

CHAPTER 2

When we turn to Holy Writ, this mystery of a silent Heaven, which is driving so many to infidelity if not to atheism, seems to become more utterly insoluble. The life and teaching of the great Prophet of Nazareth have claimed the admiration of multitudes, even of those who have denied to Him the deeper homage of their faith. All generous minds acclaim Him as the noblest figure that has ever passed across the stage of human life. But Christianity claims for Him infinitely more than this. The great and unknown God had dwelt in impenetrable darkness and unapproachable light--seeming contradictions which harmonize in fact in a perfect representation of His attitude toward men. But now He at last declared Himself. The Nazarene was not merely the pattern man of all the ages, He was Himself Divine, "God manifest in the flesh." The inspired prophets had foreshadowed this: *now* it was accomplished. The dream of heathen mythology was realized in the great foundation fact of Christianity--God assumed the form of a man and dwelt as a man among men, speaking words such as mere man never spoke, and scattering on every hand the proofs of His Divine character and mission.

But the sphere of the display was confined to the narrowest limits--the towns and villages of a district scarcely larger than an English county. If this was to be the end of it, a theory so sublime must be exploded by its inherent incredibility. But throughout His ministry He spoke of a mysterious death He had to suffer, and of His rising from the dead and returning to the heaven from which He had come down, and of triumphs of His power to follow upon that ascension--triumphs such as they to whom He spoke were then incapable of understanding. And, in keeping with the hopes He thus inspired, among His latest utterances, spoken after His resurrection and in view of His ascension, we find these sublime and pregnant words--"*All power is given unto Me in heaven and on earth.*" The position of avowed unbelief here is perfectly intelligible; but what can be said for the covert skepticism of modern Christianity which explains this to mean nothing more than the assertion of a mystical authority to send out preachers of the gospel!

Accept the scheme of revelation as to man's apostasy and fall, and his consequent alienation from God, and the history of the world down to the time of Christ can be explained. But type and promise and prophecy testified with united voice that the advent of Messiah should be the dawn of a brighter day, when "the heavens should rule," when all wrong should be redressed, and sorrow and discord should give place to gladness and peace. The angelic host who heralded His birth confirmed the testimony, and seemed to point to its near fulfillment. And these words of Christ Himself ring out like a proclamation that earth's great jubilee at last was come. Nor did the events of the early days which followed belie the hope. If because of a great public miracle wrought by them in His name the apostles were threatened with penalties, they appealed from men to God, and then and there God gave public proof that He heard their prayer, for "the place was shaken where they were assembled" (Acts 4:31). Sudden judgment fell upon Ananias and Sapphira when they sinned, and as a consequence "great fear came upon all" (Acts 5:1-11). "By the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people" (Acts 5:12). From the surrounding villages "the multitude"--that is, the inhabitants *en masse*--gathered to Jerusalem carrying their sick, "and they were healed

every one" (Acts 5:16). And when their exasperated enemies seized the apostles and thrust them into the common prison, "the angel of the Lord by night opened the prison doors and brought them forth" (Acts 5:19).

At this very period it was, no doubt, that the martyr Stephen fell. Yes, but ere he sank beneath the blows showered upon him by his fierce murderers, the heavens were opened and revealed to him a vision of his Lord in glory. If martyrdom brought such visions today, who would shrink from being a martyr! By a like vision the most prominent witness to his death became changed into an apostle of the faith he had resisted and blasphemed. And when he in his turn found himself in the grasp of cruel enemies at Philippi, his midnight prayer was answered by an earthquake which shook the foundations of his prison. Unseen hands struck off the chains which bound him, freed his feet from the stocks in which they had been made fast, and threw the jail doors open.

The Apostle Peter, too, had experienced a like deliverance when held a prisoner by Herod at Jerusalem, and this on the very eve of the day appointed for his death. The record is definite and thrilling. *"Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains; and the keepers before the door kept the prison, and behold the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison; and he smote Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands."* "The iron gate" of the prison "opened to them of its own accord," and together they passed into the street.

These are but gleanings from the narrative of the opening chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. Divine intervention was no mystic theory with these men. "All power in heaven and on earth" was no mere shibboleth. The story of the infant Church, like the early history of the Hebrew nation, was an unbroken record of miracles. But there the parallel ends. Under the old economy the cessation of Divine intervention in human affairs was regarded as abnormal, and the fact was explained by national apostasy and sin. And the times of national apostasy were precisely the period of the prophetic dispensation. Then it was that the Divine voice was heard with increasing clearness. But in contrast with this, Heaven has now been silent for eighteen long centuries. This fact, moreover, might seem less strange if prophecy had ceased with Malachi and miracles had not been renewed in Messianic times. But though miraculous powers and prophetic gifts abounded in the Pentecostal Church, yet when the testimony passed out from the narrow sphere of Judaism and was confronted by the philosophy and civilization of the heathen world--at the very time in fact when, according to accepted theories, their voice was specially required--that voice died away forever.

Is there nothing here to excite our wonder? Some of course will dispose of the matter by rejecting every record of miracles, whether in Old Testament times or New, as mere legend or fable. Others again will protest that miracles are actually wrought today at certain favored shrines. But here in Britain, at least, most men are neither superstitious nor infidel. They believe the Biblical record of miracles in the past, and they assent to the fact that ever since the days of the apostles the silence of Heaven has been unbroken. Yet when challenged to account for this, they are either wholly silent or else they offer explanations which are utterly inadequate, if not absolutely untrue.

To plead that the idea of Divine intervention in human affairs is unreasonable or absurd is only to afford a proof how easily the mind becomes enslaved by the ordinary facts of experience. The believer recognizes that such intervention was common in ancient times, and the unbeliever most fairly argues that if there really existed a God, all-good and almighty, such intervention would be common at *all* times. The taunt would be easily met if the Christian could make answer that this world is a scene of probation where God in His infinite wisdom has thought fit to leave men absolutely to themselves. But in presence of an open Bible such an answer is impossible. The mystery remains that "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spoke in time past unto the fathers," never speaks to His people now! The Divine history of the favored race for thousands of years teems with miracles by which God gave proof of His power with men, and yet we are confronted by the astounding fact that from the days of the apostles to the present hour the history of Christendom will be searched in vain for the record of a single public event to compel belief that there is a God at all.¹

1 See Appendix, Note I.