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RELIGION NOT A VAIN THING.

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“It is not a vain thing for you; because it is your life.”—
DEUT. xxxii. 47.

THIS testimony was given thirty-three hundred years ago concerning personal and family religion. The witness is Moses. Aside from his right to be heard as a divinely-appointed messenger, as we believe he was, the great Hebrew law-giver is entitled to an audience, and the generations of men have given heed to his words, because he was one of the world's foremost men. Any one tall enough to cast such a shadow as has been thrown by his conspicuous form across the space of three and thirty centuries will be recognized as one of the world's most colossal figures.

In considering his testimony, as it is conveyed to us in the text, I remark—

1. That he was an *intelligent witness*.

No man is brazen enough to dispute the intellectual greatness or the extraordinary culture of Moses; and he was thoroughly informed in the matter about which he speaks. He had not simply taken his belief on trust. True, the faith he held was the faith of his father and mother. There are some who cast slight on those who hold to the religious beliefs in which they were brought up. As for me, I think it no discredit to any man's intellect or intelligence to believe the Bible and walk in the paths of piety because his father and mother cher-



ished the Christian's faith in life, and enjoyed the Christian's hope in death. If the Bible was a sufficient lamp to the feet of my father and my mother along the path they trod; if it guided them in duty, sustained them in trial, was a solace in old age and a comfort in death, I blush not to avow myself a believer in that religion in whose faith they lived and in whose hopes they died.

But this witness had abundant and unusual opportunities to compare the religious faith in which he had been reared with those beliefs which were different and hostile. He had been taught in all the learning of the Egyptians. He knew what was the best that could be offered by the world's wisest men, who had no revelation from God. He knew what fruits had been borne by the one form of faith and by the other. And he gives, in the words before us, his deliberate and intelligent testimony on behalf of the religion which was made known by revelation from God.

2. He was a witness who had *tested* that of which he speaks.

Many persons show a disposition to discount the testimony of young and enthusiastic believers—a disposition which we cannot approve. The faith and zeal of David and John and Paul was as real and as rational in the morning of their religious life as in the after-ripeness of their rich experience. But when any are inclined to undervalue the testimony of a witness because he has not had his faith tested by time, they can offer no such objection to that of the man whose words we are considering to-day. He had embraced this faith when young, and held it through all the years till now he was old. Through loyalty to God and to his people, he had turned his back, when a young man, on the most dazzling prospect of earthly greatness that could fire the ambition of any

youthful mind. And from that day forth, in banishment, in poverty, in conflict with Egypt's king and court, in trials from an unbelieving and fickle people whom he was leading from bondage to liberty, in all these weary years and through all these varied trials, his religion had been put to the severest test, and he had been able to make proof of its reality and its value. With this long experience behind him he utters with his aged lips the testimony in our text.

3. He was a *disinterested witness*.

He had nothing now to gain by speaking aught except the truth. He was now uttering his last words. In our courts of justice the declarations of a dying man are accepted as valid testimony. It is believed that the hour of death is "life's honest hour"; that when one is on the border-line between the life that is and the life to come the lips will speak the truth. Moses had been told that he must die. Before ascending the mountain to view the promised land and then to die, he spoke these words, which were his "dying declarations" as to the truth and the preciousness of that religion in the light of which he had walked "till travelling days were done."

I. The testimony of this witness:

(1), It is *not a vain thing*.'

Our religion is not a vain thing in the sense of *lacking sufficient proof*.

We who believe the Bible to be the word of God have solid ground on which to rest our faith, and can give to every one that asks us "a reason of the hope that is in us." We invite those who would know the grounds of our confidence to "walk about Zion and go round about her, to mark her bulwarks and consider her palaces."

It is not a vain thing because it is not a *speculation* or an *unpractical belief*.

Religion is practical or nothing. It prescribes a rule of life. It sets a watch at the door of our lips, and demands that our words shall be loving and truthful and chaste.

It goes where no human law can enter and asserts authority where no human ruler can exercise dominion, in the secret chambers of the soul. It demands that the thoughts and affections shall be subordinated to its control. That which prescribes a law for the outward life, which brings us into judgment for even idle words, and claims to regulate the thoughts and intents of the heart, is far removed from being a vain speculation, or the unfruitful belief of a doctrine or a creed, it is intensely and preëminently practical.

It may be added that a religion which has borne such fruits in personal godliness, in household piety, and in the moral renovation of communities and states, whose presence in any age or land can be as surely recognized by its effects as can the course of a running stream by the verdure that adorns its banks, is not a vain thing when tried by the supreme test of being judged by its fruits.

(2), It is *your life*.

This is true as to *nations*.

Israel furnishes a telling illustration. Immediately following the words of the text it is added: "And through this thing ye shall prolong your days in the land whither ye go over Jordan to possess it."

While the people of Israel obeyed the commands the promised blessings were enjoyed. They did not continue in possession of the fair land bestowed upon them because they did not continue to set their hearts to the words of God's law to keep them.

Dispersed among the nations of the earth ; scattered and peeled and without a local habitation, they are a standing proof of the truth of Scripture prophecies, and their history bears witness that religion is not a vain thing for peoples, and commonwealths, and kingdoms, because it is their life.

This great truth is in as full force to-day as when it was uttered by the renowned Hebrew leader, and its fulfilment afterwards registered in the sad chronicles of the Hebrew people. Righteousness exalteth a nation. Sin is a reproach to any people, and will work their ruin. The mills of the Almighty Ruler "grind slow, but they grind exceeding fine." The history of states and kingdoms that have risen, and prospered, and then gone to decay and ruin, is eloquent and emphatic in confirmation of the truth of our text.

There is a lesson and a warning here for us. Our country is on trial.

The perpetuity of our free institutions and the continuance of that prosperity which has hitherto been enjoyed, the *life* of our republic, cannot be assured except on condition of loyalty to God and obedience to his commands.

All our vast resources, our teeming population, our intelligence and energy, our Anglo-Saxon blood and prowess will not prevent the sure coming of decay and ruin, if we cease to be a people whose God is the Lord.

The Bible, the sanctuary, the Sabbath and the Christian home are chief among the defences which will secure to us and to our children our fair inheritance. The Bible has, in times past, been fiercely set upon, but like the anvil in the smithy, it is surrounded by the hammers that have been worn out upon its surface.

The chief attack to-day is upon the Sabbath ; and if we

let the Lord's day be despoiled of its sacredness and given over to worldly pastime, or trodden in the mire of worldly traffic by those who are led astray by the maddening greed for gain, we will have reached "the beginning of the end."

If the Sabbath of the Puritan and the Hollander and the Scot, the holy Sabbath of our fathers and our mothers, shall be exchanged for the "Continental Sunday" of modern Europe, or the fête-day of Mexico; if instead of the holy day we have the holiday, there will follow a sure and perhaps a swift decay, and the time will come when upon all the temples of our prosperity and greatness will be written "Ichabod," for the glory will have departed.

It is true of *families* that *religion is their life*.

It is the godly families that last.

In the early days here in Texas there were some large and noted families whose names were familiar as household words. They were ungodly and dissipated and reckless of human life. Their stalwart sons were the dread of the communities in which they lived. Though numerous then, they are now extinct. Their names are almost forgotten, and most of those who bore them went down to bloody graves "unwept, unhonored, and unsung."

In many communities in the older states can be seen the workings of this great law of life. There linger there the memories of prominent families, who were gay and godless. They were possessed of large estates, and held high social place by reason of birth and blood and wealth. They lived high and fast, without the fear of God or consideration of aught but the lighter or darker indulgences of a worldly life. They have disappeared. Other names are known where theirs were once most

prominent. Other owners hold their great estates and occupy the stately homes where worldliness bore rule and godliness was eschewed.

But there were other homes—some elegant and some humble—in which the parents set their hearts to God's word, and commanded their children to observe to do all the words of his law. The family altar was the centre of household life; the family Bible was enthroned in the place of honor, and the "sweet hour of prayer" was the gateway through which they went forth in the morning to the labors of the day, and at evening time to the peaceful slumbers of the night. The sons and daughters trained by the precept and example of parents who "lured to brighter worlds and led the way" have perpetuated the honored names their fathers bore. In many cases they occupy the old ancestral homes. The rolls of members in the churches and of those who are now ministers, elders, deacons, and Sabbath-school teachers are largely filled with the names of those who were the fathers and mothers in Israel in the generation that went before. Godliness is not a vain thing for families; it is their life, and through it they prolong their days.

For *individuals* religion is not a vain thing; *it is their life.*

It is not merely a preparation for death. It is not "life" in the sense of *being* or *existence*, though temperance and chastity and godliness tend to the strengthening and preservation of physical and mental health and life. Life is a larger word than mere existence. In common speech we recognize the distinction when we say that one has a great deal of or very little life, or when we say of one whose lot has been isolated, or his surroundings disagreeable, that he *stayed* in such a place for a given time, but that he did not *live*.

When one is possessed of the peace which comes from being justified by faith, and of a realized fellowship with God as our Father and with Jesus Christ as our Saviour and friend; when mind and heart are filled and fired with the high conception that man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever; when "sustained and soothed by an unfaltering trust" that all things in life shall work together for good, and that dying will be but going home, then there is life in the full meaning of the large word, for then the whole man lives. All the faculties must be employed, and all the desires of man's nature must be met in order that life, in its fulness, be realized. Man's moral nature; his sense of accountability to God and his relation to the future and to immortality, these are as real as his possession of a body and a mind. His consciousness of sin and of his need to be reconciled to God in order to have peace of conscience and a hope of heaven cannot be denied or ignored. Only the gospel meets the requirements of man's religious nature, and makes provision for satisfying the desires of the soul.

A bird has a nature which prompts it to fly in the air, and its wings are fitted for free and graceful movement in the fields of space. You capture the little feathered songster and confine it within the bars of a cage. It may be a gilded cage, and its place may be amid the fair surroundings of one of earth's most luxurious homes. The little captive may be caressed and petted, and its dainty food may be served by a fair and jeweled hand. But that caged existence is not *life* to the little bird. If you would minister to its real life you must open the prison doors and permit it to go forth on eager wing to fly in the upper air and warble in cheerful notes its glad song of freedom.

The prodigal son existed in the far-off land; but was it *life*? He had the memory of his early home, of a father's care and a mother's love. He had, moreover, the consciousness of sin, and the remorse the sinner must sooner or later feel. He was far away from the well-remembered home, without friends or friendship; forced to occupy himself with uncongenial toil; fain to satisfy his hunger with the food of the swine he herded, and was far more miserable than the unclean beasts which it was his daily task to feed.

That existence was not life to him. But when "he came to himself," and his returning feet bore him back to the home he had left; when the deep penitence of his softened heart found expression in the words of confession that leaped from his lips, and he was embraced in the father's arms and welcomed back to sonship in the father's house, oh! then the lost was found, and he who had been dead was alive again.

Man does not live by bread alone. When creature-good is enjoyed in fullest measure it does not satisfy. The ox that feeds upon our plains can satisfy his hunger with the tempting grass, quench his thirst at the running brook, and then lie down in the nearest shade and be at perfect rest. Every want his nature knows has been fully met. He has no bitter memories of the past, no forebodings of the future, and no consciousness of wrong to make him ill at ease. But it is not thus with man. He cannot feed the hunger of his soul with the things of earth, nor satisfy its thirst with worldly pleasure, wealth, or fame. Only the bread of heaven and the water of life can feed and satisfy the soul. The gospel offers these. The Saviour came into the world that we "might have life, and that we might have it more abundantly." "In him is life, and the life is the light

of men." Coming to him we obtain pardon, and with it peace. The soul that was dead in sin is quickened into life. Spiritual life breathes in prayer, rejoices in fellowship with God and all the good, and finds ennobling use for all the faculties and employment for all the days in consecrated service. The affections have an object suited to their heavenly birth in a divine Saviour, who is "chief among ten thousand and altogether lovely." And this spiritual life, beginning in grace, will be perfected in glory. "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life."

How do you, my hearer, esteem this religion of which our text bears witness? You may say that you set high value on it, and that you believe the Scriptures and all they teach concerning Christ and the great salvation. This may be the utterance of your lips, but what is the language of your life? There is a familiar adage that "actions speak louder than words." Do you act as though this were a vain thing, or to you the "one thing needful"? To profess to believe the Bible and to acknowledge the importance of personal religion, and yet neglect the great salvation, is a fearfully inconsistent course.

The man whose heart has led him to be an atheist is consistent with his cheerless creed when he lives without God and without hope in the world. He who can walk amid the foot-prints of the Deity, which are impressed on all the acres of the globe; who can lift his eyes to yon heavens, where the Maker's name is written in syllables of stars; who can shut his eyes to all the proofs of God's being and wisdom and power that are above and about and within him, and say, "there is no God," he is consistent with his cold and dreadful belief when he lives as though it were "all of life to live, and all of death to die."

The skeptic, who does not accept these Scriptures as the word of God; who is so credulous as to believe that this wonderful book was written by unaided men; who can believe that the character, and the life, and the words of Jesus of Nazareth were the product of the thought of the fishermen of Galilee, and that they died for bearing witness to the resurrection of a Saviour who did not rise from the dead; the man who can believe all this is consistent in refusing to yield to this Saviour the love of his heart and the loyalty of his life.

But not so with you, if you profess to believe the Scriptures to be the word of God, and to accept their teachings about sin and salvation, about heaven and hell, and yet treat as a vain thing "the hope set before you in the gospel" by neglecting to lay hold upon it. How have you been treating him who has been standing and knocking at the door of your heart through all your years? What of your attitude to the church, in which he asks you to take your place and confess him before men?

What does your action say when the communion board is spread, and that Saviour whom you honor with your lips says to you, "Do this in remembrance of me," and you refuse to take a place among those who remember his love?

Were I to ask you on what terms you would barter away your faith in the Bible and your hope that some day you may be able to "read a title clear to a mansion in the skies," I doubt not you would shrink with shuddering from the proposal, and declare that you would not make that fearful bargain for a price that worlds would rate for. But, dear dying friend, what is the language of your life?

My Christian friends, do we manifest such earnest

devotion to the Master we profess to serve, and give such diligence to make our calling and election sure, as to give proof that with us religion is not a vain thing but that it is our life? May God help us to walk worthy of our high vocation, and to show, by the choices we make and the lives we live, that we "count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord."

This religion, to which the testimony of Moses was borne so long ago, is an *old religion*. Some things are the better for being old. Were we to seek a shelter beneath which to pitch our tent we would not choose the blooming and graceful vine that had sprung into being and beauty since the last frost and would perish with the next. Rather would we select an oak, like that beneath which Abram dwelt at Mamre, and which, gnarled and knotted though it might be, has anchored its great roots amid the rocks beneath the sod, and with giant arms has waged victorious struggle with the winds and storms of centuries. When we seek a place on which to build a home we do not go to the tide-washed beach whose sands may have been cast into forms of beauty by the movement of the waves, and strewn with shells and coral that have been lavished on its surface by the sea. We would go rather to some firm ground beyond the reach of tides, and digging deep till we find the rock, we would there build our habitation, and then feel sure that though "the rains may descend, and the floods come, and the winds blow and beat upon our house, it will not fall because founded on a rock."

Were we about to cross the sea we would not choose the new and gaily-painted vessel that, fresh from the builder's yard, was just weighing anchor for her trial trip. We would prefer the veteran ship whose timbers

had been tested by the waves, and whose sails had been tried and mayhap torn by the storms through which the staunch vessel had often borne her living freight to the desired haven.

In religion "what is new is not true, and what is true is not new."

We will only build wisely when we build on the Rock of Ages.

In choosing the bark on which to venture the precious interests of our souls and our hopes of heaven, let us take up with no speculation of "modern thought"; no faith that claims to be better, because newer, than that in which our fathers and mothers lived and died. But let us make our voyage, as did they, in "the old ship of Zion, which has landed many thousands and can land as many more."