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

**04. THE EXILE’S PRAYER by JAMES DENNEY**

*"I am a stranger in the earth: hide not Thy commandments from me."*

*Psalm 119:19*

The text expresses with great simplicity man's position in the world, and the prayer which rises in his heart as the position is realized. He is a stranger here, a resident alien in a land which is not his home; and when he feels the strangeness of the place, he feels at the same time the need of God's guidance if he is to pass through it with safety and honour. "I am a sojourner in the earth: hide not Thy commandments from me."

This is not, indeed, our first thought when our minds begin to open upon life, nor is it meant to be. The earth is kind to us at first. Love makes ready for us before we are born; we open our eyes upon faces that look on us with passionate fondness, and draw our breath in an atmosphere of love. God makes us dwell in families, and as long as the family is to all intents and purposes our world, the sense of strangeness or homelessness cannot overcome us. The years during which we are too weak to bear this sore trial are mercifully shielded from it, and if the hearts of very young children are sometimes pierced with the sense of loneliness and neglect, as though home had quite ceased to be homely, this is due to the fault of others and not to the purpose of God. The same holds true, more or less, of the whole period of our growth. It is part of our very nature to grow up into membership of a society, into citizenship of a country. We connect our individual life with what stretches behind us into the past, and with what lies around us in the present. We naturalize ourselves, so to speak, in the earth. If our individual life is but a moment in time, we give it duration and dignity by connecting it with its roots in the past, and by serving ourselves heirs to the great inheritance which our race has accumulated; if it shrinks into a point in space, we think of the innumerable ties which bind it to others, of the innumerable lines along which influences enter it from, or pass from it to, the universal life of humanity; we try in imagination and in reality not to be strangers in the earth, but to make the world a spacious, rich, and satisfying home.

It is impossible to doubt that this is God's will. It is He who has given man the earth to dwell in. It is He who has made nature and man's mind on the same model, so that we can understand our dwelling place. It is He who has established the laws of nature, apart from which a reasonable and ordered life would be impossible, and home an idea which could never rise upon the mind. It is He who has created the parental instincts out of which the family and the home have grown in which we are received at birth. It is His government which supports and is reflected in the great communities in which the moral life of man finds all but its highest expression. And He who has created and who sustains this manifold order as plainly designs that we should live in it and enjoy it. He designs us, as far as the order of nature and the harmony of society permit, to be at home in the world. The vast wealth of nature, and the fitness of the social organism to nourish, to exhilarate, and to gladden all the spiritual faculties of man, are of God. He who cuts himself off from these, who does not know how God has prepared in nature and in society a place for the mind and heart of man to dwell in, may say that he is a stranger in the earth, but it is a vain saying on such lips. He does not know whether he is a stranger or not; he has not tried whether earth may not be a home.

But there are those who have tried, and strange to say, the more complete the experiment, the less satisfying it proves. The more life is found to contain, the more the desires or rather the necessities of the soul expand. Somehow or other, light breaks in upon a good man from above. Let him use to the full and enjoy without stint the wealth of nature and the wealth of society - let him live in the light of science and in the glow of virtue and of love - let him naturalize himself and strike root on earth as thoroughly as he will: and in the very hour of his tranquillity, disquieting thoughts will come. Deeper than everything is the feeling of dependence, not on nature or society, but on God - the sense of the infinite, of the transitoriness of all that lies around, of the Divine kinship and immortality of the soul. When this wakes up in its strength, man cannot but feel, This is not my rest. The world is a rich and nobly furnished abode; human society, as it is organized here, is a defence, an inspiration, a delight, for which no words could be too strong; but neither the one nor the other, nor both together, represent that for which man was made. The soul must have other relations, other guidance, other joys; it is a stranger in the earth.

The word "stranger" or "sojourner" is properly speaking a political one; it signifies a resident alien, a person living in a country to which he does not belong, and excluded therefore from the rights of citizenship in it. Such exclusion does not prejudice the fact that the resident alien may in his native country be a person of great account; the citizenship of those among whom he lives an exile may be one which he would scorn to compare with his own. It is, in point of fact, in this sense that a man of God like the Psalmist finds himself a stranger in the earth; and that the New Testament, which speaks of our citizenship as in heaven, describes Christians as strangers and sojourners. The Psalms describe elsewhere the life of those who are not strangers here, but have their home and all their hopes on earth, and are unvisited by thoughts of anything beyond. "Their inward thought is that their houses shall continue for ever, and their dwelling places to all generations; they call their lands after their own names." It is this life, of the earth earthy, which makes the Psalmist feel from home. He cannot naturalize himself in it. As he sees its prevalence all around him, he can only say with a certain shrinking: "I am a stranger on, the earth". Those who sympathize with his feeling of loneliness or homelessness will appreciate his prayer: "Hide not Thy commandments from me".

Let us consider what this means. It implies that there is a Divine law for this peculiar situation. The man of God is not to suppress that sense of being a stranger, and to conform to the world's ways. He is not to try to smother the intimations which remind him that he is made for more than the world yields, and to do at Rome as the Romans do. No doubt the best men are the most tolerant, and can most easily give the world's conventions a conventional respect. Some time ago I saw a description of the character of a saint which is perhaps worth quoting in this connexion. "The saint," said the writer, the late Mr. Coven try Patmore, "has no fads; and you may live in the same house with him and never find out that he is not a sinner like yourself, unless you rely on negative proofs, or obtrude lax ideas on him, and so provoke him to silence. He may impress you indeed by his harmlessness and imperturbable good temper, and probably by some lack of appreciation of modern humour, and ignorance of some things which men are expected to know, and by never seeming to have much use for his time when it can be of any service to you; but on the whole he will give you an agreeable impression of general inferiority to yourself." Certainly it was no New Testament saint who stood or sat for this portrait; nothing could be less like Paul or John. But it has this much truth in it: The man who is a stranger in the earth and who knows it, though he does not distinguish himself by loud rebellion against the ways of the land he lives in, lives nevertheless a life of his own, inspired by higher laws, and knows without violence how to maintain his independence.

The law of this higher life, according to the Psalmist, is to be found in the commandments of God: who ever knows them knows what will bring order, peace, and stability into his existence, and turn his place of exile into a home in which he dwells with God. The heart, conscious that it is an alien in this passing world, cries out for contact with the eternal to which it is akin. It longs to know God, to see God, to be right with God, to live in union and communion with Him; it longs as a citizen of heaven to obey the heavenly laws, even while a resident alien on the earth. Browning in one of his best-known poems has illustrated this with great force. He shows us the man whom Jesus had raised from the dead,

in knowledge

Increased beyond the earthly faculty –

Heaven opened to a soul while yet on earth,

Earth forced on a soul's use while seeing heaven:

and what is the result?

He holds on firmly to some thread of life

(It is the life to live perforcedly)

Which runs across some vast distracting orb

Of glory on either side that meagre thread,

Which, conscious of, he must not enter yet -

The spiritual life around the earthly life:

The law of that is known to him as this,

His heart and brain move there, his feet stay here.

To imagine a man who has passed within the veil, and seen the things that are eternal, and after that returned again to earth, is the most striking way of presenting one who must feel himself a stranger in the earth, and bound to live by another law; but it is not the only way. Every man in whom the sense of the infinite has awakened knows what is meant by "the spiritual life around the earthly life," and longs to hold the thread of that higher life in this land of exile; every such man longs in this alien world to live under the law, the inspiration, the memory, and the hope of God. The Psalmist's prayer: "Hide not Thy commandments from me," gives a peculiar turn to this truth. It shows us that the contact with the element for which our hearts cry out, the hold upon the thread of life which is a matter of death or life to us, is granted in the shape of obedience to the revealed will of God. We know God when we know what God would have us do, and the Psalmist had been taught of God when he prayed, "Hide not Thy commandments from me". The knowledge of God that we need is a knowledge for action and obedience. Earth is a place of exile when we do no more than think of God, but the Divine life is to be introduced into the earth by the keeping of God's commandments, and even in exile we are to be loyal to our heavenly citizenship. All nature, including human nature, is to be made the organ and the revelation of God. The flesh with its instincts is to be spiritualized. The kingdoms of the world are to become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ. The commandments of God are to be obeyed in them. It is as we work at this task - as we do the commandments of God - that the sense of insecurity and unreality passes away. If earth does not become our home, at all events God is our home even while we are on earth. As St. John says: "The world passes away, and the longing it in spires; but he who does the will of God abides for ever".

A far truer and more striking example than Lazarus, of the stranger on earth who longs for God's commandments, is Jesus Himself. He is the great inhabitant of another world who passed a life of exile here, and though He incorporated Himself in the human race and naturalized Himself on earth, it must always have remained a strange place to Him. He says expressly that it was so. "Ye are from beneath, I am from above"; it is as much as if He had said: We belong to different worlds. If this is your home, it cannot be Mine; you may do your own will, but I am bound to do the commandments of God. A prophecy in Isaiah represents God as opening the ear of His Servant morning by morning, giving Him as every new day came the heavenly revelation He needed. Other words in the prophecy are directly applied to Jesus, and we know that this is applicable too. How often He withdrew into solitude, as one who felt that the influence of earth tended only to make life aimless, and spent hours with the Father, nourishing His exiled life with the life eternal. We know that the Psalms were familiar to Him and were used in His prayers even on the cross, and it does not seem to me fanciful to think of Him using this prayer: "I am a stranger in the earth, hide not Thy commandments from me". He tells us the secret of His life: does it not imply that He presented this prayer and had it answered daily? "I do nothing of Myself, but as My Father hath taught Me I speak these things." "The Father loveth the Son, and showeth Him all things that Himself doeth." "If ye keep My commandments ye shall abide in My love; even as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love." The Divine law which was essential to His life in union with the Father was perpetually revealed to Him: and even in this place of exile, as He did always the things which pleased Him, he could say: "I am not alone, for the Father is with Me".

Religion, when it is reduced to its simplest elements, is the same in all ages. Christ and his Apostles used the Psalms in their devotions, we ourselves use them, and they will be used till the end of time. As years pass, and the certainty that this is not our home becomes more importunate, do we feel more than we once did the need of the presence and direction of God? It is not in us who walk to direct our own steps in this foreign land. Many of you must be familiar with them, but I will venture to quote again the well- known words of the greatest of Greek philosophers under which the very same need of God beats as we find here in the Psalmist, and in our own hearts. He is speaking particularly of the end of life and of what comes after, but his words have a wider application. "A man," he says, "should persevere until he has achieved one of two things. Either he should discover or be taught the truth; or, if that is impossible, I would have him take the best and most irrefragable of human theories, and let this be the raft upon which he sails through life - not without risk, as I admit, if he cannot find some word of God which will more surely and safely carry him." This craving for some word of God: what is it but the Psalmist's prayer, "Hide not Thy commandments from me"? Do we feel, as life becomes more obviously a pilgrimage, and earth an alien land, that our deepest need is to be sure of God, and that the way in which such security is granted is the way of obedience to a Divine law?

There are one or two practical considerations with which I shall conclude: if we take them seriously, they will help us to attain to that certainty of God which we need.

The first is this: our situation, as strangers on the earth, requires us to seek communication with God. It demands and necessitates prayer. When it is realized and weighs upon us, it inspires prayer. The presupposition of all prayer is that there is such a thing as a will of God applicable to my situation, a Divine commandment bearing on the very circumstances in which I have to act, and by obeying which my exiled uncertain life is united to the eternal life of God. Prayer is not always the presenting of defined requests to God: we may not know what we need or even what we want - except that it is God. Prayer may be the effort of the soul, oppressed by the sense of its isolation, its impotence, or its exile in the world, to connect itself again effectively with Him. It is not an attempt to lay down the law to God; it is the longing of the soul to be sure of the law which He has laid down for it. And this particular kind of prayer, in which the soul, conscious of its darkness, its weakness, its incapacity to face life alone, cries to God in the pathetic appealing tone of this text, has a peculiar promise connected with it in Scripture. "Call unto Me and I will answer thee, and shew thee great and hidden things that thou knowest not." This is what we need - to have the Divine law, which eludes us, made plain for our actual situation. It may be made plain to us, as to Jeremiah, to whom this promise was given, in marvels of providential wisdom and goodness, in great and hidden things that we know not: but it is in any case made plain in answer to prayer.

A second consideration is this: our situation, as strangers on the earth, requires us to think about the law of God. We pray: " Hide not Thy commandments "; but in great part they are not hidden. God has spoken, and shown us the path of life. The prayer of the text is in effect very much that of the preceding verse in the Psalm: "Open Thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of Thy law". I am not speaking at random when I say that even in the Christian Church and in Christian homes there is an extraordinary lack of appreciation for the Bible as a means of initiation into the wisdom of God, and of true union and communion with Him. We do not need to raise any critical questions to be assured that if a revelation of God's will is given anywhere it is given here. If a man will only read his Bible for the sake of God's commandments, he will never encounter any difficulty in it but the difficulty of keeping them. To bring the mind, the conscience, the heart, into harmony with the mind of God, so that even in a world which largely ignores God a man may be able to live in practical union with Him, the habitual use of the Bible is indispensable. Let us read it more steadily than we have done, with more reflection, with more purpose. Let us think out, as best we can, its bearing on our life and calling. Let us come regularly to the church, where the word of God is ministered, and at least an effort is made to read its lessons for our con duct. Let us commend the word of God and the ministry of the word, at least by our example. The more we are in earnest to lead a life in which we shall have the assurance of God's presence, and in which the exile of earth shall not deprive us of our home in Him, the more we shall prize this revelation of His will, and the less shall we allow trivial causes to keep us away when the ministry of the word is within our reach.

Finally, our situation as strangers in the earth calls, us to the imitation of Jesus. As we are, so was He in the world; and as He was, so ought we to be in it. In His case, as I have said, the Psalmist's prayer was answered. He was a stranger in the earth from whom God did not hide His commandments. He is the pattern, the captain, the head of all who are exiles here, and whose home is in God. When we look to Him, we see what this prayer really means; and the answer is given to it when His voice comes to us: "Follow Me." Follow Me- that is the sum of all God's commandments. What it means is not revealed in an instant, it is only revealed as we follow. But as we do so, beginning where we stand with the minutest act of obedience, the great revelation incarnate in Jesus begins to open up to us; we discover that in Him there shines not a casual ray of Divine light, but the very brightness of the Father's glory; that God Himself has come to dwell with man, and that earth is a place of exile no more. Let us set our hearts to follow Jesus, steadfastly, soberly, joyfully. It is our supreme duty, because it answers to God's supreme grace. All our prayers are transcended by the experiences it opens to us. What is the exile of earth any more to those who can say: "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; and of His fulness we all received"?