

DO YOU BELIEVE THE SCRIPTURES?

Edward Payson (1783-1827)

And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.—Acts 1:9-11

HAVING...briefly considered our Savior's ascension with its attending circumstances and effects, let us next inquire what we may learn from it.

First: We may perhaps learn from it whether we do or do not really believe the Scriptures. To ascertain this, let me ask each of you whether you really believe that the events that we have been considering actually occurred? Do you really believe that a Person Who appeared to be only a man, but Who called Himself the Son of God, was seen alive for forty days successively after He had been put to death as a malefactor?—that at the expiration of this time, He was seen in open day by a competent number of witnesses to rise from the earth, and without any visible effort or means of support, to ascend until He reached the region of clouds, and that there a cloud received Him and concealed Him from the eyes of beholders? Do you really believe that while these beholders were still gazing after Him, two angels appeared to them in a human form and said, "This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven"? Do you believe that these events actually took place in the world that we inhabit, and that they were seen by human beings like ourselves? If you do not believe this—if it appears to you more like a tale, a fiction, or a dream, than a reality—you do not believe the Bible. Or if it appears to you like an event that took place in some other world than this, or among a different race of beings from ourselves, you do not believe the Bible. But perhaps you will say, "We do believe that all these things actually took place in our world." Then, surely you regard them as most interesting and important events; you read the book that contains them and other wonderful facts with deep interest, and you are affected by its contents, as you are affected by other important truths that you really

believe. If not, you do not believe the Scriptures, whatever you may profess. Your understandings, perhaps, assent to these truths; but in your hearts, you do not believe them. These remarks, however, are too general. We must be more particular, and our text enables us to be so, for we may learn from it,

Secondly: In what manner those who really believe in Christ's ascension to heaven, and its attending circumstances, will be affected by it. It is, I presume, universally acknowledged that facts and events we really believe affect us in nearly the same manner, though not in the same degree, as if we saw them. For instance, if we really believe that a parent or child, a husband or any other dear friend, has died in a distant place, it will affect us almost, though not, perhaps, quite so much, as if we actually saw him die. If, then, we really believe the events that have been described, we shall be affected in some measure as if we had seen them. How they were affected, you have just heard. They worshipped Christ. If, then, we believe that He ascended to heaven, there to reign until His second coming, we shall worship Him, that is, we shall address to Him prayers and thanksgivings. They spent much time in the temple blessing and praising God. If we believe what the gospel relates of Jesus Christ, we shall do the same—surely we cannot refrain from often praising God for providing such an advocate and intercessor for us in heaven.

Again: Those who witnessed our Savior's ascension were excited to fervent, united, and persevering prayer. And surely, if we really believe that Jesus Christ has ascended into heaven, there to appear in the presence of God for all who call on His name, to obtain blessings for them, and to prepare a place for their reception when they leave this world, we shall be led to call on His name with frequency and fervency, and to unite with His praying people. Such are some of the effects that will result from a real belief of the events that have been described. If, then, these effects are not produced upon you, my hearers, it will prove that you do not believe the volume in which they are recorded. And if you, my professing hearers, who are assembled to commemorate the Lord Jesus Christ, have faith in present lively exercise, you will be affected in some measure, as you would have been had you witnessed the events that have been described. They will be presented to your minds and hearts in the vivid colors of truth and reality; this house will appear to you like the Mount of Olives, and you will almost see the Savior, the symbols of Whose body and blood are before you, rise from that table as from the grave, and re-ascend His native heaven. God grant you all faith to see this. You will then

go from this house, saying to yourselves and to each other, we have seen strange things today.

But this is not all. If you believe that two angels really appeared to the disciples and foretold the second coming of Christ in the clouds of heaven, then, of course, you must believe that He certainly will come, come as He declared, to judge the world; for those heavenly messengers would not assert a falsehood. And if it was a most wonderful and surprising thing to see Him ascend alone to heaven in the form of a man, what a sight it will be to see Him descending from heaven in the form of God, shining resplendent in all His Father's glories, and surrounded by thousands of thousands and ten thousand times ten thousand angels and archangels, while at His summons all the dead arise and stand before Him in judgment.

This will be a spectacle indeed, such a spectacle as the world never saw. But if the Bible is true, we shall all actually see this spectacle, for its language is, "Behold he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him" (Rev 1:7). And if you believe the Bible, then you believe that you will see it, believe that you will be actors in it, believe that you, as individuals, will stand before the judgment seat of Christ, and receive your doom from His lips. And do you believe this? Are you living as if you believed it? If you do believe it, you are surely making it your great, your chief concern to be prepared for Christ's second coming, prepared to meet your Judge in peace. And is this your great concern? Are you living like accountable creatures who expect to be tried by the Word of God, and to be rewarded according to your works? If not, where is your faith, and what is your belief in the Bible? [It is] nothing but a dream, nothing but a cold, barren faith, which being "without works is dead" (Jam 2:20). And if God has clearly revealed truths that are thus calculated to affect you, and the only reason why they do not affect you is that you do not believe them, then surely you are without excuse.

To conclude: subjects like those we have been considering may be of admirable service to every Christian, if he knows how to use them aright. You are all aware, my brethren, that this world is your great enemy, that worldly-mindedness is in some form or other your besetting sin. You are also aware that this world has many scenes and objects that to our misjudging minds appear splendid, many that appear imposing, many that appear attractive and interesting. By these scenes and objects your passions are often excited, your affections entangled, your minds thrown into a feverish state, which is exceedingly unfriendly to progress in religion. The great question is, how

shall the pernicious¹ influence of these worldly scenes and objects be counteracted? I answer: The world to come—the unseen spiritual and eternal world—has scenes incomparably more grand, more imposing, more interesting than any that this world can exhibit. All that is wanting, then, is to bring them clearly before the mind. Let it be a part of your daily employment to do this. Enter your closet, open the Scriptures, and fix on some one of the many interesting objects that they reveal: the translation of Elijah for instance, or our Savior's transfiguration, or His death, or His resurrection, or His ascension to heaven, or His second coming. Fix the eye of your mind attentively on the object selected; spread it before you with all its attending circumstances; call in the aid of imagination, or that power that forms images of absent or invisible things; pray for faith, and continue to meditate, if possible, until you obtain some clear, realizing apprehension of the scene before you, or until your hearts are suitably affected by it. Then, when the mind is filled and the heart occupied by such an object, you may, relying on the divine protection, venture out into the world; and all its wealth, its pomp, and its pleasures will appear contemptible indeed, compared with the scenes that you have been contemplating.

In this way, and in this alone, can you maintain a successful combat with the world, and finally obtain a decided victory over it. For until your minds are preoccupied by spiritual objects, the world will find them empty and rush in upon them like a flood. Let me beseech those of you who have not already done it, to make trial of this method during the month that you have now entered. Be not discouraged, should your first attempts prove unsuccessful; but persevere, and instead of faintly remembering Christ at His table only, you will remember Him almost constantly; you will feel in some measure as the apostles did, when they returned from witnessing His ascension; and fortified by the powers of the world to come, you will be enabled to tread the present world under your feet.

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¹ **pernicious** – subtly dangerous; highly destructive.