

THIRTY-FIVE YEARS REVIEW OF MR. WELLS'S MINISTRY

TO THE EDITOR OF "THE EARTHEN VESSEL."

MY DEAR BROTHER IN THE LORD,

On receiving your letter this morning, I was startled by its contents. It was the first intimation that I had received of the departure of my long-known and greatly-esteemed minister and intimate friend, Mr. James Wells. The information produced a remarkable effect upon my mind, and it was some time before I could fully realize the fact. On reflection, however, I was enabled to bless the Lord that He had so graciously taken His servant to Himself; that He had delivered him from the shackles of mortality; from the pains and sorrows of this present world; from, the sufferings of which he has been sorely the subject during the last sixteen months of his life. Living as I do, nearly 300 miles from the metropolis, business or inclination calls me there occasionally. It has been my practice for some years on these occasions to visit the Surrey Tabernacle. It was so that I was there on the 9th of November, 1870, and heard Mr. Wells preach on the Wednesday evening, the last sermon he ever did preach in the Surrey Tabernacle. I had a very pleasant interview with him in the vestry after the service. He told me of his weakness. I reminded him, however, that the Lord had already granted him a good long lease of life, strength, and usefulness, in which he acquiesced. I did not think at that time that I should never see him again in the flesh.

He is gone! A holy solemnity pervades my soul while I meditate on his departure from a world of wickedness and woe; from scenes of sorrow and of sin to the regions of ineffable gladness and delight; to the realms of happiness and peace. He has fought a good fight; he has finished his course; he has kept the faith, and is gone to receive the laid-up crown of righteousness. He has entered into the heaven he so often told us of; enjoys the salvation he proclaimed so many times with pathos, propriety, and power. Without a veil between does he behold the savior now; that blessed savior whose glorious person and whose finished work it was his constant habit to exalt. If ever mortal man was commended to my conscience as a man of God, and as a messenger of mercy, it was emphatically James Wells. It is more than thirty-five years ago when, deeply concerned about my state as a sinner in the sight of God, but entirely ignorant of Gospel truth and the way of salvation, I entered the old Surrey Tabernacle (No. 1), and heard from the lips of our departed friend the gospel of Jesus for the first time in my life. I had doubtless heard it before with the outward ear, but never until then with a circumcised ear, nor received it into a circumcised heart. God Almighty clothed the Word with His own omnipotence; it came "not in word only, but in the demonstration of the Spirit, and with power." If he be not a minister to any soul under heaven besides, he was a minister of righteousness to me. At this moment, I have no more doubt about the sovereign operations of the Holy Spirit in bringing the ears of my soul into living relation to the mouth of his ministry than I have of the Spirit's working with the inquiring African worshipper to bring him to the reception of the testimony of Jesus from the mouth of Philip the evangelist and servant of the Lord. From the first until now, by the instrumentality of the departed, has mine ear been nailed to the door-post of gospel truth and ordinances as with a nail in a sure place. Although,

like others, have I been exposed to much temptation to depart from the truth, yet “grace has kept me to this day, and will not let me go.” A tempting devil, a corrupt heart, and an alluring world would have been a little trinity of foes too mighty for a weakling such as I; but, by the love of God shed abroad in the heart, the fear of God in the soul, and the faith of the Gospel in exercise, I have been mercifully preserved even until now. No man can know the blessedness of a Christian life but him that possesses the life of Christ in his soul, and is favored at times with holy communion at the throne of grace. How has my soul been enraptured by the scriptural eloquence of the Lord’s now called-home servant! Transfixed with a holy fascination have I hung upon his lips, whilst in heavenly strains he has been discoursing on the great and soul-ennobling doctrines of God’s Word. Whilst on the one hand he descanted melodiously on the unity of the Divine essence, how grandly did he expatiate on the scriptural and unanswerable doctrine of the glorious Trinity!

One of his favorite themes was the complexity of the person of Christ, the God-man Mediator, the one who can lay hands upon both the offended and the offender: “the Child born,” “the Son given” “the Ancient of days,” and yet “the Infant of days.” The departed servant of God was great and decided upon “Sonship.” Here I confess I was not able to follow him. He contended that Sonship was founded in complexity. I could never see it; therefore, went no further in believing even what my dear friend taught than I could conscientiously receive. I think he ever was the Son of God, and ever must have been, even had there been no complexity in other words, He was the Son of God prior to His incarnation, with this exception, I was favored to embrace all that he preached, and received from his lips the truth in the love of it.

What a sweet theme for him and his hearers, too, was the doctrine and experience of the atonement: the harmony of the Divine perfections of Jehovah made known through this: how God can be just and can yet justify the sinner; how sin is forever put away by the shed blood of the slain Lamb; in a word, the whole range of gospel truth was the field in which he loved to roam.

The departed was a great man. He was great in memory, and this enabled him to make the subjects of his varied readings his own. The Scriptures, from Genesis to Revelation, were, so to speak, at his fingers’ ends; whether for exhortation or for illustration, the right passages at the right time were at hand. He was thus enabled to expound one scripture apparently dark by another self-evident and plain. His correct memory enabled him to avoid doing violence to the Word by incorrect quotation, and to reproduce the sacred text in its integrity. He was great in intellect: he had a capacious intellect, capable of grasping a subject comprehensively in all its details, and mentally arranging the whole matter of a long discourse without written notes of any kind. He was great in power of expression. His conception of ideas was rapid, their birth immediate, and clothed at once in a vigorous Saxon dress, in language clear and unmistakable, free from all ambiguity. He was a clear thinker, therefore, a clear speaker. Friends to the subjects of his discourses, as well as those who might perchance differ from him in opinion, were equally able to understand his meaning, and few indeed was the number of his many hearers who could sit listlessly beneath the sound of his manly utterances. His tongue was as the pen of a ready writer. Gospel matter from his fertile mind flowed like sparkling water from a living fountain, cheering and refreshing to thousands of living souls. He was great in originality: in this he had few equals. He never travelled the beaten path of commonplace remarks. His method and his manner were peculiarly his own. His discourses were full of points and edges, and salient withal, reflecting the vivid lights struck out as it were of passages ordinarily considered obscure.

Often during a discourse there would be an almost constant succession of lightning flashes constituting a kind of steady flame by which the benighted pilgrim's pathway became illuminated, his whereabouts revealed, his faith encouraged, and his hope increased. He was great in consistency of character. As a preacher he was consistent with the Word of God and with his own conscience. He did not preach freewill and human power at one time, and free grace and God's power at another. He always placed the sinner ministerially where the Scriptures place him testimonially, and always exalted "Jesus only as the sinner's friend." In the pulpit as well as in the parlor, in private as well as in public, his walk and conversation were exemplary. He was not like the finger-post by the road side which points out the way to the traveler but moves not a step in the way itself. He walked in the way he preached. He was truly a leader of the people; he went before them in the way as did the Eastern shepherds before their flocks. His ministry was a voice, saying, "This is the way, walk ye in it." Happy thousands can testify of their joy and pleasure in having been by his instrumentality brought into that new and living way. He was consistent as was manifest in his unswerving adherence to the truth, which, like its author, is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He was bold and unflinching in opposition to wrong, denouncing error and superstition in all their multifarious forms, whether in doctrine, experience, or practice. It is no disparagement to say that he was naturally possessed of wit and humor in an unusually high degree. In his private associations he often times used these powers for the amusement and edification of the company of believers amongst whom he found himself. He never stooped, however, to anything low, to anything beneath the dignity of a Christian and a minister, and when he did indulge in sallies of humorous observation, there was always an intelligent application to some facts by which instruction was imparted to those around him. He was the subject of many innocent eccentricities; but these were blended with more numerous amiable excellencies, which rendered him a valued friend and much-coveted companion. He was great in gifts. He was not unconscious of the gifts that God had bestowed on him for the benefit of the church; but, by an industrious stirring of them up by exercise and prayer, he made a faithful use of them, so that he became a workman that needed not to be ashamed, because he could do his work well. He had the gift of penetration into hidden mysteries, not content to be a gatherer of straws which float upon the surface; like the diver for precious pearls, he went into the depths to bring up treasures that lie beyond the view of the casual observer. The gift of acquiring languages was his. By persevering industry and close study, he succeeded in acquiring a fair knowledge of the sciences; but all these, to him minor acquirements, he subordinated to the one great absorbing object of his existence, the preaching of the everlasting gospel of the blessed God. He was a great man, made so by grace and gifts, by natural talent and acquired wisdom. He would have excelled in any secular calling had his lot been so cast. He would have been great in any position; for great men are great anywhere and everywhere, whilst little men must small remain wherever their lot is cast; for,

"Pigmies are pigmies still, though placed on alps,
And pyramids are pyramids in vales."

But our brother has done his work, and is gone to his rest, that rest that remains for the people of God. Let us not sorrow on his account; but rather rejoice in the prospects of meeting him again in heaven, to sing with him the never-ending song of salvation to God and the Lamb. How soon did he follow our esteemed friend Foreman, and other gracious men that went before. It seems to me that the church can ill spare them; but,

“When one Elijah dies,
True prophet of the Lord,
May some Elisha rise,
To spread the truth abroad.”

Newcastle-on-Tyne. March 14, 1872.

So. prays yours,

I. C. JOHNSON.