations; nothing whatever of the essence. Attempt to grasp, to hold, to analyze it, it eludes you and disappears.

Science tells us that all life comes from life, "*omne virum, ex vivo*." There is no such thing known in the domain of science as spontaneous generation. Out of the dead there never has come life. All life, therefore, that we see and know in this sphere must come from preëxisting life in some higher realm and sphere of existence. Our lives are finite and dependent; there must therefore be some fountain of life, uncreated and independent, out of which all streams of life do flow.

In this Scripture, as elsewhere in the Word, Jesus Christ asserts his preëxistence and his eternity, "I am the first and the last and the living one. Before Abraham was, I am. Abraham rejoiced to see my day: he saw and was glad. In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. All things were made by him, and without him was not anything made that was made." In him was life, and here we reach the infinite and eternal fountain of all finite and dependent life.

The names, titles, attributes, and works that are proper to God, and that are ascribed to God, are also given to Jesus Christ; if the Scriptures of both Testaments do not clearly teach his supreme Godhead, then language is incapable of expressing that thought. He is the origin and end of all things; the creator and upholder of all beings and all worlds; the life and the light of men; the resurrection and the life: the Alpha and the Omega; the first and the last; the prince of life, who is, and who was, and who is to come.

This glorious being, with knowledge that is omniscient, with power that is omnipotent, holding all forces, all agencies, all beings, and all worlds in his hand, says to every timid, frightened, weary and heavy-laden child of God, "Fear not, I am your friend, your brother, and all the exhaustless treasures of heaven and the Godhead are pledged for your safety; I will make all things work, I will make them work together, in harmony, in co-operation, for your good." Surely if God be for us, we should not fear anything that may be against us.

II. *And was Dead, or became Dead.*—This is the second reason why the believer should not fear. It is not merely that his Saviour is divine, and therefore able to keep him from falling, and to present him faultless before the throne; but this power of almightiness is

directed by inextinguishable love, a love higher than the heights, deeper than the depths, that even death could not chill nor destroy. It is as if the Son of man said to John and to us, I, who am divine, who have all power, have loved you unto death, in death, and through death. I became dead for you, because I loved you.

The Godhead of the Son could not die, and so the word became flesh and dwelt among us. Godhead united to itself a true body and a reasonable soul, and in the God man Christ Jesus, this human soul and body could be separated one from the other, and this was done, and this was death, and thus the living one became dead. He said I have power to lay down my life and I have power to take it up again. It was because he was God that he could offer up himself, lay down his life and take it up again; because he was man, he could die.

Did this most remarkable person, this living one really become dead? This is a question of fact, and must be decided by the testimony of the witnesses.

The witnesses say, he gave up the ghost, or literally he breathed out his soul. Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit. As God, he separated his human soul from its body, and sent it to his Father God.

When the soldiers came to hasten the death of the three condemned men, who hung upon the cross, they found Jesus already dead, at which they marvelled, and did not break his bones. When one of the soldiers thrust his spear into his side, near the heart, then came out not blood only, but water and blood. His body was taken down from the cross by his friends, who prepared it for burial, which they would never have done, had not life been extinct. The whole New Testament record affords the most conclusive evidence that the

Christ of gospel history did indeed become dead. He that liveth was dead.

But why should this death rather than any other death afford grounds for courage and comfort? Why should the death of a powerful friend be given as the reason why the believer should fear not? Ordinarily, we feel far more secure in the presence of a living than a dead friend. The live man can help, comfort and sympathize with us. The dead man can do us no good whatever; a living dog is better than a dead lion.

It would have sounded strangely to the ears of Israel if it had been said to them, "Moses is dead; fear not." How bewildering to the seven thousand in Israel who had not bowed the knee to Baal had Elisha said, "Elijah is dead; fear not." How incomprehensible to the Corinthians had Titus said, "Paul is dead; fear not." What encouragement to the Hollanders to announce to them the death of their beloved William; or, to the French the death of the great Napoleon; or to Americans the death of Lincoln; or to Confederates the death of Jackson? These words, as applied to any other person than to Jesus of Nazareth, would be filled with bitter mockery. Not so when he uses them as a ground of comfort to his disciples.

I died for you; I took your place; I bore your sins in my own body on the tree; I paid the price; I endured the penalty; I magnified the law; I obtained redemption. The accursed cross, the sacrificial death, the atoning blood—these give peace, and comfort, and courage, and strength to the soul of the believer. To every whisper of Satan's malignity, to every thunder of the law, to every alarm of conscience, to every foreboding of the future, to every apprehension of the judgment, to every fear of hades, the Lord Jesus lays his pierced hand on

the believer and says, "Fear not; I am the first and the last and the living one, and I became dead for you—died that you might live."

III. "And *Behold, I am Alive Forevermore.*"—This presents a third reason for the believer's confidence. This Son of man who speaks to him, not only became dead, but he passed through the gates of the grave with the tread of a conqueror; he went down into the regions of the dead, and bound the strong man armed, who had the power of death and who kept his goods. He spoiled the principalities and power of darkness, and came forth from the realms of the dead clad in the radiant glories of the resurrection life.

His Godhead wrought in the grave and lifted his mortal body up into immortality and brought back his sinless human soul from his Father's bosom to reinhabit his glorified human body, and thus he became the first-fruits of all them that slept. "And now, Christ being raised from the dead, dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him." The person who speaks to John is not merely the Living One, the first and the last, not merely the Son of Mary, but the glorified Son of man, with his now exalted humanity united eternally to his Godhead. He can, indeed, sing, "Oh, death, where is thy sting? Oh, grave, where is thy victory?" for his corruptible has put on incorruption, and his mortal has put on immortality. After death has reigned with resistless power over the race for four thousand years, his conqueror has at last been found—the great victor has at last appeared. Man is, indeed, redeemed, and the resurrection is no longer a hope, but a fact and a reality.

Alive again, and alive forevermore. The dead who had been brought back to a mortal life in the flesh were

not alive forevermore, for they had not experienced the transforming power of the resurrection. The daughter of Jairus, the son of the widow of Nain, and Lazarus, died again; they were not made alive forevermore. But here is one who can never die again, because he has conquered death, and, therefore, over him death hath no power.

The hand laid with such regal majesty and yet with such infinite tenderness on the believer, is one that bears the print of the nails—a hand that was nailed to the cross, but it is also a hand that burst the bonds of death, and is now clothed with all power in heaven and on earth. Surely, we need not fear when guided and defended by him, who not only died, but who is alive forevermore.

IV. “And *have the Keys of Hell and Death*,” or, as in the latest revision, “the Keys of Death and Hell.”—This is the fourth reason given why the believer should “not fear.”

The key is the symbol of ownership, of possession, of legal power and authority. Ordinarily, the person who has the key of a house is the owner of the house—has rightful possession and authority in it and over it. He can open and shut the doors, go in and out as he pleases, admit or exclude persons according to his own good pleasure. When a contractor builds a house and his work is completed according to the agreement, he delivers the keys to the lawful owner. The key is evidence of ownership. The Lord Jesus Christ, as risen and glorified Son of man, has the keys of death and the grave. He is the rightful owner of the whole invisible world, because he humbled himself and became obedient unto death. God hath highly exalted him and given him a name above every name, and invested him with

power and authority over all worlds visible and invisible. Why should the believer fear when his Lord and Saviour has supreme authority over death and all realms of the unseen world?

There are two objects of fear to almost every human being; there is the dread of death and the dread of the issues that await us after death. Let us look at these in the order of nature or in the order of the Canterbury version. Death first, then hades, the world of the dead. Death is emphatically the king of terrors; there is something fearful and repulsive in death. He always comes with a sting, and is seldom, if ever, a welcome visitor. Men may deny the fact of sin; they cannot deny the fact of death; and yet God always connects the two. Men die because they are sinners. Sin is the cause of death. That which invests death with such appalling horror is sin; the sting of death is sin.

To leave this world forever, to look no more upon the glad sunlight that fills and floods the heavens and the earth; to see no more the sky bending in beauty over us; to hear no more the song of birds, the murmur of the sea, the happy voices of childhood; to leave these homes of ours forever and forever; to say farewell to the loved ones of earth; to leave these bodies of ours, these tabernacles of our souls, in the cold and silent grave. This, this is death. Can we say less than that it is an enemy, and the sum and culmination of all earthly ills? The grave is chilly, cold, cheerless, damp, dark, dismal, and yet it is the home for these bodies of ours. What millions and tens of millions have gone down into its silent embrace! The mighty kings and warriors of old who filled the world with terror and alarm; statesmen who led their people in paths of greatness and renown; poets who sang so sweetly that all men rose up to call them

blessed. These, with the unknown and unnumbered multitudes, the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the noble and the base, all, all have passed away into the grave and to the pale realm of shades. The vast procession, that started in Eden with the death of Abel, has moved on without a halt or a break, silently and sadly, to the tomb. It is moving to-day, and at each tick of thy watch one soul passes into the unseen.

It is vain to say that we do not fear death. Some say they do not, and, perhaps, they may not, but surely such a dreadful event in human existence should not be lightly esteemed, and should produce in all thoughtful minds salutary dread. But the Christian need not fear to die! There is one who is his friend, who has overcome death and who holds the keys of the grave and the unseen world, and who says to him: "Fear not."

The gates of death cannot open for you one moment before the appointed time, and he, who has the keys and opens the doors, will go with you into the darkness and conduct you safely into the light and glory on the other side.

It is appointed unto men once to die, and after death the judgment. It is not death, only, that men fear, but what is beyond—hades, that vast and eternal world into which all shall enter, where each one shall dwell forever.

Hades with its unearthly inhabitants, its disembodied spirits, its angels and demons, and spirits of the just made perfect, its eternal retribution, its worm that never dies, its fire that is never quenched, its ceaseless torments, its accusing conscience, its hopeless and helpless despair. Who will befriend us there?

To every alarm of the believing soul there comes the re-assuring word, "Fear not, I have the keys of all

the doors of this vast and unseen world." His feet as burnished brass tread down his and our enemies, his voice as the sound of many waters compels the obedience of the unearthly inhabitants of that infinite realm, and from the glory of his countenance, shining as the sun in his strength, none can escape.

Angels, principalities and powers are subject to him, and he is King of kings, and Lord of lords, and this glorious person is our steadfast and unfailing friend. He loves us with an intense, a divine, a personal love, and with his almighty hand laid upon each believer, he says, "Fear not." My Christian brother, this is the message sent you, nay brought to you, by your Lord himself. Why should you fear, when all things are yours, whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours, and ye are Christ's, and Christ is God's. You may have come this day to your Father's house, weary and heavy laden, pressed down with many anxieties, and doubts and fears. Listen, I beseech you, to this voice from Patmos, "Fear not; I am the first and the last: I am he that liveth, and was dead; and behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death."

Perhaps you can sing with Mrs. M. C. Edwards her little hymn, entitled "God Cares for Me:"

"I sat in the door of eventide,
 My heart was full of fears,
 And I saw the landscape before me lie,
 Through the mist of the burning tears.
 I thought to myself the world is dark,
 No light, nor joy I see,
 Nothing but toil and want is mine,
 And no one cares for me.

- “ A sparrow was twittering at my feet,
With its beautiful, auburn head,
And it looked at me with dark mild eyes,
As it picked up crumbs of bread:
And said to me in words as plain
As the words of a bird could be,
'I am only a sparrow, a worthless bird,
But the dear Lord cares for me.'
- “ A lily was growing beside the hedge
Beautiful, tall, and white,
And it shone through the glossy leaves of green
Like an angel clothed in light;
And it said to me, as it waved its head
On the breezes soft and free,
'I am only a lily, a useless flower,
But the Master cares for me.'
- “ Then it seemed to me that the hand of the loving Lord,
Over my head was laid,
And he said to me, 'Oh! faithless child,
Wherefore art thou dismayed?
I clothe the lilies, I feed the birds,
I see the sparrow's fall,
Nothing escapes my watchful eye,
My kindness is over all.' ”