



# CHRIST, THE TEST OF EVERY MAN.

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Prophetic Testimony.")*

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By Herbert Gill.



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# CHRIST, THE TEST OF EVERY MAN.

(LUKE XXIII. ; II. 34. 35.)

THE thought before me in reading these scriptures is to present Christ in a special light—to speak of Him as the One who, on the part of God, becomes a test to every man.

Nothing really tests men spiritually but Christ. Religion does not test a man. One may be zealous and occupied in religious ceremony and yet one may hate Christ. Look at Cain. Had you passed by his altar you might have judged by his offering that he was more zealous than Abel. But Abel's offering expressed appreciation of Christ; indeed, Abel typified Christ, and it was this that awakened all the hatred of Cain's heart, so that he rose up in the field and slew him.

Morality, good as it is, does not test a man. Saul of Tarsus was moral before he was converted. Where would you have found his equal morally? Yet he hated Christ and with untiring energy was doing all in his power to wipe that Name from off the earth. But on the way to Damascus he made a wonderful discovery. He saw that, moral and, in a sense, religious man as he was, he was presenting the bitterest opposition to Christ, and at the same time he learned that there was nothing but grace in the heart of Christ for him. It was that which broke him down. Afterwards he describes himself as "chief of sinners," because he had hated Christ more than had any other man.

The moment you bring in Christ every state of man is manifested. So the question—the burning question, that I would put to every one here to-night is that propounded by the Lord Himself when on earth: “What think ye of Christ?”

I wish to say a word or two on the scripture I read in Luke ii. It is a wonderful passage. It is part of Simeon’s address when he held the child Jesus in his arms in the temple. I can only touch upon one brief thought. He speaks of this Child being “set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel, and for a sign which shall be spoken against.” “Yea,” he says, speaking to Mary, “a sword shall pierce through thine own soul also [alluding doubtless to the cross], *that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.*” It is the latter thought I desire especially to emphasise to-night, that Christ is the *revealer of the thoughts and the hearts of men.*

Now while this was manifestly true all throughout the Lord’s active ministry on earth, it comes to light with more intense force at the close. In those moments of supreme sorrow and weakness and humiliation, when He is left, as it were, at the disposal of men to do with Him what they like, every man is shewn up in his true character, and in Luke xxiii. you see that people were not slow in taking advantage of that opportunity.

It is true that in thought this carries us back nineteen hundred years, but we do well to remember that although Christ is not here personally, yet He is still here in the way of

testimony, and the truth of Christ still becomes the test of every man; and I trust that, as we speak of Christ to-night, as then, so now, the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.

I desire to confine myself to the chapter I read and to the characters mentioned in it. I have not time to speak of others, interesting as it might be to do so. I begin with Pilate; he was tested by Christ. He was governor of Judea and the Lord was brought before him for trial. Pilate was a vacillating man. He bore no ill-will towards Christ. The last thing in the world he desired was to have the responsibility of deciding as to Christ. He preferred neutrality, and that may be the case with some of you, but neutrality is impossible when the truth is in question. His answer to the chief priests and the people is: "I find no fault in this man." But that only made them the more fierce. They accuse Jesus of stirring up the people, teaching throughout all Jewry, beginning from Galilee to this place, and when Pilate hears the word "Galilee" amidst the rabble cries, he inquires if the Lord were a Galilæan, and learning that He is of Herod's jurisdiction he sends Him to Herod. Pilate thought he had evaded the question most cleverly. He had not had to commit himself one way or the other, and he hoped that he had for ever got rid of his responsibility; but you cannot evade that question, you must meet it. Herod sends the Lord back again, and Pilate finds that issue is as living as ever. Then he has a secret interview with Jesus. It was on that memorable occasion that the Lord

said: "To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice." And then Pilate said unto Him, "What is truth?" He asked that question, and many a one has asked it since, but he did not wait for the answer. The truth was there undimmed in the person of the Lord, but Pilate went out from it, closing his eyes to it, and from that time his course is markedly downward. How solemn to close your eyes to the truth! Pilate goes out from that blaze of moral light, and the clouds of darkness gather around him, and what is the end of it? "Blackness of darkness for ever"! How graciously God seemed to encourage him to act aright. His wife sends a message to him: "Have thou nothing to do with that just man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him"; but having turned his eyes from Christ to the people, he is weakness itself, and the din of the multitude deafens his ears to the voice of God. He takes water, washing his hands and saying, "I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it." Can he plead before the throne of God—"I am innocent"? Did he wash those sin stains from off his hands that day? Alas, he did not. And yet there are many like him; seeking to evade the truth, they are forced into a position where they are compelled to ally themselves with the grossest unrighteousness. Could he speak to you to-night, how he could warn you of the folly of trifling with the truth. Pilate asked the question, "What shall I do then *with*

*Jesus* which is called Christ?" Do *you* ask that question? The answer is very simple. Bow to Him; trust Him; confess Him. Pilate had a magnificent opportunity, and so have you. But he missed it for ever. There is another question I have often been tempted to put into the lips of that man, and I would put it into your lips to-night. It is this:—"What shall I do then *without* Jesus?" Who would attempt to answer that? The thought of it is too terrible to contemplate. Oh, that it might impel you to declare for Christ now!

Next I pass on to Herod. Herod was tested by Christ. He was not indifferent, as was Pilate. He was marked by idle curiosity. He was desirous to see Jesus, to see a miracle. He was an utterly carnal man. He could not appreciate moral beauty. You find people of that stamp to-day. They have no appreciation for what is morally lovely, but they are eager for what appears to be miraculous, and alas! there are those in the profession of Christianity ready to cater to them. But Herod was mistaken as to the One he was to meet. He would like to have seen a display of power on the part of Christ. Such would have greatly pleased him and would have been on his own line, the exaltation of man. There he sat with his men of war, with all the pomp and display his carnal pride could muster, but he found nothing in Christ to answer to that. The time had not come for God's power to be manifested. The Lord was here in lowliness and meekness. Herod's time was always ready but the Lord's time had not yet come. But He did not have

long to wait for it. True, to accomplish the purposes of God He yielded Himself to the will of man. It was apparently the moment of His greatest weakness, but the power of the Gentile was soon to fall before that meek and lowly Man.

God had used the Gentile to chasten His people. But when Herod, as representing that power, would touch Christ, he is infringing on the divine prerogative, he is touching that which is precious to God and he must go. If he sets Christ at naught, if he mocks Him, it is to his own ruin; Christ answers him nothing and the moral reason for it was soon to be manifested. True, the Lord bowed to the cross and to the wicked hands that put Him there. He is crucified and laid in the grave and all the strength of the Gentile power is combined to keep Him in it. The great stone is rolled there, the Roman seal is affixed, the guard is set; but He comes forth as a mighty Conqueror, and morally the strength of the Roman power is shattered then and there; the stone rolled away shews an empty tomb that we may see how complete the triumph is. But that is not all. Not only was the power and strength of the pagan world shattered morally in the resurrection of Christ but you find in the Acts of the Apostles a resurrection company coming forth in all the energy and beauty of youth. What did they care for the power of Rome? They went forth undaunted by the threats of the world. They were in the good of the triumph of Christ, and they preached it, and before the might of their testimony the foundations of the pagan

world fell. Citadel and stronghold gave way as did Jericho of old before the blast of the rams' horns, so that the mob at Thessalonica were compelled to confess: "These that have turned the world upside down are come hither." They preached the triumph of Christ in spite of the mighty opposition of the Gentile powers, and when threatened, they did as Hezekiah did—laid the matter before the Lord. And it is as our souls are maintained in the good of the victory of Christ, and of that resurrection world that has come to pass in Him, that we can with courageous hearts pass through this world that has rejected Him, content to be nothing, gladly refusing its patronage, but with holy boldness bearing testimony to that world of glory in which Christ is everything. Soon that world, now hidden to sight, will be displayed. Soon we shall hear His voice—"Come up hither." Soon, very soon, He will come and the power of the enemy shall be *publicly* set aside, and He will bring all the glory with Him.

Then we get the chief priests, scribes and elders. These were all tested by Christ and were His bitterest enemies. They represent the religious power. They were the religious leaders. Pilate "knew that for envy they had delivered him." These enemies of Christ had a link with the people, and that made the opposition all the more subtle and solemn. They had had a place of peculiar privilege, but they had used it for their own exaltation and had forfeited it. God had set them aside and they had become thoroughly allied with the world. All the light and the power of God was



centred in a Man of another order—His beloved Son; and His meekness, lowliness, and grace so exposed all the religious assumption of these men that their hatred knew no bounds. They felt they were superseded. They were fearful of losing their grip on the people, and to hold their position they ally themselves with the world. That is proven by the man they chose. They chose Barabbas; his name means “son of the father,” and he was a true son of Adam, and Christ was the Son of *His* Father. Two worlds are built up on Christ and on Barabbas, and take their character from each; the one is marked by lawlessness and murder (for these were the charges against Barabbas), the other by righteousness and love. These religious leaders proved to which world they belonged by their preference for Barabbas, for the world loves its own. What an awful exposure! They are tested by Christ, and found, with all their religious pretension, in open alliance with the world as against Him.

I pass on now to Calvary and the malefactors. What a scene is the cross! A scene of moral paradoxes; there the love of God is revealed and the hatred of man is expressed. There we see God judging sin and yet saving sinners. There we see men reviling and murdering the Saviour, and the Saviour praying for and giving His life for His murderers. Truly the thoughts of many hearts were revealed there.

In the other gospels both thieves are said to have reviled Christ. Not so in Luke. In this gospel the thoughts of many hearts are to be revealed, and another heart is now found in *one*

of these men. "And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him." A dying thief would not have railed on his fellow thief on a gibbet, but this one railed on Christ because Christ tests and brings to light the true state of every heart. "If thou be Christ," he says, "save thyself and us." This man, in principle, was a Unitarian and so-called Christian Scientist combined. He denied the divinity of Christ to begin with. Satan had come to the Lord with an "If thou be the Son of God" in the temptation in the wilderness, and had been utterly routed, but in that "if" we hear again the hiss of the serpent through the lips of this malefactor. He denied redemption too, for how could Christ have saved Himself and saved others? How could He go surety for the stranger without smarting for it? All that he wanted was alleviation from his sufferings; he did not think of the future. He was blinded to a sense of his sin and to the moral perfection of the One who alone could put it away. But God had an answer for that scoffer, and He answered him through the lips of the other thief. "The other answering rebuked him." How magnificent that is! What a comfort to the heart of Christ to hear it! Wonderful light had entered into that man's soul and he took sides with God against his fellow, against himself, against the whole world represented there in its threefold character, and he declared boldly for Christ. He saw Christ suffering "the Just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God." He judged himself and God justified him. He says, "We indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our

deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom." As another has said, this thief was in a most perfect state of sanctification. He did not ask for relief from his sufferings. He did not ask to have his life continued here. No. This world no longer held his heart. It was not good enough for him. The whole power of it was combined against Christ, the One who alone could bring peace and joy to him, and he did not wish to be left in a world like that. He longed to be with Jesus, to be remembered by Him, to have a place in His kingdom, and he was willing to wait till that kingdom came. Few would care to be remembered as having hung on a gibbet, but this malefactor apprehended that the glory of Christ was His grace and the thought gladdened his heart that for ever he would cherish in his memory that moment when in his direst extremity he had cried to the Lord and the Lord had covered Himself with glory in answering that cry. And the Lord answered him immediately: "Verily I say unto thee, *To day* thou shalt be *with me* in paradise." For His own joy He would have that thief with Him *that day*. Think of the greatness of that work which could take a dying malefactor from a gibbet and fit him for the presence of the Lord. What an answer to the taunt of the crowd: "Let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God." Those taunts had added to the Saviour's sufferings and humiliation, but an answering joy and glory came almost immediately;

He took a dying thief to paradise that *very day*. Great as was the grace here expressed, who would dare to presume on it or trifle with it? I have heard people say: "I am going to do like the dying thief; he was saved in his last moments." I ask, "Which thief?" There were two. The one went from his gallows to paradise; the other went from that spot, illumined by the grace of God, dying as he had lived, in his sins, a scoffer, going out into eternity to share a scoffer's doom.

We have seen what an opportunity this was for men to express their indifference and hatred to Christ, and what a moment it was for grace to display itself, and how that malefactor appreciated and embraced it. But, on the other hand, these closing hours of the Lord's life on earth presented a wonderful opportunity for affection to manifest itself, and it is beautiful to see there were those who gladly seized it. It reminds one of David in the moment of his affliction when fleeing from Absalom. True, in his case he was suffering for his own sin, but he was God's anointed, and in *that* way he sets forth Christ; and if a Shimei took advantage of that moment of weakness and cast stones at him, cursing as he came, on the other hand you have an aged Barzillai and a Ziba who found their joy in ministering to him in his sorrow. What a comfort that must have been to David's heart and what a joy to the heart of God to see those who were in sympathy with Him about His anointed! So with the blessed Lord here; there were those who saw what a moment it was for affection, and they embraced it.

First we get the women. I suppose they set forth the affection of the saints. The hearts of these women had been attracted to Christ. They had tasted of His grace. He had met their deep need and had made Himself indispensable to them. They had clung to Him with true affection. Their happiness was all wrapped up in Him and His sorrow was theirs, and though they stand afar off at the cross (I suppose you might expect that), yet they are there sharing His sorrow and affliction, not ashamed to be identified with Him, who was given the place of a malefactor, to the last. The truth concerning that Man is still in reproach. The offence of the cross has not ceased, and true affection would still seek identification with it.

Then we get Joseph of Arimathea, and coupled with his name that of Nicodemus. Both of these were men of distinction in their way, and how beautiful it is to see that God would bring them to light in connection with giving the last touches of love to the precious body of the Lord! There was true dignity in that, and a moral distinction that put to the blush all the world's honours. Joseph was rich in this world's goods, but he had found in Christ what he had never found in the world, an "Object bright and fair to fill and satisfy his heart," and now he is allowed a privileged part in the fulfilment of that prophecy in Isaiah: "Men appointed his grave with the wicked, but he was with the rich in his death." (New Trans. Isa. liii. 9.) Man proposes but God disposes. Wicked men had prepared three graves for the

occupants of those three crosses, but one of those graves was destined to be unoccupied that day; it was not to be filled by the Lord's body. *They* made His grave with the wicked, but He was not to be laid in a malefactor's tomb. He was laid in a new tomb, prepared by one who loved Him. In those closing moments earth's "rich" ones were raised up to do homage to Christ and to pay Him the last tributes of affection. Associated with Joseph in this blessed service we find Nicodemus. He "brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight." That was a most costly gift and it indicates that he was rich in *affection*. It is true that twice when his name is mentioned it is coupled with the fact that he came to Jesus by night, but while that might sound like a stigma it does not appeal to me in that way. Doubtless when he first sought the Lord he realised that Christ was in reproach. Would that all realised it! Many come to Christ with little sense of that, for Satan would falsify the truth. But Nicodemus felt instinctively that the world—the religious world—was against Christ, and though he came by night, yet he *came*. He did not stay away. Better come by night than never come at all. And that timidity which marked him at first seems to have developed into moral courage, though on the last occasion when his name is mentioned you find "who at the *first* came to Jesus by night," yet he comes out openly and confesses Christ, and never more boldly than when the whole world had proved its inveterate hatred towards Him.

I do not follow these devoted souls beyond the death of Christ, interesting as it would be to do so, and to see how those affections that clustered around Him then, were carried through into resurrection, and were found in the assembly. I have not time to enter upon that.

We have seen what a test Christ became in the closing moments of His life here in flesh. My desire is that what has been before us might touch our hearts and appeal to every one of us. He is no longer here in that character, but we are living in a moment that is similar in many respects. The *truth* of Christ is here; the testimony of the Lord is continued; and we are living in the last days, in the closing moments of that testimony on earth, in its present character. Indifference, opposition, envy we may expect, but that should only serve as an incentive to greater fidelity. Never was there a more wonderful opportunity than the present for affection and whole-hearted identification with Christ and His *ruth* to manifest itself. May the Lord give us greater desire to answer to the moment!

H. G.

