

The Timely Presence and Salutation of Jesus.

by Edward Payson

Christ's visit to his church was a gracious and loving visit that revived the faith and hope of the disciples and filled them with joy and gratitude.

Scripture: Psalm 85:8, Malachi 3:6, Matthew 18:20, Luke 24:36, John 20:19, Hebrews 10:25, Hebrews 13:8, James 4:8, Revelation 3:20

Topics: "Christ's Presence", "Spiritual Revival"

Description

Edward Payson preaches about the gracious visit of Jesus to his disciples after his resurrection, highlighting the character of the visit as one of love, comfort, and blessing, despite the disciples' unworthiness and lack of preparation. He emphasizes the importance of desiring and seeking the presence of Christ in our lives, drawing parallels between the disciples' situation and the church's need for revival and spiritual awakening. Payson urges the congregation to earnestly desire Christ's presence, use all means to excite such feelings in others, and not forsake gathering together in anticipation of experiencing the peace and blessings that come with the real presence of Jesus.

Transcript

"And as they thus spake, Jesus himself stood in the midst of them, and saith unto them, peace be unto you"

Luke 24:36

we are studying the character of a person of whom we know little, but whom we have particular reasons for wishing to know thoroughly, every part of his past and present conduct becomes, in our view, highly interesting. We wish to be acquainted with his whole history, even with the incidents of his childhood and early youth, that from what he was then, we may infer what he probably is now. And yet, to infer what any one is, from what he has been in former years, may often lead to very erroneous conclusions, respecting his character for man is a changeable being, and there are comparatively few persons, whose lives are all of a piece.

The promising child, the amiable youth, does not always prove a valuable man: and, on the other hand, sometimes, though much less frequently, the man renounces the vices and follies of youth, and becomes, unexpectedly, an estimable character. To our Savior, however, these remarks are in no degree applicable. It is safe to infer what he is, from what he once was. If we can ascertain what he was at any former period,

we shall ascertain what he is now: for inspiration assures us, that he is, yesterday, today, and forever, the same.

And blessed be God, we may easily ascertain what he was during his residence in our world: for the inspired records of his life are before us, and they are sufficiently particular to give us a clear view of his sentiments, feelings and character. This fact renders these records particularly interesting to every one, who counts all things but loss, for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, his Lord; who wishes to be thoroughly acquainted with the Savior, to whose care he commits his soul, and on whom he founds all his hopes.

Of this Savior, and of the manner in which he treats his disciples, we may learn something from the passage before us. It describes the first manifestation, which he made of himself to his church, after his resurrection. He had indeed previously appeared to individuals among them; but not until this occasion was he seen by them all. Now he stood at once, unexpectedly, in the midst of them, and said, Peace be unto you. In meditating on this passage, let us consider, I. The character of the visit, which Christ here made to his church; and, II.

The time, when the visit was made. I. With reference to the character of the visit we may remark, that the visits which Christ makes to his churches, are of two kinds. He sometimes comes in anger, to chastise them. In this manner he threatened to visit some of the Asiatic churches. To the church at Ephesus he says, I will come unto thee quickly, and remove thy candlestick out of its place, unless thou repent. And to the church of Sardis, If thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, that is, suddenly, and unexpectedly; and thou shalt not know at what hour I will come upon thee.

At other times, he visits his churches in a gracious manner, to comfort, animate, and bless them. The visit mentioned in our text was of this kind. He came, not in anger, but in love; came in his own beloved and appropriate characters of Savior, Friend and Brother. This is evident, in the first place, from the language in which he addressed them; Peace be with you. This was the customary form of friendly salutation among the Jews, and the use of it by a visitor, was equivalent to an assurance that he came as a friend.

Indeed it probably conveyed far more meaning to their ears, than it does to ours; for the word peace as used by the Jews, was a term of very extensive signification. It was considered as including all blessings of every kind. Hence, when they said to any one, Peace be with you, --it was the same as saying, may every blessing be yours; or, may happiness attend you. And though the salutation was doubtless used by many, as our customary expressions of friendship and civility too often are, in an insincere and unmeaning manner, yet we may be sure, that in such a manner it would never be used by our Savior.

And while this language, as used by him, meant all which it seemed to mean; it was, in his lips, something more than the expression of a wish, something more than even a prayer, that peace might be with them. He had just returned from the invisible world; that world, which men naturally regard with dread. In these circumstances, by saying, Peace be with you, he did in effect assure them, that there was peace between them and the invisible world; between them and the God, who governs that world.

Nor was this all. He had it in his own power to give the peace which he wished them to enjoy; for all power, in heaven and on earth, was now committed to him. In these circumstances the salutation, Peace be with you, was equivalent to an authoritative declaration, that Peace should be with them. He had said to them, just before his crucifixion, Peace I leave with you; my peace I give unto you; and this dying bequest he now renewed and confirmed. We may remark further, that the three blessings, which the apostles usually

asked for the churches, were grace, mercy, and peace.

But the last of these blessings includes, or implies the two former; for to sinful creatures such as we are, there can be no peace, without grace to sanctify them, and mercy to pardon them. This our Savior well knew. Hence, when he said, Peace be unto you, he did in effect assure them of an interest in his grace and mercy. If farther proof that this was a gracious visit were wanting, we might find it in the context. We there learn, that at this visit, he enlightened the understandings of his disciples, increased their religious knowledge, banished their doubts, fears and anxieties, strengthened their faith, revived their fainting hopes, and filled them with wonder and joy.

These surely were works of grace, and these, we may add, are precisely the works which he still performs when he makes any of his churches a gracious visit. Let us now consider, II. The time when this gracious visit was made. 1. We may remark, that it was made at a time when the disciples were exceedingly unworthy of such a favor, and when they rather deserved to have been visited in anger. Since their last interview with their Master and Savior, which took place at his table, and in the garden of Gethsemane, they had treated him in a very unkind and ungrateful manner.

Though repeatedly warned by him to watch and pray, lest they should enter into temptation, they had neglected the warning, they had yielded to temptation, they had proved unfaithful to their engagements, and in a most pusillanimous manner, had forsaken him, nay, fled from him in his greatest extremity. Nay more, one of them had, with oaths and imprecations, denied that he knew him. In addition to these sins, they had all been guilty of criminal and inexcusable unbelief. Though he had repeatedly forewarned them of his approaching crucifixion, referred them to predictions of it in the Old Testament, and at the same time assured them, that on the third day, he would rise again, yet they forgot his warnings, disbelieved his assurances, and were in consequence, plunged into the depths of despondency by his death.

So obstinate was their incredulity, that they even refused to believe the testimony of those, to whom he has revealed himself on the morning of his resurrection. These were surely great sins; they must have been exceedingly painful and offensive to their Master; they rendered them most undeserving, not only of this gracious visit, but of ever being again numbered among his disciples. Yet instead of renouncing them, instead of treating them as they had treated him, he comes to visit them, and the first sentence which he utters is, Peace be unto you. O, if they had any feeling, how must this unmerited kindness from their injured Master have shamed them, and cut them to the heart!

No reproaches or threatenings would have been one half so overwhelming, or so hard to hear. While contemplating his conduct, we may well exclaim with David, Is this the manner of men, O Lord? No; it is the manner of Christ alone. 2. This visit was made at a time, when the church was very imperfectly prepared for it, and when very few among them expected it, or had any hope of such a favor. It is true indeed, that a few individuals among them were in some good measure prepared for it.

Peter had repented of his fall, and wept over it in bitterness of soul, and to him Christ had previously appeared as he had also to two others of the brethren, and to several of the female disciples. And some, who had not yet seen him, were so far convinced by their testimony, that their unbelief and despondency began to give way. But the great body of them appear to have been still incredulous, and by no means prepared for such a visit, or disposed to expect it. That they were so, is evident from the fact, that even after their Master had appeared among them, and spoken to them, they would scarcely believe the testimony of their own senses.

He was obliged to expostulate with them, to show them his hands and his feet, bearing the scars of the cross, and to partake of food in their presence, before they would be convinced that it was indeed he himself. It is however possible, and perhaps not improbable, that this backwardness to believe was occasioned in part, by a conviction of their own great unworthiness. They could not but recollect how they had forsaken him when he was in the hands of his enemies, though they had but just before promised never to forsake him.

And this recollection, with the feelings of conscious guilt, which it must have occasioned, might perhaps lead them to suppose, that even if their injured master were risen from the dead, he would not so soon favor them with a gracious visit, but would rather consider and treat them as persons unworthy to be his disciples. If they really entertained these feelings of conscious unworthiness, they were in some measure prepared for their master's return to them; for he ever regards those who feel most unworthy of his favors, as best prepared to receive them.

Indeed he confers them on none, except such as are sensible of their own unworthiness; for such persons only will receive them with thankful humility, and duly appreciate the goodness which leads him to bestow them. 3. The time when Christ made this gracious visit to his church was a time in which it was very much needed. The faith, and hope, and courage of its members were reduced to the lowest point of depression, and unless revived by his presence, must soon have expired.

One member after another would have returned to his original occupation and the church would have been scattered and become extinct. In these circumstances, it seemed indispensably necessary to the continued existence of the church, that something should be done, and done speedily, to revive it. And this gracious visit from Christ, was precisely what it needed for its revival. The sight of their beloved Master, raised from the dead, standing among them, and addressing them in language which implied forgiveness, and expressed affection, revived their drooping spirits, banished their doubts and anxieties, rendered their faith stronger than it had ever been, and filled them with joy, and gratitude, and love.

Nothing then could be more necessary or more seasonable, than this gracious visit. 4. This visit was made at a time when the church was employed in exerting the little life, which yet remained among them, and in using proper means to increase it. Though assembling at this time was dangerous, so that they did not dare to meet openly, yet they did assemble, and they assembled in the character of Christ's disciples. This proved the existence of a bond of union among them, which drew them together.

This bond of union consisted in sympathy of feeling. They all felt the same affections, the same apprehensions and anxieties, and the same sorrows, and all their thoughts centered in one object. This object was their crucified Master. Though they had forsaken him in a moment of temptation, yet they could not utterly renounce him. They could not give up all the hopes which he had excited, nor cease to feel the affection with which they had regarded him. His dead body, his grave, had still more charms for them than any other object, and they found a melancholy pleasure in thinking of him, in recollecting his actions and discourses, and in speaking of these subjects to those who could sympathize with them.

These feelings had prevented them from leaving Jerusalem and returning to Galilee, and the same feelings now drew them together. And while they were together, those few to whom their master had appeared, and whose faith had in consequence revived were endeavoring to revive the faith and animate the hopes of their fellow disciples. They were assuring them, that they had seen him, and spoken with him, that they had not been deceived: and were also calling their attention to the promises and predictions,

which he had uttered respecting his resurrection.

Thus those who had any faith in exercise, were doing all in their power to encourage those who had none; and those who had none, or who then seemed to have none, were listening to their brethren, half willing to be convinced, but still fluctuating between hope and fear. And it was at the very moment, while they were thus employed, that their Master stood in the midst of them and said, Peace be unto you. Yes, when they who feared the Lord, thus spoke one to another, the Lord hearkened and heard it, and not only heard it, but appeared to bless them. 5.

The gracious visit appears to have been made the very first time that the church met after Christ's resurrection. This circumstance is highly indicative of his affection for them, of his unwillingness to leave them mourning one moment longer than was necessary, and of his strong desire to be again in the midst of them. Since he had died for them, he loved them better, if possible, than before. They were endeared to him by the price which he had paid for them, by the agonies which they had cost him.

Hence he longed to see them, to speak to them, to assure them of his forgiving, unchanging love, and turn their sorrow into joy. Should any father present, voluntarily encounter great hardships, sufferings, and dangers for the sake of saving his children from death or slavery, would he not earnestly wish, after their deliverance was effected and his own sufferings were ended, to see them again, that he might congratulate and rejoice with them; would they not now be dearer to him than ever; and would he not, when he met them, feel compensated for all that he had suffered?

Similar, we may without presumption suppose, were the feelings of the man Christ Jesus, on this occasion. We remark lastly, that this gracious visit was made on the Lord's day, or Christian Sabbath. And the next visit which he made to his church, was made on the next Lord's day. Thus early did he begin to put honor on the Christian Sabbath, and to intimate that it was designed to come in place of the seventh day, or Sabbath of the Jews. In a similar manner he has ever since continued to honor it.

There has not, probably, a single Christian Sabbath passed, from that day to this, in which our Savior has not graciously manifested himself, if not to whole churches, yet to individual disciples. Nor will this day pass without similar honors. In the midst of some little band of his disciples, our Master will today stand invisible and say, Peace be unto you. My brethren, I doubt not that every real Christian present will unite in saying, Would to God, that we might be thus favored.

Would to God, that when this church shall approach his table he would come into the midst of it, and say, Peace be unto you. For those of you who are Christ's real disciples, know experimentally, that though our Savior is no longer visibly present on earth, he still favors his church with his real presence, and manifests himself to them, as he does not to the world; and that where two or three only assemble in his name, there he is in the midst of them. You also know, that without using an audible voice he can effectually speak peace to a guilty conscience, and a trembling, doubting heart; and make fainting love revive, and faith and hope grow strong.

But the great question is, Will he thus favor us? Have we any reason to hope that he will thus favor us, on the present occasion? It may be remarked, in reply to this question, that in several particulars the present situation of this church strikingly resembles that of the disciples, at the time when they were favored with this gracious manifestation of their Master's presence. In the first place, we are, as they were, exceedingly unworthy of such a favor. This, I trust, you are all ready to acknowledge.

There cannot surely be an individual present who will say, I am not unworthy of a gracious visit from Christ. To say nothing of our former sins, which were great, and numerous, and aggravated beyond all computation, have not the sins, which Christ has seen in us since our last approach to his table, been sufficient to render us forever unworthy of his presence? Have we not been unfaithful to our covenant engagements? Have we not practically denied him? have we not, though often warned, neglected to watch and pray against temptation? have we not suffered worldly-mindedness and unbelief to prevail in our hearts?

In the second place, are we not, like the disciples, far from being suitably prepared for such a visit? We are accustomed to suppose, and with truth, that thorough repentance, and deep humiliation for sin, are proper and necessary preparations for the gracious presence of Christ. But have we not reason to fear, that there is little of thorough repentance, or of deep humiliation among us? And does not unbelief prevail extensively? Do not many of you as little expect to see the Savior coming to revive his work among us, as the disciples expected to see him among them, when they assembled on that evening?

In the third place, it is certain that we greatly need such a favor. The disciples scarcely needed it more than we do. It seems as if nothing but our Master's returning presence can save us from the power of spiritual death. Unless he shall ere long thus favor us, the evils, which now prevail, will prevail more extensively and more fatally; iniquity will abound more and more; love will become more and more cold, and scandals and divisions will soon be seen. But on this point of resemblance we need not enlarge.

No disciple of Christ among us need be told how greatly we need his gracious presence. To these remarks it is scarcely worth while to add, that we are now assembled in the character of Christ's disciples, and on the day which he delights to honor. Thus far then, we may trace a manifest resemblance between our situation and that of the disciples. But we can, I fear, trace it no farther. I fear that we do not lament the loss of Christ's presence, and lay it seriously to heart, as they did.

We are ready indeed to acknowledge that it is an evil, and that it ought to be lamented. But do we suitably lament it? Do not many of us rather seek to console ourselves for his absence, by engaging more eagerly in worldly pursuits? And are those who have any life, using all the means in their power to revive and animate those who have none? In fine, is there among us any thing like that ardent, unappeasable desire for the presence of Christ; that preference of it to every other blessing, which we have reason to think the disciples felt?

I fear not; and I cannot but suspect, that if he does not on this occasion favor us with his presence, it will be, not on account of our unworthiness, nor on account of our unpreparedness in other respects; but because he sees that we are not suitably desirous of his presence, and that we are not exciting ourselves and each other to seek for it. If we are really deficient in this respect, it is indeed a great obstacle to the coming of Christ among us; for seldom indeed does he visit any church, until he sees that his presence is earnestly desired and sought for, and that he shall meet with a joyful reception.

My brethren, should he not favor us with his presence on this occasion, let us consider this evil as the cause of his absence, and set ourselves to remove it without delay. Let all, who have any religious feeling, use all the means in their power to excite similar feelings in the hearts of their brethren. Let all beware, how they forsake the assembling of themselves together, as the manner of some is. Remember that it was a private meeting of the church, at which our Savior thus appeared to them.

Remember too, what Thomas lost by being absent from this one meeting. While all his fellow disciples were filled with faith, and hope, and love, and joy, he was left for a time under the power of unbelief and despondency. But should our Master, notwithstanding our unworthiness, condescend to favor us at this time with his gracious presence; should he come and stand in the midst of us, and say, Peace be unto you; what shall we do? My brethren, we need not tell you what to do.

Your own hearts will inform you. Every one, to whom the Savior shall manifest himself, will feel ready to cast himself at his feet, to admire, and wonder at, and thank him for his goodness; he will feel more than ever sensible of his own unworthiness of such a favor; he will repent in dust and ashes, and his future life, like that of the disciples, will evince his sincerity and be spent in self-denying, and persevering labors in his Master's service.

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