## "BEFORE ABRAHAM WAS, I AM";

WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOU.

BY P. R. MORFORD.

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G. MORRISH, 20, PATERNOSTER SQUARE,

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(JOHN VIII.)

"Jesus went unto the mount of Olives.

" And early in the morning he came again into the temple, and all the people came unto him; and he sat down, and taught them. And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in the midst, they say unto him, 'Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?' This they said, tempting him, that they might have to accuse him. But Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not. So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, 'He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.' And again he stooped down, and wrote on the ground. And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst.

"When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, 'Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?' She said, 'No man, Lord.' And Jesus said unto her, 'Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more,'" (Yers. 1-11.)

"Then said Jesus again unto them, 'I go my way, and ye shall seek me, and shall die in your sins: whither I go, ye cannot come.' Then said the Jews, 'Will he kill himself? because he saith, Whither I go, ye cannot come.' And he said unto them, 'Ye are from beneath; I am from above: ye are of this world; I am not of this world. I said therefore unto you, that ye shall die in your sins: for if ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins.' Then said they unto him, 'Who art thou?' And Jesus saith unto them, 'Even the same that I said unto you from the beginning. I have many things to say and to judge of you: but he that sent me is true; and I speak to the world those things which I have heard of him.' They understood not that he spake to them of the Father.

"Then said Jesus unto them, 'When ye have lifted up the Son of man, then shall ye know that I am he, and that I do nothing of myself; but as my Father hath taught me, I speak these things. And he that sent me is with me: the Father hath not left me alone; for I do always those things that please him.' As he spake these words, many believed on him. Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, 'If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples

indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." (Yers. 21-33.)

"Then answered the Jews, and said unto him, 'Say we not well that thou art a Samaritan, and hast a devil?' Jesus answered, 'I have not a devil; but I honour my Father, and ye do dishonour me. And I seek not mine own glory: there is one that seeketh and judgeth. Yerily, verily, I say unto you, If a man keep my saying, he shall never see death.' Then said the Jews unto him, 'Now we know that thou hast a devil. Abraham is dead, and the prophets: and thou sayest, If a man keep my saying, he shall never taste of death. Art thou greater than our father Abraham, which is dead? and the prophets are dead; whom makest thou thyself?'

"Jesus answered, 'If I honour myself, my honour is nothing: it is my Father that honoureth me; of whom ye say, that he is your God: yet ye have not known him; but I know him: and if I should say, I

know him not, I shall be a liar like unto you: but I know him, and keep his saying. Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad.' Then said the Jews unto him, 'Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham?' Jesus said unto them, 'Yerily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am.'

"Then took they up stones to cast at him: but Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by." (Yers. 48-59.)

I would like to refer to a few verses in this chapter, particularly verses 24, 28 and 58. In verse 24 the Lord Jesus said to the Jews, "If ye believe not that I AM [you will notice the "he" is in italics], ye shall die in your sins," and in verse 28, "When ye have lifted up the Son of man, then shall ye know that I AM," and

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in verse 58, "Before Abraham was, I AM."

The desire has been expressed in prayer to God that the reality of eternity might be brought before men. As a finite creature one feels incompetent to do that; no man can do it, because he does not know eternity except as God may give power and light. The power of the gospel is to lift souls into the sphere of eternal things, things not seen. "The things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal," and the gospel deals with things unseen. Were it otherwise faith would not be required. One needs no faith to take in what is evident, what can be seen or touched. It needs no faith to know that London is a city; our senses make us fully aware of it. But faith is requisite to know that

there is a Man in heaven, and witness is borne to this fact by One come out of heaven, a divine Person, God the Holy Ghost. Faith puts us in touch with an order of things unseen and eternal, which is confirmed to us by the Holy Ghost.

My desire is from these three verses to touch on the thought of eternity, and how it has been brought to us in One who has come into holy Manhood, our Lord Jesus Christ. If God is God, He must be eternal. "Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto." And what is eternity? It is not a mere extension of time. We are here on earth to which time applies. God has set a clock in the heavens with greater and smaller hands, the sun and moon. He has applied time to us here: years, months and days are all under

His hand; God made time, man did not make it. All God's purposes are being worked out in time. "When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son." Time and man, and man and time, go together.

God has allotted man's life in relation to time. A man has lived on this very earth which we tread nine hundred and sixty nine years. (Gen. v. 27.) It staggers us to think of it, but it is fact. Now, if a man lives sixty nine years he has done well, leaving out the nine hundred. But scripture tells us that in a coming day men will live a thousand years on earth. But the life of God is outside all that. I want you to think for a moment of God, outside time and yet in His infinite Being taking time into account and man as in time. 'He remembers that we are

dust. Psalm xc. speaks of days and years, and you will recall the words, "We spend our years as a tale that is told." A few brief years under the government of God, three score and ten, and then cut off and we fly away. The expression "cut off" shews it is unnatural; it is not natural for people to die, God never made man to die. Death has clearly come in as the penalty for sin; man would never have died, not even at nine hundred and sixty nine, if sin had not come in.

Now outside of all that, the blessed God lives, He is, and that is the only way we can express what God is, and the very nearest thought we can have of what God lives in, is that eternity is an ever-present now, without past or future. You say you cannot conceive it; neither can I. But God does not dwell in time, He dwells in eternity. Past and future are alike to Him, but not to us, for we are finite. "Even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God." Psa. xc. 3.) He is "The high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity." (Isa. lvii. 15.) We are in time, and I see man has to die. But why? He has to die because he is a sinner. You remember the daughters of Zelophehad, speaking of their father, admitted it, saying, "Our father died in his own sin." Every man that dies, dies in his own sin; that is the penalty, but it does not meet the question of his sin. Some people think that, when they die, their death in a way atones for their sins. How great a mistake! Yet the mistake arises because we do not take sufficiently into account that the question of sin touches the eternal Being of God, it challenges

the holiness of His eternal Being; it is against God. If we can see this from scripture, I think we shall understand the necessary severity of the penalty on sin.

Had sin reference merely to what is finite, a finite punishment could meet it. If it were only against one's fellows, such as stealing, or lying, or defrauding, no eternal punishment could be called for. But Scripture has proved that sin is against God, for man is responsible to Him: "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned," and that is why the gospel is preached: to bring home to man the gravity of sin, and at the same time to shew how God by the sacrifice of Christ has secured a righteous basis for forgiveness of sins. There are those who think that sin is only sin if you are found out. You are always found out with God.

"Thou God seest me." Nothing escapes Him. "All things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do." All is written in His book. But then sin at its root is against God, that is the point. It challenges the being of God. There must be no expression of another will in God's universe; if things are to be harmonious in God's universe there can be only one will there. Sin is the expression of another will, and it comes into instant collision with the will of God. You may say, does a little sin? Yes, a little sin does. What is sin? "Sin is lawlessness." (1 John iii. 4, New Trans.)

The smallest sin sets in movement a train of things you may never catch up; it is obnoxious to God, it is rebellion against God. The exhibition of my will, the simplest act of

mine under that will, comes into collision with the will of God. And if it does, it raises questions which are not finite, but which are infinite in their character, and eternal in their consequences. Though we are still on this earth and there are acts which God will judge on this earth, vet sin raises questions which are eternal in their character and must have eternal settlement.

There are offences between man and man, and the law of the realm has provided a punishment for such, but that does not alter the fact that sin is against God, and calls God's character in question. If murder is committed, that is sin, and the murderer must be punished by the law of the land—thank God it is so, but that does not expiate the offence with God. The penalty for man's offence against man cannot go beyond death, but as against God, it raises eternal issues; and a man dying in his sins has judgment to face, "after this the judgment." (Heb. ix. 27.) Men mock at sin and at the thought of eternal punishment, but that is because they do not know God. When once the soul is brought face to face with God, there is no more mockery of sin; its character is exposed, man realises that he is a lost sinner and that only God, against whom he has sinned, can save him. God has fully demonstrated His judgment of sin in the cross of Christ, "God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and [as a sacrifice] for sin, condemned sin in the flesh." (Rom. viii. 3.) And again "He hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." (2

Cor. v. 21.) Thus the cross of Christ, the Son of God, becomes the place of His righteous judgment against sin, and the basis of His righteous forgiveness for the repentant sinner; for you, reader, if, confessing your sins, you abjure them and submit to God's righteous claims.

I do not know whether I can illustrate time and eternity. A circle is an endless and unbroken figure, and is often used to convey the idea of eternity. Now if you draw a straight line against that circle, you will touch it at one point only. The time in which we live is like this straight line, which has a beginning and an end, but it has come in contact with eternity, and that touch is fraught with eternal issues to us of blessing or otherwise. I want to put it clearly, for we must consider it, pressing as life is to-day, and

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seldom, it may be, that we are able quietly to sit down and to take into account that God is. "He that cometh to God, must believe that He is," not only faith in the fact that God exists, but faith in God as a Being unalterable, unchangeable and ever living in His own still eternity, outside of time and man's reach, or life here.

\* \* \* \* Now let us turn to this chapter.

Have we ever taken in the immensity of it? It mentions both sin and sinners in the early part of it. What remarkable words are these: "He that is without sin." Have you thought of it? Just look at it for a moment. The Lord Jesus issues the challenge to that select company of scribes and Pharisees who were spotless in their outward demeanour. If anywhere in Jeru-

salem a man without sin could have been found, surely it ought to have been among them. On the other hand, there was one unquestionably a sinner, and they brought this woman to Him that they might get His sanction to carry out the law of Moses on her. But the Lord says, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her."

That man did not present himself, and he has never presented himself since. No one in that company had the hardihood to present himself as the one without sin, and I have never heard of a man yet who could. They did the only possible thing, as men, that they could do, and that was they went out. It was not possible for them to remain, but one full of sin stayed there, and she stayed to get the blessing. Whose presence were they in? That of a

Man. The only time in holy scripture we have it recorded that He spoke of Himself as Man is in this chapter. You will find that in verse 40, "But now ye seek to kill me, a man that hath told you the truth." Jesus said it. Scripture speaks of Him as Man, but this is the only time He speaks of Himself as Man. He constantly speaks of Himself as the Son of man, but here He speaks of Himself as Man. They were in the presence of a Man, but oh, what a Man! How different to every other man. Who was He in Person? That was the question. What was it made these men tremble and slink out of His presence? What convicted them as He wrote? I think it was that they saw the finger of God. Just as in the days of Pharaoh, Jannes and Jambres, the great magicians and sorcerers of Egypt, stood

before him in the presence of Moses, and said, "This is the finger of God"—we cannot imitate that. They were exposed by the finger of God. What does it write? "Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin." Man summed up in the divine account books, weighed in the divine balances, and, as the result, judgment about to be executed.

They were the fingers of a man's hand, but the message conveyed was the message of God. "Jesus stooped down and wrote," and they went out one by one. Why should they have feared a Man like that? What was there that terrified them and made them feel their righteousness was as filthy rags? These Pharisees were accustomed to walk through the market place and to be hailed as Rabbi, Rabbi, "My great one, my great one," by an admiring crowd. Why, then, was not their holiness

and righteousness sufficient to cover them in that presence? Because it was only outward, and they realised that in that Man, God was there.

Reader, consider! He who could say "I AM" had come out of eternity and had entered time, had even come under the great census of the Roman Empire, a date recorded in the annals of human history. Having walked here for thirty-three years He passed out of time by giving up Himself to the death of the cross, in order that the deep question of sin and all its consequences might be taken up and divinely met. Then from resurrection glory, forgiveness is proclaimed to whomsoever will in His namethe name of Jesus.

Before He came that blessed Person existed, subsisted in the

orm of God. I cannot tell you what that is, no one could. God, as God, dwells in light unapproachable, no man could ever fathom the Being of God, and Jesus, before His incarnation, "subsisted in the form of God." Nevertheless to accomplish the will of God "He made himself of no reputation," and took on him a bondman's form. That is the Man who was here, and that is why they went out. They were in the presence of the "I AM." So too, if your spirit comes into touch for one moment with eternity, it will alter everything. You must touch it after death, for "every one of us shall give account of himself to God." You must pass out of time, and you will leave the sphere of days and months and years; you will pass beyond them, but the gospel message is announced in time so that you may touch eter24 "BEFORE ABRAHAM WAS, I AM";

nity while you are yet alive, that you may touch God.

When God gave man a conscience, He gave him that by which he could know his responsibility to the eternal God. If God touches your conscience to-day, it is not to drive you out, but to bring you near. Those who went out lost the blessing. We have no record that they ever returned. They went perhaps through an admiring crowd in the market place, but I think they must have had the sense that they were but poor sinners. Before men they might keep up appearances, but there are no appearances to keep up for God. God looks upon man's heart; Jesus is God, and as the "I AM" all is naked and open to Him.

I come now to verse 24. "If ye believe not that I am, ye shall die in

your sins." I do not think it is quite "I'am he," but "I AM." John records this expression several times in his gospel, because he sets forth this blessed Man as the eternal God. "If ye believe not that I am, ye shall die in your sins." You may have believed Jesus to have been a very good man. Then you will die in your sins. If He was not God, He was not a good man. If the Saviour of men was not God, if He is not the I AM of scripture it is all over with you, you will die in your sins. But He is, and we have most abundant testimony to the fact. The testimony of two we are bound to accept, and in verse 17 He appeals to it. He is what He professed to be, it is simply for us to take it in. Unless ye believe that I am ye shall die in your sins, ye shall abide in your sinful condition, and there is no recovery afterwards. The test is whether you believe that "I AM." If you are right with God you can sustain the light of His holiness without going out. If you have confessed your sins you need not go out, you will not be afraid, and He will unfold Himself to you as the I AM. Suppose He had been the best

man that ever lived, He could not help you. There are hundreds of good men but they cannot help you. No one can announce the remission of your sins but One who is God, because God alone can forgive sins. They said, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" They were right. Thank God, He was no impostor, He was the great and blessed I AM -self existing, eternal One, not dependent upon anything outside for life. I am entirely dependent upon certain conditions for life, I am de-

pendent upon God. It is "in him we live and move and exist," and in His hand our every breath is, as in mercy God reminded the potentate Belshazzar while he was yet alive.

"Then said Jesus unto them, When ye have lifted up the Son of man, then shall ye know that I am." The Jews, under the hands of the Gentiles, lifted up the Son of man, they held Him up as an object of shame to the world, and at the same time they murdered Him. But you may depend upon it Israel will learn its guilt. They may speak with contempt of Jesus to-day, but they will yet be brought to account before God for their rejection of Him. Where do you stand in regard to it? Do you believe that Jesus is the I AM? There is no greater testimony to the fact that that blessed Man was divine than His words on

the cross, "It is finished." He put His own seal upon His work. Make no mistake in thinking that Jesus died a natural death, He did not. He did what no other man has ever done—He delivered up His spirit. It was in His keeping and He could do it, because He was I AM. Because He is self-supporting, selfexisting, though come into holy Manhood, He delivered up His spirit; they could but lift Him up. "When ye have lifted up the Son of man, then shall ye know that I AM." Do we know that name?

I turn to the end of the chapter, where they claimed Abraham as their father. Just as you hear people say to-day, "I am a churchman, I cannot take up these questions, I am quite content to be as my father was." Where are you before God? You cannot present your credentials as a

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churchman to God. You would find you had the wrong passport, to use an illustration. Heaven does not know anything about religious credentials; the only name they know there is "IESUS." If that name has been submitted to in your heart, you will have more than a passport. They speak of Abraham to the Lord Jesus, but what are these remarkable words? He speaks familiarly of Abraham. He spoke as if He had lived in Abraham's day: they are staggered by it. They said, "Thou art not yet fifty years old." Fifty years! How wonderful to apply years to the One who was there. He was only thirty-three years, but His face was "marred more than any man." For He had come from "the bosom of the Father" into man's time, into a scene ruined by sin, that He might be "the Lamb of God" to take away the sin of the world. The holy sufferings of that blessed Man were marked and recorded in His countenance.

Then He says, "Verily, verily" truly, truly, amen, amen, a dual witness-"I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am." No man before had used language like this. "Before Abraham was, I am." You say, "It is not human language;" no, it is divine. He affirms positively that He is God, self-existing, self-supporting-do you believe it? In that lowly Man that stooped down and wrote upon the ground, the blessed, eternal God was present, wholly identified with that blessed Man.

We must never forget that though He was seen in humiliation and acquainted with grief, He was never

less than the blessed God, He subsists as I AM. The best of men must disappear from His presence unless they are prepared to own themselves lost sinners in the light of the holiness of God. The only one who stood in His presence was that poor woman, a sinner confessed, exposed. Was there one that would not condemn her? Yes, He would not condemn her. He had not come to condemn but to save her, and He would do so, because He had come to lay down His life and thereby to glorify God. They went out selfcondemned.

It is a fearful thing to have a seared conscience. Do not trifle with your conscience. The conscience is given as a straight touch with the circle of eternity. If you believe that He is the "I AM," you will not die in your sins; you will know that He, by the eternal Spirit, has offered Himself to God for sin. You will know that He came down here and wrote man's history in the dust of death; He stooped down and wrote His judgment on man, and God, in His death, has maintained His rights, that He might shew mercy towards all.

May you know what it is to turn in your spirit to the One of whom it is said, "From everlasting to everlasting thou art God," that you may find in Him the forgiveness of sins, and may abide in the presence of Him who could say, "Before Abraham was, I AM."

P. R. M.

46. The Chase, London, S.W.

G. Morrish, 20, Paternoster Square, E.C.