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

**11. LOYALTY TO THE SAINTS by JAMES DENNEY**

*"If I had said, I will speak thus; Behold, I had dealt treacherously with the generation of thy children."*

*Psalm 73:15*

THE Old Testament does not often speak of children of God, yet no one would have any difficulty in understanding to whom the Psalmist here refers. In the Book of Deuteronomy the Israelites generally are described by this title: "ye are children to Jehovah your God; ye shall not follow any heathen custom". But even in ancient times it had become plain that they were not all Israel that were of Israel; within the wide circle of the nation there was a narrower circle of those who really were what it was called to be. It is this narrower circle, the true people of God, who are here described as the generation of His children. A similar expression is found in the twenty-fourth Psalm. The Psalmist asks: "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord, and who shall stand in His holy place?" "He that hath clean hands," he answers, "and a pure heart: who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, and hath not sworn deceitfully." Such he assures of the blessing of God, and then proceeds: "This is the generation of them that seek Him, that seek Thy face, O God of Jacob". In other words, this is the generation of God's children. Substantially also, in the last half of the Book of Isaiah, it is this Israel within Israel which is meant by the Servant of the Lord. In spite of apostasy and all its painful consequences, there ever remains in Israel a seed to serve God, a spiritual succession of men and women true to Him. They have a character of their own; they have hopes and convictions peculiar to themselves; they form a party and an interest distinct from everything else in the world.

This was not only true when the Psalms were written; it is true to-day. At this moment, there is such a thing in the world as the generation of God's children, the spiritual successors of those to whom the Psalmist refers; they inherit the same hopes, and represent the same ideals and beliefs. It is a great matter to recognize this. For one thing, it is an important part of our moral security to have our place among God's children. They alone are perpetuated from age to age: the cause with which they are identified is the only one against which time does not prevail. For another, it is a great test of the sound ness of our judgment in spiritual things when we find ourselves in agreement with them. " I love," says one of the fathers of the Scottish Church, "I love to walk in the steps of the flock"; that is, I love to find myself at one with the generation of God's children. The individual cannot but have misgivings if he feels inclined to set his own wavering judgment, his own unstable faith, his own brief and limited experience, against the age-long experience and the immemorial convictions of the people of God. It is one of God's warnings that he is on a wrong track when he finds himself at variance with them. To dissent from them is somehow or other to be disloyal to them. "If I say, I will speak thus" - that is, I will indulge in sceptical, unbelieving, God-disowning thoughts and words - "behold, I shall be a traitor to the generation of thy children".

The one mark of the children of God which never varies is that they believe in Him. From generation to generation they perpetuate the sublime tradition of faith. In various modes, through all sorts of discouragement, they look unceasingly to Him, believing that He is, and that He is the rewarder of those who seek Him. The Old Testament does not contain any doctrines, and this faith is the whole of its religion. It is the element in the life of our race which ennobles it and makes it great. It is that which has inspired every kind of virtue - patience, self-denial, self-sacrifice, superiority to the senses and to the world in which they live. Could there be a more fatal symptom of a bad heart than that one should be a traitor to those who represent this great cause upon the earth? Could there be a surer sign that a way of feeling, thinking, speaking, or acting was wrong than this, that it separated a man from those who in all ages had stood for God and for faith in Him?

It will enable us to appreciate this more truly if we consider some of the ways in which faith in God is manifested, and in which we may prove untrue to it.

**1.** Faith in God implies faith in His government of the world. This is the particular aspect of faith with which the Psalmist is here concerned. No doubt it belongs to the nature of faith that it should be tried; if there were not appearances against it, it would not be faith; it would be sight. The contrary appearances are what challenges faith and puts it to the proof, and it is in asserting itself against them that faith shows its genuineness and strength. It is manifest that the Psalmist had had more than enough to try his faith in the Divine government. When he looked abroad upon the earth, it was as though God had abandoned it, or rather as though there were no God at all. He saw all power and prosperity in the hands of the wicked, and he saw this power and prosperity generate in them an arrogant and godless confidence which language almost fails to describe. "They scoff, and in wickedness utter oppression: they speak loftily. They have set their mouth in the heavens, and their tongue walketh through the earth ... and they say, How doth God know? and is there knowledge in the Most High?" It is the reign of atheism at once practical and theoretical - not confined to the disregard of God's will in action, but advancing impiously to flout the very idea that He knows or cares for what is done on earth. When such a situation lasts long, it undoubtedly brings with it the temptation to doubt the government of God. Even believing men like the Psalmist find sceptical thoughts rising involuntarily in their minds. What is the use of trying to be good? What profit is it to serve God? It gains nothing. It exempts from nothing. "Surely in vain have I cleansed my heart, and washed my hands in innocency. For all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning." Goodness is a mere futility which in the life of the world does not count at all. Such is the hot, impatient, despairing speech which bursts from this good man's lips as he looks round him on the moral confusions of earth, and the seeming absence of God. But all of a sudden it is checked. The "behold" in the text reveals how he was startled by the thought which flashed into his mind. What, it was suggested to him, does the indulgence of this sceptical temper mean? It means that I am betraying the cause for which the children of God have fought the good fight from generation to generation, that I am deserting the forlorn hope of the good to side with the enemies of God and man. God forbid! Be my soul with the saints, and shall my mind cherish thoughts, shall my lips speak words, that are disloyal to their faith, their hopes, their sacrifices? To choose your creed is to choose your company, and the feeling that such scepticism would range him in base opposition to the Israel of God is the first thing which rallies the Psalmist again to assert his faith.

Surely the lesson of this is plain. The things that tried the Psalmist's faith have not yet vanished from the world. Those who can form any conception of what is involved in the government of the Armenians and the Macedonians by the Turks - those who followed through weary years the indescribable barbarities perpetrated systematically by a so-called Christian government on the Congo - those who realize what is involved in the position and influence of the liquor trade in this country - those who see how human beings are dehumanized alike by the excessive wealth and the extreme poverty which our civilization seems to engender: all these may well be tempted to wonder whether God does govern the world, or whether He cares at all for what happens here. But let no one think that the trials of faith are arguments for unbelief. No: they are trumpet calls for witnesses for God; for soldiers, for martyrs, for men and women who will fight God's battle against all odds, and though they die fighting die assured of victory at last. All the hope of the world lies in them, not in the cynical or sceptical who say, How doth God know?

And in our own private concerns, as well as in the larger outlook upon life, this temptation has to be encountered and overcome. There are people who seem haunted by misfortune - "plagued," as the Psalmist says, "all day long, and chastened every morning". They are not bad people either; they may be sincere, well-meaning, devout. For a while, they bear up against their troubles, and ascribe them to chance or to some mismanagement of their own; but as courage fails they are tempted to say, The strife is useless; there is no care taken by God of human life, or we could never fare thus. But to speak so is to desert the faith of all the good. It is to desert the conviction which has made numberless lowly, suffering, and dis appointed lives beautiful with a beauty beyond that of earthly success. It is to separate ourselves from those to whose patience and hope all that is finest in human character is due. Surely this is the proof that it is a great mistake. Surely the true course is to remain loyal to the generation of God's children, and to add something of our own to the most priceless treasure of our race - the inherited conviction that God is everywhere present in the life of man, directing it to Divine ends, and in spite of disconcerting appearances making all things work together for good to them that love Him. This is the patience and the faith of the saints; do not, however you are tried, betray or belie it, but by your own faith and patience set a new seal to its truth.

**2.** Faith in God's government of the world is what the Psalmist is fighting for, but faith in God has other aspects. It involves faith in the authority of His law. It means the conviction that there is an eternal dis tinction between right and wrong which can never be explained away. It means that the right is something absolutely binding - not something to be deduced from other things essentially variable, and therefore liable to vary with them; and that the wrong is in the same way absolutely to be repelled. There are, as we know, philosophers who refuse to accept any such distinction. On the ground that the moral conscious ness in man has developed, they hold that all definitions of right and wrong are relative; things are right at one stage which would be wrong at another; they are right for one man when they would be wrong for another; a right and wrong which are not to be argued about, but merely recognized - in which there can be no room for adjustment whatever, but only submission to the absolute will of God - these are ideas which the subtle modern intelligence has outgrown. Nor is it only philosophers or professional moralists who speak thus. A vast proportion of the general literature which deals with human life takes this sceptical attitude. It takes it avowedly and of set purpose. It lays itself out to show that the man who asserts the absolute authority of what he calls the law of God - or rather of what the generation of God's children have always recognized as His law - is a dull and narrow-minded man, with no flexibility of intellect, no sensitiveness to the multiplicity of nature. He needs to be mentally emancipated, and once he is, his moral austerity will see that it has no ground.

I will refer to two instances of this, from quite different quarters of the moral world. Everyone who has been brought up in the Christian Church knows the law of personal purity which is constituted by the teaching and the life of Jesus. He knows that this is the will of God, even our sanctification, that everyone should keep his body in purity and honour. But he will very soon discover that there are philosophies of morality which cannot vindicate and do not promulgate any such law. An ostentatiously anti-Christian writer, like the late Sir Leslie Stephen, frankly ac knowledges that those thinkers who have sought to explain morality on utilitarian grounds have shown as a rule a strong tendency to relaxed ideas on this vital subject. And how many novelists there are, exhibiting their criticism of life in all languages, who seem to have it as their one motive to show that there is nothing absolute in the seventh commandment. A man is to be true to his wife, naturally; but it is a poor kind of truth to sacrifice to his legal obligations to one woman the genuine love for another in which his true being would attain its full realization. What should we say when we encounter ideas of this kind, in philosophy or in literature, in cruder or in subtler forms? Let them be met on their own ground, by all means; let bad philosophy be confuted by good; let the inadequacy of such theories to explain the actual moral contents of life be made clear; but before everything, let the soul purge itself from every shadow of complicity in them in the indignant words of the Psalm, "If I spoke thus, I should be false to the generation of God's children." I should desert those who have done more than all others to lift the life of man from the natural to the spiritual level. I should betray the cause of Christ and of all the saints to strengthen the cause, at best of David Hume, at worst of the brute in man.

The second illustration will seem to many frivolous by comparison, but that may itself be a proof of its seriousness. The fourth commandment is, Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy - that is, remember the day of rest to keep it unto God. We are all aware that this is a subject on which there is a remarkable laxity or even an entire absence of conscience among ordinarily good people. The day is remembered, certainly; it is a day off, and in that sense is not likely to be overlooked; but it is not, as the commandment requires, kept unto God. It is often kept to ourselves - to amusement, to indolence, to idle reading. Those who believe in having a day off once a week are hardly at liberty to say that the fourth commandment is annulled by the higher principle which claims every day for God. It is common ground between them and the saints that to make one day in seven exceptional is an excellent thing, and the only question that remains to be settled is what exceptional use of it is the best which can be made. Of course this is left for decision to every man's conscience: let no man judge you in respect of a Sabbath, as St. Paul says. But it is conscience which is to judge - conscience, and not the caprice of the man whose real thought is that this is a matter in which conscience has nothing to say. Once let conscience speak, and the ancient law which claims the day peculiarly for rest and for God will soon assert its authority. If you are in doubt as to what is or is not legitimate on the exceptional day of the week, call up to your mind the best people you have known, the generation of God's children, and let their conscience and practice weigh with you. Distrust yourself if your conduct makes you disloyal to them. Do not speak about the Sabbath, or if you prefer to call it so, the Sunday - do not speak about what Christians rejoice in as the Lord's Day - in a way which betrays the high interests of the soul to which the day has been devoted from the beginning by those who best knew God. Be true to the good. Be loyal to those on whom God has set His seal, and count such loyalty an honour higher far than that of any reputation for liberality of mind. Who is so likely to be in the wrong, on a question of this kind, as the man who finds himself in opposition to the saints of all time?

**3.** Once more, faith in God implies faith in His promises: it implies in the last resort faith in the greatest of His promises, the promise of eternal life. This is directly suggested by the context. True, it was not at first seen by believers in God. The God whom faith apprehends is so great that all that is involved in faith cannot be apprehended in an instant. But it comes into view by degrees. As the Scottish father whom I quoted at the beginning has said, "Eternity is wrapt up and implied in every truth of religion". A religious life, or a life of faith, means at bottom life in God; and life in God is life over which death has no power. The Psalmist had attained to this truth, and gives expression to it in words of deathless sublimity and beauty. "Nevertheless, I am continually with Thee; Thou hast holden my right hand. Thou shalt guide me with Thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee. My flesh and my heart faileth, but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever." This is the full compass of faith in God - faith with its amplest range of vision, and speaking in its clearest tones. This is what ultimately characterizes the generation of God's children.

But how few there are who1 can naturally speak thus! How difficult it is for us, when we use such words in our praise, to feel that we have any right to them! Our own faith in immortality is often languid, often in abeyance. Sometimes the idea eludes us; sometimes we do not know whether it is a hope or a dread. We are painfully sensible of all the appearances which are against it. We feel our kinship with all the other life in the world, which is not immortal. We feel how hard, nay how impossible it is to draw a line across it at any particular point, and to say that all that is on one side is mortal, while all that is on the other only passes through death to enter into immortality. The statement once made by Lord Lister at the British Association - that anaesthetics suspend the functions of vegetable as well as of animal life - in its simple truth makes the blood run cold. It is all one thing, we seem to feel, in plant, in animal, in man; it springs from one fountain, it runs one course, it comes to one end. No wonder the mediaeval proverb says, "Three physicists, two atheists"; the whole analogy of nature is against immortality. When we think of the immense mass of human intelligence which is now being trained in the sciences that use only physical categories, we can understand the immense pressure under which faith has to assert itself, the hardness of the battle it has to fight. Imagination is chilled and appalled in such an atmosphere, and faith is benumbed where it is not killed outright.

Nevertheless, it is one thing to feel the difficulties which are thus created for faith, and another to succumb to them. There are two ways in which faith when hardly pressed can react against this trying environment. One is to recall the fact, that true as the disconcerting phenomena referred to may be, they are not the whole truth. A man's life is one the functions of which can be suspended by an anaesthetic just like those of a dog or a plant: no one can question that. But a man's life is also one which can raise itself to the immortal faith of this Psalm: "Thou shalt guide me by Thy counsel, and afterward receive me unto glory". This sublime faith in God belongs as much to the realities of human life as the insensibility induced by chloroform. It is not only as true as the other, it is far more true in this sense, that it marks what human nature is when it has really reached its height. This is the self-expression of man when he comes to the full stature of manhood. A man under chloroform is not a man; no one breathes the native air of the soul, no one speaks its native language, no one moves in the liberty for which it was born, till he can make these words his own. It is of those who speak thus and of them only that we can say, "This is the generation of them that seek Thee, the generation of Thy children, O God of Jacob". And the second way to react against sceptical thoughts about immortality is the one which is directly given in the text. When such thoughts press upon us, when the arguments that death ends all seem conclusive and we have nothing to urge against them, when the sense of our mortality is importunate and we do not know how to mitigate or to evade it, let us say to ourselves: If I yield to such impressions, I separate myself from the generation of God's children. In a question of spiritual import I take the opposite side from all who have been distinguished by spiritual insight and by know ledge of God. I become disloyal to the Psalmist and to all who have made his words their own - disloyal to Jesus, and to the faith in which He lived and died - disloyal to the martyrs - disloyal to all who have fallen asleep in Jesus in the sure and blessed hope of a glorious resurrection. Is it nothing to be on the other side in such circumstances? Is it nothing to be aware that the great spirits of our race are on the side we are abandoning? And for whom? For whom, I say, not for what; for again we must remember that to choose our creed is to choose our company. Can we appeal to names on the other side that command an equal reverence? No one, I fancy, has ever argued more subtly against immortality than Hume: but what has Hume contributed to the spiritual life of the world that he should be counted an authority at all? Who would weigh his negative inferences, whatever the weight of logic behind them, against the insight and conviction of this Psalm, against the assurance of Jesus, against the struggling yet ever triumphant faith of the generation of God's children? None who would be loyal to the best that man has been. None who have generosity enough to comprehend the sudden emotion of this text: "If I spoke thus, behold, I should be a traitor to the generation of Thy children".

I will add one word of application to this interpretation of the text: Associate with God's children, and let their convictions inspire yours; frequent the church, and let the immemorial faith of all saints beget itself in you anew. It is one great service of the Church that it perpetuates the tradition of faith - that sublime voices like those of this Psalm are for ever sounding in it, waking echoes and Amens in our hearts - that characters and convictions of the highest type are generated in it, not by logic but by loyalty, not by argument but by sympathy with the good - deep calling unto deep. We need the common faith to sustain our individual faith; we need the consciousness of the children of God in all ages to fortify our wavering belief in His government, His law and His pro mises. To be at home in the Church is to absorb this strength unconsciously. It is to be delivered from the shallows and miseries of a too narrow experience, and set afloat on the broad stream of Christian conviction which gathers impetus and volume with every generation the saints survive.