

GROWTH IN GRACE. Subject of Dr. McCook's Discourse Yesterday.

The Learned President of Princeton College Speaks in the First Presbyterian Church.

Notwithstanding the heat, the First Presbyterian church of this city was yesterday filled to its utmost capacity by a select audience, assembled to greet Dr. McCook, the famous divine and president of Princeton college.

His text was "Growth in Grace, Illustrated in the Life of Nicodemus." His text was from John XIX, 39: "And there came also Nicodemus, (which at the first came to Jesus by night) and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pound weight."

He said, "Among other and higher excellencies by which the four evangelists were characterized, every human mind is much interested to notice the variety of human character, good and evil, brought before us. In the center or foreground of the painting, (if painting it can be called), which is the simplest of all simple narratives) stands Jesus, the brightest of the Father's glory, and the express image of his power only seen in the shadow, working miracles, relieving distress and teaching his disciples, under the pressure all the while of the mighty load."

Around, we see the apostles distinguished by almost every possible diversity of character; some timid, others confident, each with a heart ungodly by nature but all, with one and the same exception, coming under divine power, which is struggling with remaining corruption within them.

At that place a party of scribes and Pharisees. Scattered among these we find persons who had been relieved by grace of Him who went about continually doing good, who had their burdens of care removed or their diseases healed. This man fixing his eyes so eagerly on Jesus was lately blind; this other listening so intently was lately deaf; this other walking and leaning with such slowness, a short time ago, hopelessly lame; and this other, so full of life and joy, was, but a few days ago, prostrated on a bed of sickness, or shut up in

THE GLOOM OF THE SEPULCHRE. In the background of the scene we have the mass of the people vacillating between two opinions; now straggling his path with branches of trees and shouting Hosanna, and again low voice demanding his crucifixion. Where else will you meet such a variety of character, reaching from spotless excellence on the one hand and bloated lust and demagogical malice and fury on the other. Heaven and earth and hell, God and man and devils, the flesh and the spirit, human nature and divine grace, met and wrestle and struggle like we see the several properties of each. By this mixture of light and shadow we are interested and allowed to pursue the path before us; and in doing so we pick up most salutary instruction. I believe it may be said that he who has thoroughly studied the gospel history

knows more of human nature in its deeper characters and moods, especially in its relation to God, the friend and to God, (the supposed) foe, than one who has read all the histories that were ever written of all the people that have ever lived.

We mean at this time to single out for special contemplation, a single person from the multitudes that pass before us. That individual is Nicodemus. He is presented to view in three different positions. In the passage immediately before us, as engaged with Joseph of Arimathea, in committing the body of Jesus to the place of sepulchre. But the evangelist in mentioning this circumstance, so much to his credit, refers to another passage in the bible not so commendable. "Then came Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night." On turning back to chapter III, we read of Nicodemus giving

NOBLE TESTIMONY. In different circumstances in behalf of justice and of Christ, but in that passage the same humbling clause is added, "he that came to Jesus by night." Among other distinguishing qualities, the scriptures are ever faithful in recording the infirmities also of those whose excellencies are held forth to our admiration. Paul, in alluding to his success adds that he was once a persecutor, a blasphemer, and claims, "Not I but the grace of God in me." In like manner when the faithfulness of Nicodemus is recorded it is added that at first he was so ashamed of Jesus that he could not come to him except at dead of night. We are thus taught in reading the lives of the saints to distinguish the sinfulness of the men and

THE POWER FROM ABOVE. "Not unto us, not unto us, but unto thy name be praise." Let us consider Nicodemus under the three aspects in which he is presented. "Nicodemus who, at the first, came to Jesus by Night." This carries us back three years in the history. Jesus at that time was just commencing his public ministry. He had come to Jerusalem for the first time since he began to teach and to work miracles. His life had hitherto been obscure till lately in Galilee, and now in Jerusalem, he wrought signs and wonders, which proved that he was a teacher come from God. But from his first appearance in Jerusalem the prejudices of the priests and rulers were aroused against him. Finding the temple, which was his Father's house, profaned by unseemly

merchandise he proceeded to cleanse it by casting down the tables and removing the money changers as a type of the work he came to perform in preparing the world, which ought to be his temple. From this time forward

THE JEALOUS EYES of the hierarchy were fixed on him and narrowly watching his conduct. A wound had been inflicted, which continued to rankle in their breasts. Nor did this enmity cease till, three years after, it succeeded in bringing him to the cross and to the grave.

You can easily conceive how in these circumstances it must have required much courage on the part of one possessed of rank and authority to avow himself to be a follower of Jesus. "Not many mighty, not many noble, are called. Yet God has had in every age witnesses for the truth from among the higher as well as

THE LOWER GRADES OF SOCIETY. It was on this very turn that Nicodemus first came to Jesus. Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish Sanhedrim, the supreme council of the nation, in short was one of the judges and senators of the land. He belonged to the sect of the Pharisees, the most popular and influential of all the parties into which the Jews were at that time divided, and whose one which felt its self righteous spirit most deeply wounded and its power shaken by the life and doctrines of Jesus. We can understand how great must have been the struggle before he could come to receive instruction from the new teacher of Nazareth, the lowly Jesus, the son of Mary and Joseph, the carpenter.

On the one hand prejudices must have led him to doubt whether one with so lowly an appearance could be the Messiah mentioned in such glowing language by the prophets and expected by the people to be

A TEMPORAL PRINCE, who was to sit on the throne of David and establish a more extensive dominion than the Jewish one had been in the time of its greatest prosperity. On the other hand, reasons told him that no man could do those miracles which Jesus did except God went with him. Pride must have suggested that, by avowing himself a follower of Jesus, he would be lowered in the esteem of the circle in which he moved. He felt as if he needed a teacher and a savior, and yet he was ashamed of one who came in so lowly a form. For a time there must have been a struggle in his breast like that between

CHAOS AND ORDER. at creation, when the spirit moved on the face of the waters, like that which we have seen between the light and thick masses of cloud at the dawn of the day, and no one but he who doth all things can tell which is to gain the mastery.

When at length the good overcame the evil, no doubt through the leading of the spirit of Jesus, it was accompanied by an unworthy compromise of principle. He resolved to go to Jesus, but he had not the courage to do so openly in the light of day. He was afraid that if he was seen in the company of the new teacher from Galilee he would lose

THE FAVORABLE OPINION of those of his own station; and every one acquainted with human nature knows that most men would rather lose favor of those beneath them in rank, or even of those above them, rather than of persons of their own circle, with whom they are in the habit of daily associating. We ought all to be ashamed of our foolish desecration here is one ashamed of the wisest resolution he had ever formed. If he had been about to visit an earthly prince he would have chosen the light of day, but so much are men dazzled by the splendor of worldly station, and so little do they esteem spiritual excellence, that he could come to him who was born King of the Jews only under clouds of concealment. If the herald had announced that Tiberius, the Roman emperor, had arrived in Jerusalem, we can conceive that Nicodemus would have selected the most public day and the most public street to wait upon him, in the midst of

BUSTLING CROWDS; but now, when he who is the Prince of Peace, foretold by prophets for thousands of years, his birth celebrated by angels and his power attested by miracles, and he himself the king of kings and lord of lords, came to Jerusalem he could not come to him except in a way which showed that he was ashamed of being seen in his presence

But it is well when we come to Jesus at all. We will be received if we have but faith as a mustard seed. Virtue will come out of him to make us whole if we but touch the hem of his garment. If Nicodemus had come to Jerusalem he would have been scornfully rejected, but he came to the Prince of Peace and he received a welcome. He did not discourage him by a single

WORD OF REPROACH or look of disapprobation. The greatest of teachers proceeded to instruct him in the grand doctrine of the necessity of being born again by the Spirit of God. While the great prophet of the church taught him by his word he also taught him by his spirit. He came with a veil over his heart so that he could not discern, as he heard them, the meaning of Moses and the prophets; he went away with the veil removed and with his mind enlightened. He came with his soul dark as the night which enveloped him, but he came to the son of light, and he was born again. He came to the light of the world, and he retired under the light of the morning, which shineth more and more unto the perfect day.

Upwards of two years have elapsed without our hearing of the Jewish ruler. We do not read how he passed this time, or whether, during it, he had any personal communication with who had instructed him in the doctrine of regeneration. Nicodemus, after the feast, may have gone to some other field of labor. We know that Jesus, shortly after this interview, retired to Galilee, the usual place of His abode, or rather of his wanderings, and so their future meetings may not have been very frequent. But when Jesus came up, as he did, to the great religious festivals of the Jews, we can conceive that Nicodemus would wait on his ministry and might seek

opportunities of meeting with him. This is certain; that he would often MEET WITH GOD in spiritual communion and the teacher who had come from God, and who had taught him the spiritual nature of Christ's kingdom, would help him in his devotion.

Passing over this part of his life we find him next presented to our view in his place in the Jewish Sanhedrim. Jesus had come to Jerusalem at the feast of tabernacles and his presence had been hailed by the multitude who crowded around him eagerly listening to the words of grace and salvation which flowed from his lips. A number of the people believed on him and avowed their convictions. The people were keenly interested, and their feelings were too loudly expressed not to come to the ears of the Pharisees and priests, who felt as if their dominion was tottering beneath them.

STUNG BY MALICE and jealousy, a hurried meeting of the great council of the nation was called to determine what should be done in the extraordinary circumstances in which they were placed. They intended to send officers to apprehend Jesus and drag him before their tribunal. When the officers drew near to Jesus they found him in the midst of the people, inviting them in the most encouraging manner to partake of the mercy brought nigh to them. "If any man that thirst let him come to me and drink." Before securing their intended prisoner the officers were induced to listen, and as they did so they found themselves interested in the discourse. Their attention became more and more riveted, they caught the feeling of admiration which

HEAVED IN EVERY HEART. They hesitated and delayed carrying their design into execution, and when Jesus finished his discourse they were so awed that they became completely powerless, they allowed him to pass away undisturbed, and at the risk of being terribly punished, they returned to those who had sent them out, with this signal testimony, "Never man spoke like this man." The council sat in stern and sullen impatience waiting the return of their servants, and on hearing this unexpected answer their passion could be restrained within no bound. Here were their own dependents falling from their feet, and they were asking, "Have any of the Pharisees believed on him, but this people who know not the law are cursed." "This is a popular delusion; only the lowest and most ignorant of the people have been

DECEIVED BY HIM; none of the learned have thought for one moment of espousing his cause. Can you point to a single Pharisee, a single ruler, who regards him with a friendly eye. No, it is impossible, and cursed must be the people be who are thus liable to be deluded." It is a trying time to Nicodemus as he sat there in the Council, a time fitted to search him and to show to himself and others the innermost springs and motives of his nature. He sees the passions of brother councilors exasperated to the utmost. Not a voice in the assembly is lifted in behalf of justice. Does Nicodemus seek at this time to conceal his faith in Jesus and he had done so on a former occasion? No though he should stand alone

LIKE A BREAKWATER in the middle of the waves he feels himself called on to speak out even though he should thus bring down upon him the ire of all his associates. He saw that the council was about to proceed to violent measures and in language which showed how calm he was in the midst of the tempest he put the simple question, "Doth our law judge any man to be dead? He that knows what he doeth?" In the conduct of Nicodemus on this occasion we discern courage and faithfulness of the highest order. It was a testing time and Nicodemus stood it. He said enough and he said no more. It is evident that during the two years that have elapsed since first we met with him, he has made decided progress in

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE. He who, at the first, could come to Jesus only by night, now stands by him in the open day, and in the face of the most decided opposition, before which the courage of the strongest might have quailed. "Add to thy faith virtue," the old Roman counsel, a noble quality when used in defense of a good cause. Christ has a kingdom and a cause in the world, in which there is evil opposing the good.

Again the curtain drops and months elapse before we see him more of the Jewish council. During this time he may have suffered not a little persecution, owing to the suspicions raised against him by the part he had taken. But his faith was now strong, and he could bear the trial, and may have been strengthened by it. The wind that might blow away the feeble spark may only kindle

THE STRONGER FIRE into a flame. Everything now indicated that the earthly course of a prophet who had appeared was drawing to a close. He had fulfilled the time appointed in the councils of heaven and his work was about to be finished. The council of the nation, headed by the high priest, convened him. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, when appealed to refers the case to the people, who demand his crucifixion. Every voice is raised against him, and they continue to assail him in his dying agonies, when the vilest malefactors have often had sympathy expressed in their favor. The circumstances are all more trying than those in which Nicodemus had formerly been placed in the Sanhedrim. At that time if he was opposed by the rulers of the land he had at least the people to support him. Now, he stood almost alone. The very disciples had fled in his hour of trial and only one had the courage to come

TO THE FOOT OF THE CROSS. A few pious women, scarcely observed by the multitude, remain to do the gentle offices of the dead. How is Nicodemus now to act? Does he, as at first, conceal his faith, or does he content himself, as in the second instance, in uttering a protest on behalf of innocence and against injustice? No. He is now ready to brave every peril. A friend, Joseph of Ar-

imathes, begs the lifeless body of Jesus, and Nicodemus joins him in preparing it for the sepulchre. Far above the fear, far above the applause of men these two join in their becoming offices. It would be difficult to find in history a braver superior to that of Nicodemus. There may be a nobler courage, than even that of the warrior in the battle or of the sailor in the storm. When Luther defended himself before the great emperor of his age, and a council of princes and prelates

AN OLD GENERAL greeted him, grasp him by the hand, and said, "I have fought in the thickest battles of my time, but I have never, after all, shown a valor equal to yours." The courage of Nicodemus was a higher order than that which forces and tights with danger; it was so ardent that it did not see the danger, and was in fact utterly unconscious of it.

So, Christian brethren, be not contented with past attainments. Besides this, with all diligence, add to your faith virtue, and to virtue knowledge, and to knowledge temperance and patience, and to patience godliness, and to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness charity, for if these things be given you and abound, they make that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." The true Christian does not allow himself to think that he has attained, or that he is

ALREADY PERFECT, but forgetting the things that are behind, he presseth forward to those that are before. He may not be perfect but he is seeking to be perfect. Like a good soldier of Christ, he will not cease from the contest till he has conquered those sins which are Christ's enemies and are his own enemies. We are to continue the contest until we have slain the last of our spiritual enemies. If it is objected that this must be till death, I say that even until death we must continue faithful. The Christian dies in armor, as we have heard of the warrior dying in the battle at the moment when his troops were raising the shout of victory. The last sound which he hears on earth is the clang of arms in his final contest with sin; even as the first sound which he hears in heaven is the song of triumph, "Blessing and honor and glory and power be unto him that sitteth on the throne and the lamb that was slain."

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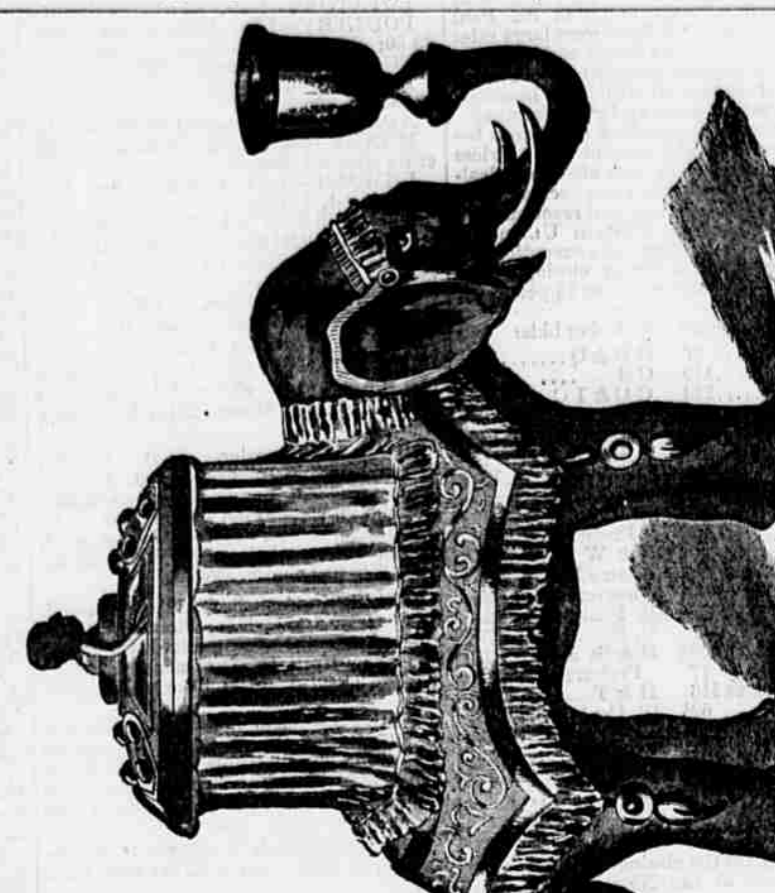
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