

In this session, Chesterton moves from the paralysis of standing at the crossroads to the fierce unity of a life actually lived. Joan of Arc becomes his great image of faith in action: not one who merely admired poverty or praised courage, but one who embodied them. From there, Chesterton turns toward Christ, whose mercy and righteous anger cannot be divided into neat modern categories. The episode closes as Chesterton begins "The Ethics of Elfland," suggesting that what is most common to humanity may also be what is most wondrous.

Full Transcript:

Welcome.

I'm glad you're here.

This is *Orthodoxy* by G. K. Chesterton, using the Project Gutenberg edition—read slowly, aloud, and in company.

These readings aren't lectures, and they aren't explanations. They're an invitation: to listen carefully, to follow an argument that wanders on purpose, and to allow surprise to do some of the work. So, let's take our time—and see where Chesterton leads us today.

Last time we considered Chesterton's argument that every real act of will is also an act of self-limitation.

This week, Chesterton presses the point further. He looks at thinkers who try to avoid limitation, either by rejecting every road or by accepting every road. But, in the end, they remain standing at the crossroads. Against them, Chesterton sets Joan of Arc: not a theorist of courage or poverty, but one who lived them. She chose a path and went down it like a thunderbolt.

Let's turn now to the reading.

Reading 11 – lines 1321 through 1434 of Chesterton, G. K. *Orthodoxy* (1908). Project Gutenberg eBook no. 16769.

Here I end (thank God) the first and dullest business of this book--the rough review of recent thought. After this I begin to sketch a view of life which may not interest my reader, but which, at any rate, interests me. In front of me, as I close this page, is a pile of modern books that I have been turning over for the purpose--a pile of ingenuity, a pile of futility. By the accident of my present detachment, I can see the inevitable smash of the philosophies of Schopenhauer and Tolstoy, Nietzsche and Shaw, as clearly as an inevitable railway smash could be seen from a balloon. They are all on the road to the emptiness of the asylum. For madness may be defined as using mental activity so as to reach mental helplessness; and they have nearly reached it. He who thinks he is made of glass, thinks to the destruction of thought; for glass cannot think. So he who wills to reject nothing, wills the destruction of will; for will is not only the choice of something, but the rejection of almost everything. And as I turn and tumble over the clever, wonderful, tiresome, and useless modern books, the title of one of them rivets my eye. It is called "Jeanne d'Arc," by Anatole France. I have only glanced at it, but a glance was enough to remind me of Renan's "Vie de Jésus." It has the same strange method of the reverent sceptic. It discredits supernatural stories that have some foundation, simply by telling natural stories that have no foundation. Because we cannot believe in what a saint did, we are to pretend that we

know exactly what he felt. But I do not mention either book in order to criticise it, but because the accidental combination of the names called up two startling images of sanity which blasted all the books before me. Joan of Arc was not stuck at the cross-roads, either by rejecting all the paths like Tolstoy, or by accepting them all like Nietzsche. She chose a path, and went down it like a thunderbolt. Yet Joan, when I came to think of her, had in her all that was true either in Tolstoy or Nietzsche, all that was even tolerable in either of them. I thought of all that is noble in Tolstoy, the pleasure in plain things, especially in plain pity, the actualities of the earth, the reverence for the poor, the dignity of the bowed back. Joan of Arc had all that and with this great addition, that she endured poverty as well as admiring it; whereas Tolstoy is only a typical aristocrat trying to find out its secret. And then I thought of all that was brave and proud and pathetic in poor Nietzsche, and his mutiny against the emptiness and timidity of our time. I thought of his cry for the ecstatic equilibrium of danger, his hunger for the rush of great horses, his cry to arms. Well, Joan of Arc had all that, and again with this difference, that she did not praise fighting, but fought. We *know* that she was not afraid of an army, while Nietzsche, for all we know, was afraid of a cow. Tolstoy only praised the peasant; she was the peasant. Nietzsche only praised the warrior; she was the warrior. She beat them both at their own antagonistic ideals; she was more gentle than the one, more violent than the other. Yet she was a perfectly practical person who did something, while they are wild speculators who do nothing. It was impossible that the thought should not cross my mind that she and her faith had perhaps some secret of moral unity and utility that has been lost. And with that thought came a larger one, and the colossal figure of her Master had also crossed the theatre of my thoughts. The same modern difficulty which darkened the subject-matter of Anatole France also darkened that of Ernest Renan. Renan also divided his hero's pity from his hero's pugnacity. Renan even represented the righteous anger at Jerusalem as a mere nervous breakdown after the idyllic expectations of Galilee. As if there were any inconsistency between having a love for humanity and having a hatred for inhumanity! Altruists, with thin, weak voices, denounce Christ as an egoist. Egoists (with even thinner and weaker voices) denounce Him as an altruist. In our present atmosphere such cavils are comprehensible enough. The love of a hero is more terrible than the hatred of a tyrant. The hatred of a hero is more generous than the love of a philanthropist. There is a huge and heroic sanity of which moderns can only collect the fragments. There is a giant of whom we see only the lopped arms and legs walking about. They have torn the soul of Christ into silly strips, labelled egoism and altruism, and they are equally puzzled by His insane magnificence and His insane meekness. They have parted His garments among them, and for His vesture they have cast lots; though the coat was without seam woven from the top throughout.

CHAPTER IV-- *The Ethics of Elfland*

When the business man rebukes the idealism of his office-boy, it is commonly in some such speech as this: "Ah, yes, when one is young, one has these ideals in the abstract and these castles in the air; but in middle age they all break up like clouds, and one comes down to a belief in practical politics, to using the machinery one has and getting on with the world as it is." Thus, at least, venerable and philanthropic old men now in their honoured graves used to talk to me when I was a boy. But since then I have grown up and have discovered that these philanthropic old men were telling lies. What has really happened is exactly the opposite of what they said would happen. They said that I should lose my ideals and begin to believe in the methods of practical politicians. Now, I have not lost my ideals in the least; my faith in fundamentals is exactly what it always was. What I have lost is my old childlike faith in

practical politics. I am still as much concerned as ever about the Battle of Armageddon; but I am not so much concerned about the General Election. As a babe I leapt up on my mother's knee at the mere mention of it. No; the vision is always solid and reliable. The vision is always a fact. It is the reality that is often a fraud. As much as I ever did, more than I ever did, I believe in Liberalism. But there was a rosy time of innocence when I believed in Liberals.

I take this instance of one of the enduring faiths because, having now to trace the roots of my personal speculation, this may be counted, I think, as the only positive bias. I was brought up a Liberal, and have always believed in democracy, in the elementary liberal doctrine of a self-governing humanity. If any one finds the phrase vague or threadbare, I can only pause for a moment to explain that the principle of democracy, as I mean it, can be stated in two propositions. The first is this: that the things common to all men are more important than the things peculiar to any men. Ordinary things are more valuable than extraordinary things; nay, they are more extraordinary. Man is something more awful than men; something more strange. The sense of the miracle of humanity itself should be always more vivid to us than any marvels of power, intellect, art, or civilization. The mere man on two legs, as such, should be felt as something more heart-breaking than any music and more startling than any caricature. Death is more tragic even than death by starvation. Having a nose is more comic even than having a Norman nose.

“Joan of Arc ... chose a path, and went down it like a thunderbolt.”

I like to consider all my options, but there comes a time when I simply have to choose one and say no to all the others. There is a fierceness in Chesterton's description of Joan of Arc. I do not mean only the fierceness of her actions, but the fierceness of her whole approach to life. She was as fierce in her gentleness as she was in her violence. She did not let indecision or image hold her back. Each footfall came out of the unity of a person whose faith had become determined action.

As Chesterton moves from the disunity of modern thought into the ethics of imagination, could he be suggesting that the disunity of our age often passes itself off as practical maturity? Do mature people actually lose their ideals, or do they sometimes surrender them with a shrug to practicality and necessity? And does Chesterton then call the age of individualism to account by suggesting that, in his words, “...the things common to all men are more important than the things peculiar to any men”? Is the most remarkable thing about us not what makes us different, but what we hold in common?

Next time, Chesterton turns to democracy, tradition, and fairy tales, arguing that the ordinary wisdom shared by common people, and even by the dead, may tell us more about reality than the isolated cleverness of experts. He begins to show how “The Ethics of Elfland” taught him to see the world not as dull fact, but as enchanted common sense.

Let's meet again in two weeks. Until then, God bless and keep well.

Session: 12

Reading: 11

Project: Chesterton Orthodoxy Reading Series

Primary Text: G. K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy (1908)

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Reading Lines: 1321 through 1434