**THE WAY EVERLASTING: SERMONS BY JAMES DENNEY**

**03. KNOWLEDGE, NOT MYSTERY, THE BASIS OF RELIGION by JAMES DENNEY**

*"The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things that are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law."*

*Deuteronomy 29:29*

The secret things spoken of in this verse are in the first instance the destiny of the Jewish people. After the law has been proclaimed, the lawgiver enlarges upon the consequences of obedience and disobedience; he pronounces blessings on those who keep it, and curses on those who disregard it; in particular, he threatens the most terrible judgments upon the moral scepticism which laughs at the promise or the menace of God, and confidently takes its own way as though God had never spoken or would not keep His word. He declares frankly that we do not know how or when the promises or threatenings will take effect: that is the secret thing which belongs to God alone; but the nation is under law to God nevertheless, a law which is perfectly well known; and it is this which determines its duty. Ignorant as men are of the course of providence, of the means which God will employ to react against rebellion and crush it, of the quarter of the sky in which the thunder clouds of His judgment will accumulate; ignorant as they are also of a thousand things which at once solicit and baffle the mind, and by doing so seem to disable it for action, there is one thing of which they are not ignorant - the law of God. This has been revealed to us and to our children for ever. It is an unchanging and infallible guide through worlds and ages yet unborn. And it is given to us that we may do it.

The fortune or the destiny of nations is always an interesting subject for speculation. The story of the rise and fall of powers like Babylon, Egypt, Tyre, Carthage, Rome, Venice, fascinates the historian and the moralist; even for the thoughtless it is a magnificent picture, and for the wise it is a revelation. It verifies the word of God which speaks to us in this chapter; it shows us in a thousand ways that vice is the worm at the root of a nation's strength, and that righteousness alone makes nations great. Often we meet with speculations on the future of our own country or of its contemporaries and rivals. We are invited to see a greater Britain grow continually greater, until a federation of English-speaking peoples controls the affairs of the world, with a pleasing consciousness of having only obtained their due; or to see the worn-out British race, stripped of its ships, its colonies and its commerce, sinking to an inglorious end. These speculations are precisely what is meant here when we read, the secret things belong unto the Lord our God: as far as we are concerned, the book of the future is sealed with seven seals. But our duty is not affected by that. Though we cannot tell the fortunes of the nation beforehand, we can tell on what they depend. We know that obedience to the law of God has the promise of the future. We know that industry, sobriety, justice, charity, are the strength of the community; we know that pride, fullness of bread, and abundance of idleness, are its death. We know that no nation can prosper in drunkenness and un-cleanness, in luxury and insolence, in the deification of might and the contempt of right; and this knowledge is given for our guidance. It never goes out of fashion. It is as true now as in the days of Moses - as true in Britain as in Israel - as true in the capitals of modern commerce as in Carthage or in Venice - as true of nations as of individuals, that only those who do the will of God abide for ever.

It is permissible to generalize this truth, and to point the applications of it which are pertinent to ourselves. Religion, it means, does not depend on the things we are ignorant of, but on the things we know. Its basis is revelation, not mystery; and it is not affected by the fact that mysteries abound. Little as we know, and much as we are ignorant of, our responsibility for what we know is unqualified. I do not think it is possible to overstate either the dimensions of our ignorance, or the urgency of our responsibility for acting up to what we know. There is always a temptation to let the first of these depress our interest in the second; ignorance - sometimes erected into a principle and designated Agnosticism - falls like a heavy frost on morality and religion. It takes the pith and virtue out of them. Now what Scripture here teaches is that this is wrong. The most perplexed and baffled man, the man who has most certainly come to the limit of his insight and who is most appalled by the opaqueness of the future, knows something; and it is on his action in view of that knowledge that his relation to God depends. He is not to be tested by what he does not understand in the infinite scheme of the universe, but by how he faces the responsibility imposed on him by what he knows. A few illustrations will make plain what this means.

Many of us are interested not only in our country, but in the Church, and much as we should like to see into the future must acknowledge that it is very impenetrable. How long can the Churches go on upon the present footing, and in their present relations to each other? What prospect is there of closer relations between them? Do such closer relations depend in any degree on all Christians being gathered into one organization, - or may they come to pass through the discovery that modes of organization are matters of comparative indifference, and that Christians may be thoroughly one, in the only sense in which Christ is interested in their unity, though they are organized in many different and independent ways? Are the masses of the population which are at present outside all the Churches going to be brought within the existing organizations, or will the Gospel perhaps take root among them in ways unexampled hitherto, developing new types of thought, of organization, and of moral effort? Will Christ establish His ascendancy upon the earth in ways no one has dreamt of? Will the words He spoke of the temple at Jerusalem - "There shall not be left one stone upon another " - be spoken of our Churches? or what will their future be? These are simply questions which we cannot answer. They are like the question the disciples put to Jesus after the Resurrection: "Lord, dost Thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" The answers belong to the things which the Father has kept in His own power. But our ignorance does not in the least affect our duty, and when such questions rise in our minds, we have only to recall how Jesus answered the disciples: "Ye shall be witnesses unto Me". Even if the future were revealed to us beforehand it would not be intelligible: it is only as we grow up to things and live through them that they enter into our minds. I once heard a missionary say, "I don't know how India is to be evangelized, but I know we are evangelizing it"; and we must say something similar of our own country. We cannot predict and cannot effectually plan the future of the Christian societies in Britain; but if we use them to penetrate life with testimony to Jesus, we may be sure they will not fail, and that no future will leave the soul without a home.

Cognate to this is a question which has also exercised many minds and has had serious practical consequences - the question of the future of those who die without having heard the Gospel. It was once believed in the Church that the heathen who die in their heathen state perish everlastingly, without exception and without hope. Every time the clock ticks, it was said, a soul passes out of time into eternity, and all over heathendom that means passes from earth to hell. Every twenty- four hours from eighty to a hundred thousand souls die this awful death. This belief was regarded if not as the only, yet as the most urgent and imperative motive of missions; it was under the constraint of it that missions were first organized in modern times, and it was assumed as an unquestionable piece of Christian faith. No one, we are well aware, would give it this place any longer. What the future of the heathen is, and how it is related to their present, we simply cannot tell. The curtain that falls at death is as impenetrable for us as it was for the first man, and we cannot see past it a single inch. But our duty to the heathen does not depend upon what we do not know, but upon what we do; and that is clear enough to supply all the motives for missions that we need. We know the life that human beings lead where the name of Jesus is unknown: its darkness, poverty, degradation, despair. We know what our own life would be if everything were taken out of it which it owes to Him - all our Christian convictions, our Christian hopes, our Christian ideals, affections, and energies. We know how much Christ could be to the heathen, and experience has taught us how much they could be to Him. We know what treasures of devotion, of faith and love and obedience, he has already found in the hearts of men of all races - black and red and yellow as well as white. We know that God will have all men to be saved. We know that it is our Lord's will that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations. We know what the dictate of love is. We are debtors to all our brethren of mankind; we owe them the Gospel. And whatever it may mean to them in the future not to have heard it while they lived - a question to which we can give no answer whatever - it is certainly a grave sin in us if we have it and keep it to ourselves. We have every motive to missions in what we know, and as against this our ignorance does not count at all.

To pass to a somewhat different illustration, many people are exercised about the future of their children more than about anything else that God has kept to Himself. They would like to know how their sons will bear themselves in the battle of life, and especially how they will face its temptations. Will they pass victorious where their fathers stumbled and fell? or will their fathers be humbled and horrified to see their old sins looking out on them from the eyes of their sons? What kind of settlement will their daughters have in the days to come? Will they marry, and happily? or will it be necessary to make them independent of any resources but their own? If only we knew what to provide against! Of all these things we neither know nor can know anything: the future is wholly in the hand of God. But we do know what is the will of God both for ourselves and for those who come after us; and it is what we know that fixes our duty. Above all other books in the Bible, Deuteronomy is the book of religious education and of the promises attached to it. "These words which I command thee this day shall be upon thine heart: and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up." No duty could be enforced more urgently, and in our blank ignorance of the future there is none upon which so much depends. If we want to have any insurance against its painful possibilities, it is here we must find it. What God requires of parents is not a provision for the future of their children which enables them to defy Providence, but such a training of their children in the knowledge of God and in obedience to Him as will make them secure of God's friendship. It is a training to do all the words of this law, and where it has been effectively given the future may be safely left with God.

Apart from these particular cases, in which ignorance of the future does not affect our present duty, there is ignorance of a more fundamental kind which has sometimes perplexed men in their religious life, and sometimes even had fatal consequences. I mean the kind of ignorance in which we are not only without knowledge, but are oppressed with the idea of mystery; as though we were in contact with something which was not simply unknown, but never could come within the sphere of knowledge. I will give two illustrations on this point.

The text which we are considering is quoted in the Westminster Confession in connexion with what it calls the "high mystery of predestination" - the doc trine that "God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass"; or in its particular application to responsible creatures, that "by the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death". The time has been, we know, when these tremendous assertions exercised a powerful influence over many minds; there was something in them which overawed and humbled perhaps, but which as certainly shocked and paralyzed the spirits of men. For better or worse that time has passed. We have sailed into latitudes where such statements have lost their authority: in the form just cited no one is perturbed by them anymore. But the facts and the motives which originally inspired them have not vanished from the world, and the trouble which they once produced still vexes souls which do not see that under another guise it is still the same. Here are two men living side by side, sons of the same parents, running to all appearance the same course: one is arrested by the Gospel, the other is not. The one who is arrested has no doubt how it happened. God arrested him. Christ stretched out His strong hand and apprehended him. It is the sovereign will of God the Redeemer which is manifested in his salvation. "Not unto us, Lord, not unto us," he says, "but unto Thy name be the glory." No question of duty or responsibility seems to be raised at all: there is no apparent actor in the case but God. But what of the man who is still leading the old life, and who has had no such experience? Is he at liberty to say: Till God saves me as He has saved my brother, I have no responsibility in this region? No. He knows nothing of how or why God acted as He has done in his brother's case, and therefore the motives of religion cannot lie there for him. The secret things belong unto the Lord our God; it is in the things that are revealed, in the realities which are patent to our minds, that all religious motives lie. Is it possible, then, for such a man to trace back the difference between himself and his brother to an original difference of constitution, to a distinction in nature, the responsibility for which belongs in such wise to God that no responsibility in connexion with it can ever be attached to him? No: this is not possible either. No doubt the immense original differences between men, which determine so much in their life, are important; no doubt some will of God is revealed in them, some Divine purpose; but just because it is a will and a purpose that are so far hidden from us, our responsibility in religion cannot be affected by it. Our religious responsibility depends on the revealed will of God: it depends simply and solely on what we know. We know that eternal life has come into the world in Christ. We know that God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked. If we may say so reverently, it is a high mystery to Him, a thing He cannot understand, that men should refuse His salvation: "Turn ye, turn ye, for why will ye die?" We know that the scope of the Gospel is not a matter for speculation but for action, and that the answer to the question, Are there few that be saved? is: Strive to enter in by the strait gate. We know that no one here dare stand up and say: God has never spoken to me, never laid His hand on me, never called me to Himself by the voice of Jesus. He has. And against this knowledge and experience, no ignorance however profound, no mystery however impenetrable, weighs for a single instant.

The other illustration is in substance very close to this one, but is worth stating separately. It is concerned with the mystery arising out of the complex nature of man which seems open always to inconsistent interpretations. We have only one experience, yet we can read it in ways which seem directly to contradict each other. We can read it, so to speak, from the outside, through the body. Then everything in it appears subject to a law of necessity, and responsibility is shut out. Every change in the body, including the brain, is dependent on antecedent changes, and these again on others, all being bound in an endless chain of adamantine links. Yet on these changes, which are entirely beyond our control, de pends all our inner life - our thoughts, our emotions, our affections, our pieties, our impieties, our prayers, our blasphemies: they are what they are, and that they should be anything else is inconceivable. But we can read that self-same experience again from the inner side - not through the body, but through the soul - and then everything is changed. There is no necessity now, no compulsion which has simply to be recognized, or rather which is so all-encompassing that it is not felt; everything is free, spontaneous, responsible, charged throughout with the character and value of personality. How are these opposites to be brought together? How is experience, which is undoubtedly one, to be seen in its unity, and rescued from this incoherence which is so paralyzing to the will? Here is a mystery over which the mind has brooded since thinking began. It is put in all sorts of ways. It is the problem of the unity yet distinction of soul and body, of spirit and nature, of freedom and necessity, of religion and science, of God and the universe; all these are different ways of naming the same thing. Perhaps, after all, it is too much to consider this a high mystery with power in it to suspend life and arrest responsibility. Perhaps it is not a mystery, but a conundrum. Perhaps the mind will some-day expand a little and outreach it. Perhaps some mental readjustment, or some change of our point of view, may give us a stereoscopic look at life in which the two aspects shall coalesce into one clearer and more complete. We cannot tell. But one thing we are sure of: it is not by the baffling problems and unsolved mysteries of life that our conduct is to be determined; it is to be determined by what we know. We cannot make our inability to answer the questions just referred to a plea for disowning the responsibilities of life altogether. We cannot make them a plea for renouncing liberty, and consenting to exist as if nature and its necessities were all. We cannot do this, because our responsibilities are fixed by what we know, and to put it simply, we know better. We know that man is made not to be lost in nature but to rise above it - not to be a part of the physical universe, but to be its sovereign - not to live the life of rocks and stones and trees and dumb creatures, but even while rooted in nature to live a life eternal and Divine. It is as we accept this responsibility in the sight of God that God is on our side. It is as we assert our liberty at all costs, and only so, that we enter into life.

The general import of the text is summed up if we say that, like so much else in Scripture, it is a lesson on the simplicity of real religion. It has a place for Agnosticism, doubtless; so far from being a rival to religion, Agnosticism is an element in it. "Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection?" Such is the noble scorn with which it meets the man whose creed is only too complete. But though it has room for Agnosticism, it rests on what we know. Its basis is not the secret things, but the things which are revealed. It is as plain as the will of God - as the Ten Commandments, as the builders on the rock and the sand, as the example of Jesus, as the appeal of His love. The difficulties which arise out of our ignorance, no matter how far-reaching they may be, are not in the proper sense religious difficulties. They are often called so, but it is a mistake. They may be theological, or scientific, or philosophical difficulties; but they are not religious, for religion rests simply on what we know. There is only one real religious difficulty, the difficulty of being religious; just as there is only one real difficulty about the word of God, the difficulty of keeping it. To see this does not make religion in itself easier, but it keeps us from fretting our strength away on obstacles which are not on our path at all.