

THE OLIVE TREES, AND THE CANDLESTICK

Peter, in his old age and his last known letter, expressed his anxiety that the brethren should be mindful of what the prophets had written. We shall act in harmony with his desire this morning if we bestow a little attention on that portion of the prophetic writings which has been read from Zechariah (Chapter 4). It may not appear to have much connection with the purpose for which we have met—to remember the Lord in the breaking of bread. We shall find a connection, notwithstanding—a connection it may be said to be found, directly or indirectly, in every part of the Scriptures—not a wonderful thing in view of the fact that all Scripture is given by inspiration, and that the testimony for Christ is the inspiring idea of it all.

The chapter before us presents this testimony in the form of symbol. This may be difficult at first to understand; but the effect of symbol, after understanding is attained, is to make the matter set forth much more vivid and striking to the understanding than it would be in a merely literal presentation. Considerable use is made of symbol throughout the prophetic writings, though these writings mainly deal with the literal. Yahweh alludes to the fact in Hosea thus:

*“I have also spoken by the prophets, and I have multiplied visions, and **used similitudes**, by the ministry of the prophets”* (Ch. 12:10).

If the similitudes were employed without any clue to their significance, their use would not be enlightening; but the clues, in almost all cases, are supplied—if not in the immediate context, in some corresponding part of the word. Diligent search and comparison will find them.

In some cases it requires no such search; they lie on the surface. Thus Jeremiah, at the commencement of his ministry, was caused to see an almond rod. He was asked what he saw; he said,

“I see a rod of an almond tree.”

*“Then said the Lord unto him, Thou hast well seen: for **I will hasten my word to perform it**”* (1:12).

Here an almond rod is constituted the symbol of speed in the execution of the Lord’s purpose, so that every time it was seen, it would carry that meaning with it, in the same way that the scales in modern allegory represent justice. The same prophet was shown a seething pot with its face towards the north, the explanation of which was added in these words: *“Out of the north an evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land”*—namely, a military invasion, as the next verse shows. Consequently a seething pot would become a symbol of the sore affliction arising from war. Amos was shown a basket of garnered fruit (ch. 8:1), and informed that it signified the completeness of Israel’s iniquity, because of which Yahweh would bear no longer with them.

In the chapter in Zechariah, the symbol is very beautiful, and the explanation glorious when apprehended in the fulness of its meaning. The prophet sees two olive trees, and a seven-branched golden lamp standing between. From each olive tree is a golden pipe communicating with the bowl out of which the seven branches are supplied with oil. This bowl is at the top of the central shaft or stem, and at the bottom or meeting point of the seven branches. The prophet having attentively inspected the apparatus, asked the meaning of it. The answer he received was brief but pregnant. At first it seems no answer; but at last it appears complete and glorious. The answer was:

“Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts.”

In what way did the olive-fed candlestick show forth this idea? It will not be difficult to perceive this when one or two simple clues are followed up.

This was not the first time the seven-branched golden candlestick had been symbolically employed. It was part of the furniture of the Mosaic tabernacle in the wilderness—a tabernacle of which Paul says it “*was a figure for the time then present*” (Heb. 9:9). It was therefore an element in the “*shadow of good things to come*” (10:1). Those good things to come are all covered by, or summarised in, the intimation early made by Yahweh to Moses,

“I will fill the earth with my glory.”

The gospel is a declaration of this purpose in its detail, and if there is one feature more conspicuous than another as to the agency by which this glorious purpose is to be accomplished, it is the one expressed in the interpretation of the olive-fed candlestick:

“Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts.”

But it may be asked, “Is there no might, is there no power in the spirit of Yahweh?” Yes; in truth there is no might or power besides, for all might and all power are of it. What is the meaning of the contrast then expressed in the interpretation? Obviously the contrast is between human power, and divine power. It is the contrast otherwise expressed in Paul’s words thus:

“Not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called . . . that no flesh should glory in his presence.”

Not by human might, not by human power, but by the direct operation of the spirit of God, were the things to be accomplished that had been foreshown to Zechariah prior to the vision of the olive-fed candlestick. What these things are may be learned from attentive consideration of the matters exhibited in chapter 3. They are in brief the emancipation from mortality which awaits the chosen of God, the cleansing of the house of Israel and all nations from their present sin-polluted state, and the consequent peace and blessedness that will ensue over all the earth. These results are to be effected “*not by might, nor by power, but by the Spirit of Yahweh!*” The reformation of the world is not to be accomplished by human power, but by God Himself, operating in the particular form signified by the symbol shown to Zechariah.

What particular form is this? What is meant by the oil combusted in the candlestick, after being drawn from the two olive trees? We perceive the answer when we look forward to the organization through which the spirit of God is to illumine the earth in the day of Yahweh’s glory. This organization is expressed in its simplest form as Jesus and the saints in corporate completeness, glorified and imperially enthroned. But from whom are the elements of this his One Glorious Body derived? There are two sources recognised in the apostolic writings. Paul having alluded to Israel after the flesh as “*the circumcision*”, among whom he remarks the Gentiles are called “*the uncircumcision*” (Eph. 2:11), says,

“He (Christ) is our peace, who hath made both one,” abolishing the law “to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross.”

He further says:

“He came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh: for through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father.”

The reference is, of course, to Jew and Gentile. The question is, Are the Jews and Gentiles spoken of under the figure of olive trees? The answer comes at once from Romans 11, where Paul discoursing of the natural relation of Jew and Gentile to the covenants of promise, says to the Gentiles:

“If thou wert cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a good olive tree: how much more shall these,

which be the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?” (Rom. 11:24).

If this idea were enigmatically presented, in reference to the glorious ending of the matter in the day of *“the manifestation of the sons of God,”* how could it be more strikingly done than in Zechariah’s symbolism—an illuminating apparatus fed by material drawn from two olive trees? The flame would tell us of the Spirit which transforms and empowers the saints in the day of their glory; the oil, of the called and chosen persons through whom the Spirit will be manifested; the olive trees, of the two great sections of mankind (as they are grouped in relation to God) from whom the saints are selected. The golden pipes through which the oil was conveyed from the trees to the lampstand, would also tell the principle on which the selection is made. Gold, in moral similitude, is always employed to express the idea of tried faith:

“When I am tried, I shall come forth as gold” (Job 23:10).

“That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:7).

The golden pipes through which all the oil must pass that finds its way to the illuminating lampstand, to be used there in the manifestation of the divine glory, are a symbolic intimation of the fact that *“without faith it is impossible to please God,”* and that no one may hope for a place in the glorified body of Christ who has not, in mortal probation, glorified God by a steadfast faith in His promises in the midst of affliction.

All parts of the symbolism unite in proclaiming the fact that the salvation in due time to be accomplished in the earth is not of human might or power. It is—

“According to the riches of his grace; wherein he hath abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence; having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: that in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ” (Eph. 1:7-10).

Even as regards the preliminary adoption of which believers are now subject, it is *“not of works, lest any man should boast.”*

“By grace (favour) are they saved through faith.”

God, in His favour, has condescended to appoint and accept their faith as righteousness; this is not an arrangement of themselves; it is the gift of God,

“Who hath predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will.”

Much more is the resurrection-sequel *“not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit,”* for who can refashion and glorify the dead but God only by His Spirit through Christ to whom He has given the power of using it for this purpose?

By a happy coincidence, we have the symbol of the golden candlestick in the New Testament portion of our reading as well as in our reading from Zechariah. The seven golden candlesticks seen by John in Patmos are not the same as those in Zechariah, except in the sense of being involved as an element of these. Those of Zechariah comprehend those of John in the sense in which the New Jerusalem comprehends the saints as they now are—that is, as a thing involved and not as a thing expressly represented. Zechariah’s olive-fed golden candlestick shows us the One Body glorified, those of John, the One Body in the day of its development and probation. The symbol is the same, though at a different time and in a different relation. A tried faith giving forth the light of testimony is the idea proximately manifest in the golden candlestick; in weakness now; in power and glory in the day of the manifestation of the sons of God.

As applicable to the present time, there is special significance and usefulness in the symbol of the candlestick when we consider the leading idea associated with it. Men do not light a candle, says Jesus, to put it under a table, but to put it on a table that all in the house may have light. To represent a community by a candlestick is to intimate that its function is to maintain and exhibit the light. This is the plain lesson of the apocalyptic candlesticks.

“The seven candlesticks are (or represent) the seven ecclesias.”

Seven stand for the whole. The messages sent to the seven (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea) were each accompanied with the intimation that they were for *“him that had ears to hear,”* generally—therefore the symbols of all similar communities wherever found. The friends of Christ are a light-bearing community in all ages. They speak of and uphold the exhibition of the testimony of God, whether men will hear or forbear. In this they are to be discerned from the sluggish and dark-minded, who are Christians so-called. Jesus says of them plainly, *“Ye are the light of the world”* (Matt. 5:14), and he tells them to let their light shine—(verse 16). Therefore, however unpalatable to men, they are those who *“speak of the glory of Yahweh’s kingdom and tell of His power.”* The light appertaining to them is not of or in themselves: it is the light that has come from God by revelation to prophet and apostle, and which, being written, becomes an illumination through the word written to all who study it. Hence, they can all say with the Psalmist,

“Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.”

They are men in whom the word of Christ dwells richly, as Paul exhorted—in whom therefore the light shines. Where this is the case there will be a showing of the light, in some way or other, every one in his own way and according to his own measure, but still showing the light. Their life will be a testimony for Christ in some way or other; otherwise they are no part of the candlestick by which Christ is pleased to symbolise his ecclesia in the present state.

Men obtained admission into the community of the believers in the apostolic age who did not possess or ever acquire the characteristics of that community. Jesus refers to them as *“men crept in unawares.”* Paul speaks of them with tears, as *“many”* who were in reality the enemies of the cross of Christ, and who minded earthly things. Peter describes them as false teachers, whose pernicious ways many should follow, and by reason of whom the way of truth should be evil spoken of. Jesus had foretold the same thing in likening the kingdom of heaven in its doctrinal operations, to a net let down into the sea, into which all manner of fish would come, good and bad. The conclusion to be deduced from this is that it is necessary to exercise discrimination with regard to men called brethren whose influence and teaching are in opposition to the mind of the Spirit as embodied in the word. There will always be such: we must try every one, yea, ourselves also, by the one standard. Jesus commended the brethren in the seven ecclesias addressed for this very thing: The very first words of the entire series of messages are:

“I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars.”

On the other hand, we find him condemning the carelessness and indifference of some ecclesias who tolerated wrong teaching in their midst. Thus to Pergamos, he says:

“I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam . . . So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes.”

To Thyatira, he says,

“I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants.”

The tendency of such teaching is manifestly in palpable contradiction to the spirit of the present age, which inculcates a "charity" that would sacrifice the truth to peace and love. There can be no peace or love acceptable to God that is not based upon that wisdom which as James says, is "*first pure, then peaceable.*" The truth, in faith and practice, is the rule of fellowship and peace with every son of God. He will be considered bigoted and uncharitable; but what matters the unfavourable opinion of men if the Lord Jesus approve at his coming?

"We must contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints."

So says an apostle, and he is a higher authority than the uninspired thinkers and speculators of an easy-going age. It but requires to be added that this faithful contention in the hands of true men will not degenerate into cantankerousness or bitterness: in the hands of such, it will be done in the true spirit of kindness and forbearance, anxious only for the ascendancy of truth as Paul prescribes:

"The servant of the Lord must not strive: but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves."

A further feature of these messages deserves special notice before closing. It is a feature bringing comfort and encouragement. It is the frequent occurrence of the word "*repent.*" To almost every one of the seven ecclesias, this command is addressed. To such of the Laodiceans who were "*neither cold nor hot, but lukewarm,*" we are not surprised at such an exhortation: but even Ephesus, commended for their vigilance in the detection of spiritual imposture, is similarly advised:

"Remember from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works."

To Sardis, "having a name to live but being dead," we expect to hear the words addressed,

"Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die . . . repent:"

But we find a similar exhortation to Pergamos, of whom it had been testified:

"Thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith."

It might be suggested that there was little comfort to be found in this general necessity for exhortation to repentance. The comfort lies here: Christ addresses his own brethren in these messages. He therefore illustrates in this way the fact overlooked in some systems of interpretation: that we are all invited to renew our ways before God. Some have taught that defection in the saints is unpardonable. This is only true as applicable to presumptuous and wilful sin. It is not true as applicable to sins of weakness, such as Peter's denial of the Lord through the combined effect of cold, unsleepiness, fear, and the anticipated surrender of Christ to the hands of his enemies. This discrimination is important: it will give heart and hope to every struggling believer. Let us never give in. Let us die fighting. If we are oppressed with the consciousness of past remissness, let us listen to the words of Christ who in addressing the seven ecclesias of Asia, spoke to his brethren everywhere for all time:

"Repent, and do the first works."

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