

## VISITATION OF THE SICK

Who are the sick? It is not a needless question by any means. We have known a wider opening of the hand follow upon the answer to the question, 'Who are the poor?' Certainly, 'the poor' are a larger class than many suppose, for they include institutions, as well as persons – all who must lean for help on the sympathy and help of others.

Who, then, are the sick? Perhaps it may open our hearts wider if we say, in reply to this question, they are all who, through any infirmity, are laid aside from active work, including frail and aged ones, and all who are under the cloud of sorrow. At the same time, those who live without God and without Christ in the world should know that they are not the persons who are spoken of as 'the sick' in the Word of God. It is God's sick ones to whom our attention is directed, and for whom our care is asked – members of Christ, in regard to whom he can say: 'In visiting them, even the least of them, you visited ME' (Matt. 25:36). The careless, godless, unconverted sick are undoubtedly to

be sought out and visited; but he who is 'Saviour of all men, but specially of those who believe' (1 Tim. 4:10), in his peculiar love to his own, enjoins us, while doing good to all men, to care especially for those who are of the household of faith' (Gal. 6:10).

These sick ones, then, are so far commended to us for their comfort. We are to visit them. But a question meets us – for, it is written, 'Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction' (Jas. 1:27). Is not this statement extravagant? It seems to place the *visitation of the sick* in an extraordinary position. For surely this duty, however well performed, is not in itself even a certain evidence of the visitor's personal godliness. It is important, very important, on this account, to know the true meaning of that verse. The key to it is found in the word 'religion', a peculiar word in the original. It is *threskeia*, a term which speaks of the performance of Divine offices, or devout attention to the outward service of God; so much so, that Trench, in his *Synonyms of the New Testament*, explains it by *cultus exterior*, the external ceremonial or form by which the devout person is led to express his inward feeling. It is, in short, the attractive foliage and blossom on the tree, but in no sense whatever is it the root or the sap.

Our way is now clear to ask, How we are to proceed in carrying out this Visitation of the Sick?

It is well to notice that in Scripture 'visit' has, in one connection, attached to it as its object, *punishment*; and in another, *kindly help*. It is, of course, in this latter sense we use it when speaking of visiting the sick. There is ever in this use of it the suggestion of bringing help to the person in some form. In Genesis 50:24, 'God will surely visit you to bring you out of this land.' In Job 7:18, 'What is man that thou shouldst visit him every morning?' In Jeremiah 29:10, 'I will visit you and perform my good word toward you.' In Zephaniah 2:7, 'The Lord shall visit them and turn away their captivity.' In Luke 1:68, 'He hath visited and redeemed his people.' When the tears of the widow of Nain are wiped away, 'God hath visited his people' (Luke 7:16). How beautifully do the words of Psalm 65:9 express the effect of God's kind providence in springtime to the dry land:

Thou *visitest* the earth, and waterest it;  
Thou dost greatly enrich it with the river of God.

And may we not suggest that even thus spiritually our visiting the sick might always 'water and enrich' till, as verse 13 says of the valleys and the pastures, we leave them so blessed, that

They shout for joy; they also sing.

A minister in Dublin, some years ago, made a call on one of his flock, a lady, who was feeble and rather desponding. When asked very tenderly about herself, her reply was, 'Weak – oh, so very weak!' And then she added that she had been that day much troubled in mind because she had found it impossible to govern her thoughts in meditation and prayer, so much so, that 'she had kept *going over the same things again and again.*' 'My dear friend,' replied her pastor, 'there is provision in the Gospel for you here. Our Lord Jesus Christ when his soul was exceedingly sorrowful, three times prayed, and spoke *the same words.*' In a moment her face lightened up. Her trouble was gone.

In similar circumstances, Dr. Stoughton, of London, entered the room of one sinking under pulmonary disease. 'How are you feeling today?' 'Weak – oh, so very weak!' He looked at her pale sad face, and, with half a smile on his own face, repeated two lines of a hymn well known to her:

When I am weak, then I am strong;  
Grace is my shield, and Christ my song.

The effect was remarkable. Her countenance changed, lighted up with a gladness that never left it, but shone from it even in death.

'I am useless now – quite laid aside,' said a devoted Christian man in a time of sickness to a friend who

came hoping to speak a word in season. The sick man was calm and patient. The words of his friend, however, seemed to aid him in no way, till, in going away, he said, with true feeling, 'You think you lie there useless; but the sight of you today has taught me what will send me on my way with stronger faith and confidence.' The idea of having helped another at once touched a chord in the heart of the sick believer, who was left in his chamber with his cup brimming over.

And it is true that the sick do help the whole in a multitude of ways. Let us tell them at times what their patient faith and joyous submission teach to those who come to help, but who go away helped by them. One reason for the long-continued and sore affliction of God's own may be specially to preach to us the lesson of Divine sovereignty, and to draw forth our sympathy more and more, that our own souls may become more like the heart of our Great High Priest.

Again, might we not sometimes suggest to God's suffering ones, who lament their utter inability to be of use for God's cause, that possibly they in a very special manner are giving one illustration of that text, 'To the intent that now *unto principalities and powers* might be known by the church the *manifold (polupoikilos)* wisdom of God' (Eph. 3:10). Angels who minister for the heirs of salvation may often be sent to the sick not to help, but to learn from them what they themselves can never know experimentally – viz., how

the redeemed can pass through the hottest furnace, leaning on the Beloved. The same Holy Spirit who upheld the humanity of Christ on the cross, soul and body (Heb. 9:14), is upholding that suffering member of Christ's body; and angels 'look into these things' with intense interest. He is a teacher of *angels*!

In connection with this, it may be useful to remind the sick and feeble saint that *suffering* borne in Christ's name is real *service*. They think their soul is left empty, and they blame themselves for their unprofitableness. But falling in with the will of God is service, whether in the form of active doing, or passive submission and waiting. One day a pastor came to the bedside of a sick saint, and found her dull, low, sad. She did not use to be so; why was she so today? 'Oh, I have not been able since I awoke this morning till now to pray one petition, or offer praise, or even think over one verse.' The pastor had heard from the doctor that her trouble had taken a new turn, which had shaken her whole frame, and so he said, 'The Lord did not wish you today to pray, or praise, or remember any passage of Scripture.' 'What did you say?' 'The Lord today has taken from you the power to pray, or praise, or think to any purpose; he wishes you just to lie still and look up to him.' At once the cloud passed away. 'Oh, then, he is not angry! I can look to him as before.'

It is, at the same time, oftentimes seasonable to remind God's sick ones, that they must not give way to

*selfishness*. The Lord expects them still to care for their fellowmen, and for the interests of his kingdom on the earth. It would be well for them to forget themselves in their remembrance of their Lord and his people, and of his afflicted in other places. Was not this the example left to us by our suffering Master?

If we were asked for some hints as to what is requisite by way of preparation for visiting the sick, we might suggest,

1. *The state of mind in which Christ was whenever he effected a cure*. It was this: '*Moved with compassion*' (Mark 2:41). Very often are we told of him going forth to help, '*full of compassion*.' With us there is a constant temptation to neglect this preparation. We are often compelled to go hurriedly to the sickbed; we are obliged to turn aside all at once from some other engrossing duty; we have scarcely had time to collect our thoughts for this more trying work. Yet we must be calm, and we must be patient, and we must be compassionate and kind, if we are to be really of use. Perhaps we might more readily find ourselves in the true frame for such visits, even when pressed beforehand by other business, if we on all occasions regarded visits to the sick as *opportunities of preaching and applying the Gospel*. We do not go to gossip, nor to speak of generalities; we do not go to relieve our consciences by repeating a text that seems appropriate, and to offer up a prayer. We go to carry the living water

of the Gospel to these hungry ones who cannot come to the public ordinances. Let us aim on all occasions to give them a fresh thought about him who 'once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, to bring us unto God.' Should we not aim never to leave the room without pointing the sick one to the Lamb of God? Sometimes we will tell of his death, sometimes of his resurrection, sometimes of his intercession, sometimes of his coming again, and how he will then give the resurrection body, and wipe away all tears for ever.

2. Generally, *we should be brief*. It vexes a weak believer to find himself unable to follow the long prayer, or the many verses you read. Literally 'a word' spoken in due season may be our best way to be helpful; and that word, being a crumb of the Bread of life or a drop of the Water of life, has wondrous virtue in it, because it is the Word of God, which the Holy Spirit delights to use. A few fervent petitions and some short passage, like a live coal from the altar, will fill the soul of the infirm and sick and suffering with gladness.

There was once a godly elder, very dangerously ill, his face so swollen under erysipelas (a bright red rash) that he could neither see nor speak, nor could it be known whether or not he had the power to hear. The pastor used to come during the fortnight of his illness almost every day, doing no more than stand by him repeating a verse and praying over it. When that good man recovered, he most warmly thanked the pastor,



telling him he heard every word each day, and how it helped him as if a voice from heaven spoke, when he could not call up a thought otherwise, adding that the very brevity of the interview was wonderfully in accordance with his feelings.

On another occasion the same pastor was asked to visit a bereaved widow, who was like Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, in that 'she trusted in God'. Before leaving he asked, 'Do you ever ponder that name of God – the Judge of the widow?' He explained that it spoke of God as managing the widow's affairs, attending to her interests, just as Samuel, Gideon, and the Judges of Israel did in behalf of the nation. After prayer, with a face of astonishment and relief, she said, 'You do not know how that one word has lifted off all my burdens!'

Nor was it with less joy that an intelligent but somewhat desponding saint caught at the words of Isaiah 27:3: 'Do you know,' he was asked, 'where this is? The Lord says of His vine, and every branch in it of course, "I will water it *every moment*.'" That *every moment* was enough to feast that now happy man for many days to come.

3. *In visiting unsaved persons*, there are errors we are apt to fall into. Partly from the desire to deal tenderly with them as sick ones, we are prone to be superficial in our conversation. It may be we see they are weak, not able to listen as they did in health, and so we excuse

ourselves for not trying to probe their conscience far; and so we are somewhat too easily satisfied. Oh how we need at such times to be 'full of the Holy Ghost,' and to have him bringing very near to us that eternal world into which the dying one is so soon to enter! Let that warning of Ezekiel 13:22, ring in our ears: 'Ye have strengthened the hands of the wicked, that he should not return from his evil way, by *promising him life.*' At such a moment, a vague hope, an indefinite expression of assent to the Gospel cannot surely satisfy us. Can a man lean his weight upon a cloud? Or upon a shadow? No, he must see his bare foot resting on the Rock of Ages.

The writer will never forget the account one gave of his interview with an unsaved but anxious soul, to whom the doctor had told that death was close at hand – probably would be there in two hours. 'Oh,' said he, 'how I sought to make the way of salvation plainer and plainer. In a few moments that soul's eternity would be settled. With what trembling I sat by and spoke! Was not this Paul's state of mind on ordinary occasions when pressing home the Gospel? 'I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling' (1 Cor. 2:3). At such times how unspeakably precious is it to 'speak to the Breath' (Ezek. 37:9), for he gives life to the dry bones, and can at once take the things of Christ and show them.

We had to do with another case. The medical attendant thought it right to assure his patient that in a few weeks, as far as man could see, time would to her be for ever gone. This aroused her from spiritual torpor, and that very afternoon began an intensely earnest inquiry, 'What then must I do to be saved?' The Holy Spirit was there, and salvation came to that soul.

4. We should not forget to pray *for the body as well as the soul*. Occasionally, if much concerned about the soul of the sick one, we may omit to show sufficient sympathy for the state of the body. Christ never overlooked this matter. He cared for the seven disciples' cold and hunger that morning at the Sea of Tiberias, before he said a word to their conscience. He fed the 5000 almost as soon as he had taught them the things of the kingdom. 'You might next time try not to forget to ask the Lord for my bodily relief,' was the gentle rebuke given one day to the writer when bidding goodbye to a distressed man.

5. Do we pray for the sick in full *expectation of an answer*? Do we pray for them at home? Do we pray in the congregation for them, not as a mere duty, or because it will gratify the invalid, but because we surely look for an answer? Few pastors who have so prayed and watched but can tell of remarkable answers. As the servants of the Lord, are we never afraid that our *omissions* may yet trouble us sore – at least, may cause us sad regrets? We may look back and feel as

Livingstone did in the case of one over whom he thus laments: 'Poor Sebituane, my heart bleeds for thee. What would I not do for thee now? I will weep for thee till the day of my death. Alas! Alas! Sebituane! I might have said more to him. God forgive me! God free me from blood guiltiness! I might have recommended Jesus and his great Atonement more.'

But here we stop, though our subject might lead us on to many not unimportant points which we have not touched upon. We should like to have inquired into that most memorable passage in Job 33:23, where Elihu brings before us 'the Messenger, the Interpreter,' in the chamber of one chastened in his bed with pain, drawing near to the grave. We should like to have referred to the mystery of pain in the case of so many of God's people. Nor less should we have found it profitable to take up the case of Gaius, the friend of the beloved disciple, and of Epaphroditus, and Timothy, and Trophimus, not one of whom in their sickness got relief by miracle, though so dear to two of the greatest apostles. There must be some great blessing in sickness; (1) To the sick believer when his field lies fallow; (2) To those who wait on him (the Lord) and inhale the fragrance of the bruised spices; (3) To angels, of whom we spoke as here learning something of the manifold wisdom of God; and (4) beyond question, the day of Christ will show an immense revenue of glory to God.