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# The Message of the Epistles.

## The First Epistle of Peter.

BY THE REVEREND THOMAS YATES, D.D., UPPER NORWOOD, LONDON.

AN intense personal interest attaches to this Epistle. It is true that its authorship is disputed, but the weight of external evidence is with the Early Church, with whom, according to Eusebius, the Epistle was 'undisputed.' Internal evidence raises certain difficulties, especially that of language, and it may be that the easy and scholarly Greek of the writing was beyond the Galilean fisherman. If Silvanus, the bearer of the letter, was also its scribe, freely expressing what was given to him out of the mind and convictions of Peter as his message to the Jewish Christians of the Dispersion, it is not the only or the most conspicuous instance in the New Testament of Peter's use of an interpreter. It need not be doubted that it is none other than the disciple and apostle Peter, known to us in the Gospels, whose mind is opened to us in this letter. It is a human document of the first order. It is soaked in autobiography. Knowing what we do of its writer, there are things in it most moving to reflect upon in the light of his personal story. The eye lights upon such places as this. He writes, 'Be all of you towelled with humility,' and we cannot read this without remembering the foot-washing in the Upper Room at the Last Supper, in which this man had his conspicuous part. We know his forward self-confidence, and remember what tragic things were to follow. 'Be sober,' 'be watchful,' 'be steady,' he writes again, and we recall the impulsiveness and impetuosity which brought humiliation and disaster upon this man who utters the admonition. There is this also; 'Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another; love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous: not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing; knowing that ye are thereunto called,' and we know that these counsels come like gold tried in a furnace of personal experience, in which much dross had to be cleansed away. Again, look at this golden passage: 'The God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered awhile, will perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you.' The man who said that these things should be wrought in the believing souls of his suffering fellow-Christians was a man who knew how such things could be. They hold

the conviction of one who knew what God can do with unpromising people, because God had done it with him, who had needed, not only grace, but manifold grace. He had been as fluid, unstable, disappointing as man could be, and there were chapters in his story of which he could hardly bear to think. But Grace would not let him go, and his letter is telling of what Grace did with him, and telling it with a humble and wondering joy.

He is now sending, out of his own experience and his living faith, a message to Christians of his own race who are in the shadow of fear, and are already tasting suffering. The sum of it is, 'Let those who are suffering by the will of God trust their souls to their faithful Creator, and continue to do right.'

He is not intent on doctrinal treatise, but would exhort to patient steadfastness in faith and hope, and to holding on with all their might, under God's grace in Christ, to the Christian way of living. He is at no point far away from the immediate and practical. Dr. W. H. Bennett says of this letter that it and James are to the Epistles what the Sermon on the Mount is to the Gospels.

But all this practical counsel is in a setting of things mightily believed, and ringingly proclaimed. The man, and what grace had made of him, are the best interpreters of his message, and we may well keep hold of the personal and experimental clues.

I. The message of this Epistle concerns an absorbing and commanding allegiance. Jesus Christ is everywhere and everything in it. It opens with a peal of great bells. 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. By his great mercy we have been born anew.' Onward from that doxology you are never away from Jesus Christ. He is the 'bearer of salvation,' the 'chief corner-stone' of God's spiritual temple, the 'Shepherd and Bishop of souls,' the 'sinless Author of salvation,' the 'Son of God.' He bore the sins of men, and died to bring the unrighteous to God. He has redeemed them by His blood. He is risen and on the throne.

In the light of what Christ is, these persecuted people must view their sufferings. In the light of Christ they must see what shadows their fears are. In the light of Christ they must see how they may,

and how they can, bear themselves in this present world.

There is one summit passage, described by Dr. Denney, as the most decisive expression in the Epistle. 'It is by Him that you believe in God' (1<sup>21</sup>). These were people who had believed in God all their lives. But to see God in Jesus Christ is so sufficient and final that it is as though they had never before believed at all. As Dr. Denney says: 'The final faith in God owes its *differentia*, that which makes it what it is, its specific and characteristic qualities, to Him. The God in whom the Christian believes is the God who is Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God who gave Him up for us all, who raised Him from the dead, and gave Him glory. There could not be such faith in God, or faith in such a God, apart from the presence of Jesus, His atoning death, and His exaltation to God's right hand; it is only as we believe thus in Jesus that we can have the new Christian faith in God.' 'God would be a word of another meaning to us but for Him.'

Peter rests all his counsels and admonitions, and all his hope, on God revealed in Jesus. For his persecuted and harassed brethren life may be staining the white radiance of eternity, clouding it with fears, darkening it with cruelties. But through Jesus Christ shines crystal clear the divine radiance, and in His light they may live and walk, endure and count it joy.

II. The message of this Epistle reflects the consciousness of an available and present Power. Once more we may read the man in the message. If any man needed to be convinced and sustained by the dynamics of redemption it was this man. His temperament left him open to be constantly apprehended of Giant Despair, and much cudgelled. He was for ever needing some one to heal him of his self-despisings. In the Upper Room at the Last Supper he had felt that all things were possible to him near Jesus, and under the contagion of His strength. He was to explore the meaning of those strange words of Jesus about giving His body and blood in the bread and the cup. He was to explore it through deeps of despair and sorrow. Read again the triumphant doxology with which the letter opens, and you will know how the sense of a living Power came to him. This man has right to speak to others of a power available in Christ, a power of defence under their perils and alarms, a power to keep them clean and strong in daily living. The grace of God in Christ Jesus is the greatest and most immediate of all the practicalities. Dr. Moffatt points out that 'the grace of life' is Peter's

equivalent for Christianity. God is to him the God of all grace, and Christians are to be efficient stewards of God's varied grace. Grace is bounty given for the ends of service.

The rising of Jesus from the dead is central here—the spring of this conscious empowering for life. 'By him'—that is Jesus—'ye believe in God'—*this* God, who raised Him from the dead—in *this* God who did this mighty thing.

The cross of Jesus is no longer to be seen as the triumph of human malignity over pure goodness. It is victory, not defeat; it is life, not death. The sufferings of Jesus are not a ghastly memory, but an abiding example. The Holy Self-giving Love of God, shown in the Cross, is also the secret of Power, able to unlock the gates of death, and to turn the worst ill and the last enemy into instruments of His holy Will and Purpose. Here is Power now available to the last jagged edges of our human need.

Let them not be surprised at the fiery trials, as though some foreign thing had befallen them. They are sharing in what Christ suffered. Let them continue in right doing as He did, leaving them an example, and, as He did, trust their souls to their faithful Creator. The God who raised Jesus from the dead is a God who cares for moral values. Truth, goodness, beauty, love have the might of this God behind them. They get mishandled as Jesus was on the Cross. They have to face antagonisms which seem to crush and destroy them. But they will not go under finally. Out of the wreckage, the patience and power of God finds a new opportunity, and a new point of departure. In the end of the day God comes into His own.

The God who raised Jesus from the dead cares for persons as well as for causes and values. He watches well His children. Therefore, 'Let all your anxieties fall upon Him, for His interest is in you.' This is the message for the overborne individual soul. It is a great thing to know that God cares for moral values, and for the high causes of the world. But the poor human creature who has troubles within and without, wants to know, 'Does He care for me?' He is left frozen if he knows only of God's care for causes, and nothing of His care for persons, except as they serve great ends. There was Jesus, valiant, faithful, exposing Himself to the last hazard that He might be true to God's will and purpose. Is He to be allowed to go down? Will He be left with a spear thrust through Him, uncared for, so long as truth be served? If He is to be left a poor derelict, then

Nicodemus and Joseph, who at least cared for and rescued His dead body, were more godlike than God. But Jesus, as He comes in radiance on the first morning of the week and meets His friends with His 'All hail,' is God's answer to our fears. Cruel hands had broken Him. But the hands of God held Him, the only hands which can break the bars of death. And we are all in those same hands of God.

III. Here is the ground of the mighty hope, the message of which rings like a trumpet through this Epistle. Christ risen is Christ ascended to the throne of power and glory. To this heavenly world His followers belong. Sojourners and pilgrims, they live and travel by the hope of blessedness. But here and now, shadowed by threats and hurt by persecutions, they are to be counted blessed. 'The Spirit of glory and power, the Spirit of God Himself, is resting upon you.' 'In the fiery trial,' says Dr. J. H. Jowett, 'the Operator is the Glory-spirit, the Maker of glory. As though He were controlling the hardships and trials and converting them into ministers of beauty and grace. The

immeasurable waters of Niagara generate electrical power which a man may use to engrave a name upon a jewel; and the Spirit of Glory can so employ these waters of sorrow as to write our Father's name upon our foreheads. . . . Look at the character of the Operator, and you will be filled with rejoicing.'

In one strange and difficult passage the writer follows this hope into the unseen, and into the shadowed world of 'spirits in prison' (3<sup>18-20</sup>). It is a passage which laid hold upon the imagination of the Early Church. It put 'the Harrowing of Hell' into Christian poetry, and, as Miss Underhill says: 'Some of the greatest of the mediæval painters have found in that story the perfect image of triumphant love. It is as if the charity self-given on Calvary could not wait a moment, but rushed straight to the awaiting joy of releasing the souls of men.' No interpretation of the passage is free from difficulty. But over the obscurity of it there shines the truth that, yonder as here, Christ is the Hope-Bringer. The final word is therefore, 'Steady, then!' Stand in that grace.

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## Literature.

### UR EXCAVATIONS: THE ROYAL CEMETERY.

MESOPOTAMIAN excavation may be said to hold to-day the keystone position in the ethnic and cultural studies that deal with the ancient Near East. For it is in Mesopotamia that several important lines of investigation converge at present. It is easy, therefore, to appreciate the importance of *Ur Excavations*, vol. ii.: *The Royal Cemetery*, by Mr. C. Leonard Woolley, M.A., D.Litt., with chapters by the Rev. E. R. Burrows, S.J., Professor Sir Arthur Keith, M.D., F.R.S., Dr. L. Legrain, and Dr. H. J. Plenderleith, in two volumes—Texts and Plates (Publications of the Joint Expedition of the British Museum and of the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania to Mesopotamia; £3, 3s. net).

In these two massive and finely printed volumes Dr. Woolley presents the fruits of his five years' labour (1926-1931) on the predynastic and Sargonid graves of Ur. He does it in a remarkably lucid style and with a modesty that is not unnatural with scholars who know their subject thoroughly.

In the first volume, which contains the text, the graves and their contents are described in detail, and in the second we have nearly three hundred plates and charts, many of the former being beautifully produced in colour. The report deals with no less than eighteen hundred and fifty graves, a number of which date from 2500 B.C., at which time Ur was a flourishing city with many thousand inhabitants. The cemetery was originally a royal burial-ground, but about 3200 B.C. it was abandoned as overcrowded. Some centuries later, however, in spite of being covered with accumulations of rubbish, it was again brought into requisition, this time not for royalties but for slaves, foreigners, and similar classes of people. It continued to be used more or less down to and including the Sargonid period, and was only abandoned finally about 2400 B.C., when it was included in a development scheme for the city. In the earliest tombs (the royal ones) ample evidence is provided of human sacrifice as a part of the royal obsequies. As many as seventy or eighty attendants might accompany their king to a new existence in the unseen world, not unwillingly but proud of the honour and