

## SUNDAY MORNING NO. 290.

The power of the Scriptures is great to lift us up in the good sense if we open our minds to them—not by pickings and text-nursings, but by a survey of all they bring before us in our daily readings. We need this lifting up; for as the Psalmist expresses it, “*our souls (naturally) cleave to the dust.*” We gravitate earthwards. The flesh is an empty thing of itself: and if we trust to it, we shall be tied to merely earthly things, and shall drag heavily along in the midst of mere cares and mere flesh combustions of one sort or another, which all steadily draw on to the final decay. A distinct view of all that the Bible reveals to us will rescue us from this. It will expand the mind to the recognition of an extensive history: it will put the rein on natural impulse by the check of commandments: it will deliver from anxiety by a prospect of bright hope: and enlarge and ennoble the sentiments by lofty themes of worship and holiness: and soothe the mind amid the irritations of an evil generation by the assurance of that mercy and peace and love from God the Father, which is the constant invocation of the apostolic epistles. It does not matter where we read: this is the effect when all that is brought before us is fully taken in.

Today we are taken back in Samuel to a time when there was no open vision (1 Sam. 3:1), and, when after a long silence, God spoke again. The form and the occasion of the renewed speaking are both full of suggestion for us. The message came to a mere child, and passed by the hoary elder and high priest, Eli. Why was Eli thus ignored? A previous message by a man of God explains.

*“Thou honourest thy sons above me.”*

His sons were heavy transgressors in various ways described in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter.

*“The sin of the young men was very great before the Lord, for men (through them) abhorred the offering of the Lord.”*

Was Eli unfaithful to God, then? Far from it, as regards his sentiments. He was sensible of the young men’s offence and found fault with them.

*“Nay, my sons,” he said, “it is no good report I hear: ye make the Lord’s people to transgress. If one man sin against another, the judge shall judge him: but if a man sin against the Lord, who shall entreat for him?” (2:24).*

This seemed all very sound and faithful and wholesome: what was the matter then? Where did Eli fail? We learn from the message sent through the child Samuel.

*“I will judge his house for ever for the iniquity which he knoweth: because his sons made themselves vile and **he restrained them not**” (3:13).*

Eli was aware of the wrong, but confined his action to mild remonstrance instead of interfering with his sons. At this, God’s displeasure was so marked that he sent this message of wrath right over his head, as it were, to the little boy who helped in the menial offices of the tabernacle. The essence of his offence was touched in the words of the man of God.

*“Thou honourest thy sons above me.”*

These things were written for our learning. It does not seem possible to miss the lesson. Eli honoured God, but not enough. He honoured his sons, but he honoured them too much. He allowed his natural preference for his children to come between him and the thorough course of compliance he ought to have observed towards the things of God. Is there not a possibility of our all erring in this matter? We are not high priests, but we are “an holy priesthood,”

whose business it is to “offer up spiritual sacrifices” of various kinds (1 Pet. 2:5): may we not allow friends and worldly considerations to come between us and that hearty service that God requires? “Thou honourest thy friends above me. Thou honourest thy children above me.” Nay, some may go a step deeper: “thou honourest thyself above me.” We need to be always on our guard. It may seem an indifferent matter for the time while times are quiet and the vision tarries: but the day will certainly come when we shall not be able to avoid seeing the force of that other remark to which the rebuke of Eli was accompanied:

*“Them that honour me, I will honour: but they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed.”*

Eli saw it when the alarm of war was in the land and when the terrible tidings came that his sons were slain, and that the ark of God was taken. We shall see it when “*the hour of his judgment is come,*” and we stand before the Lord to behold the issues of life, either in “*glory and honour and immortality,*” or in that dread alternative of indignation and wrath and anguish which waits every man who robs God of the honour that belongs to Him at the hands of those whom He has created.

But not all rebuke and cloud, is the word of God. In our second portion for the day (Isaiah 49) we have brightness and cheer for the drooping pilgrims as they toil their way through the desert, to the Kingdom of God.

*“Listen, O isles, unto me, and hearken ye people from far.”*

Here is a loud voice whose tones, by the Bible, go sweeping through the world. We know whose voice it is. The Spirit of God in the Apostles has settled this for us, and in the exercise of reason, we could not otherwise apply it than they do, to Christ. What though it is addressed (verse 3) to “*my servant, O Israel,*” we have only to remember the meaning of that name to see it is one of the names of Christ (A Prince with God). He is not a prince with man. To be a prince with man, a man must have royal blood in him, as the world reckons—the blood of Hapsburg, or Hohenzollern, or Bourbon, or Guelph. Jesus of Nazareth with Jew blood in him (not that he has blood in him now) is not a prince with man, but he is a prince with God, and the others are not so, except as He permits them and uses them and ordains them for the temporary government of the present evil world—to be set aside as ignominiously at the last as Oreb or Zeeb or Zalmunna or the five kings of Canaan, on whose neck the elders of Israel, at the request of Joshua, placed their feet. This prince with God demands the attention of the world.

*“Listen to me.” “I am the light of the world.”*

We have only to imagine the greatest of earthly potentates taking such a pose, to see the immeasurable difference there is between them and this Prince with God. Suppose Queen Victoria, instead of sending round the message when the procession started, “I thank you from the bottom of my heart,” had said “Listen, O isles, unto me, and hearken ye people from far,” she would have struck a sad jar instead of a chord of sympathy, and she would have made the world feel she was taking a position out of keeping with her origin, her history, her nature, and her position as a frail mortal woman. But no one has this feeling in connection with Christ, because of the inherent difference between him and all men that ever appeared upon earth. The difference is stated in the chapter before us, though no comparisons are made.

*“He (Yahweh) hath made my mouth like a sharp sword: in the shadow hath he hid me, and made me a polished shaft: in his quiver hath he hid me.”*

There is in this much of figure, but who can fail to see the great thing expressed—a man qualified as no man has been qualified, to accomplish the great work God has given him to do. The precise meaning was brought out in his actual life. The prophets possibly wondered what all this could mean when the spirit in them testified thus beforehand, the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow (1 Peter 1:10-11). But we need not to wonder, with the full account in our hand

*“of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which he was taken up, after that he through the Holy Spirit had given commandments unto the apostles whom he had chosen” (Acts 1:1).*

We see a man who was not only begotten of the Holy Spirit, but guided in his development by it as man was never guided (Luke 2:40), and anointed with it at his baptism in the Jordan, even to his filling therewith without measure (John 3:34), so that he was able to say, *“My father dwelleth in me”* (John 14:10-11). The people who heard him said, *“He speaks as one having authority”*: others, *“Man never spake like this man.”* Even we who only read written samples of his utterances are able to say the same. We can see that it is no extravagant figure which the Spirit makes him utter in this 49<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah.

*“He hath made my mouth like a sharp sword . . . he hath made me a polished shaft.”*

We feel that it was even so—so even in the days of his flesh: how immeasurably is the thought strengthened when we extend our view to him who, after the resurrection, had his eyes as a flame of fire and his countenance like the sun shining in his strength.

This is he to whom Yahweh says (verse 3):

*“Thou art my servant in whom I will be glorified.”*

This is a future realization: but it has already in part been accomplished, for when we survey the weary history of the world since the day they crucified him, do we not see that any glory that has come for God among men has come through him and through him alone? But the work would be a failure if it rested with present results. The enemy see this, and are not slow to pronounce it a failure. Infidel and Jew, both unite in asking, *“Where is the peace on earth and goodwill among men?”* *“Where is the turning of swords into ploughshares, and spears into pruning-hooks?”* Most wonderful of all, the Lord himself acknowledges the failure in the first stage. His response in this chapter (verse 4) to the statement that God will be glorified in him is,

*“I have laboured in vain: I have spent my strength for nought and in vain.”*

Now, here is an extraordinary thing to consider, that in a prophetic writing which describes the Messiah as a divinely qualified man—*“a sharp sword,”* a *“polished shaft,”* a spirit-shadowed and protected man—his work should be declared in advance a failure. A man writing such a composition would certainly have conceived that a divinely qualified man could not fail. Yet here it is: *“Then I said, I have laboured in vain.”* What are we to make of it? Men sometimes try to believe or profess to assert that Daniel was not written by Daniel: but there is no pretence of this sort about Isaiah—the contemporary of Homer. So here is the uncontested fact that 800 years before Christ, Isaiah predicting a divine Messiah, introduces him as confessing failure. What are we to make of it? There is only one thing to be made of it. We know that the Lord’s work was a failure in its proximate results. Israel rejected him, and the nation was broken up in anger by means of the Romans. It happened so, because Isaiah was a true prophet, and he was a true prophet because the Spirit of Christ was in him. And because he is a true prophet, all the other things he says will be accomplished also—

which interests us much: for the rejection of Christ is only an item, and a comparatively small and obscure item in the things of which he writes.

Having declared the failure of his work in the first stage, the Messiah proceeds to say,

*“Yet surely my judgment is with the Lord, and my work with my God.”*

That is, though Israel should reject him, and shut eyes and ears to his work, the verdict of Israel’s God would be on his side—which has proved to be the case. Though they said “Away with him” and killed him, “God raised him,” whereof the apostles gave witness in all their miracle-attested addresses. “We are his witnesses.” “We have eaten and drunk with him since he rose from the dead.” “We cannot but speak the things we have seen and heard.” And not only raised him, but “God hath exalted him to his own right hand—angels and principalities and powers being made subject unto him” (Acts 2:33; 1 Peter 3:22).

See how wonderfully the prophecy coincides with these facts:

*“And now saith the Lord, who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob again to him, **though Israel be not gathered**, yet shall I be **glorious in the eyes of my Lord**, and my God shall be my strength.”*

Here is a recognised interval characterised by two things—Israel’s dispersion and the Messiah’s glorification in the presence of Israel’s God. Behold it in the current state of things—which has lasted for centuries, since the apostles proclaimed the resurrection and ascension of Christ. What can be more complete than this correspondence between actual fact and prophetic foreshadowing?

There is a feature in it that the truth alone enables us to understand. Jesus here says,

*“Yahweh formed me from the womb to bring Jacob again to him,” “to raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the preserved (or the survivors) of Israel” (verse 6).*

What place is there for this in the so-called “evangelical” religion of the day? What can those make of it, who deny the restoration of Israel; who think Jewish nationality a thing of the past, and whose idea of the “future state” is a steady streaming of souls from earth to heaven or hell, as confined corpses are conveyed to cemeteries in all countries? To such a scheme of thought, the prophecy of Isaiah is utterly unadjustable. To the gospel of the kingdom, it is a perfect adaptation. This gospel, as the hope of Israel, teaches us to look for the building again of David’s fallen tabernacle, and the setting up of his throne in the days of the Messiah’s glory, when he shall truly raise up the tribes of Jacob, and settle them after their old estates in the land promised to Abraham.

Meanwhile, we contemplate the extension of his work, in which as Gentiles we are specially interested:

*“It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the preserved of Israel: **I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles that thou mayest be my salvation to the ends of the earth”** (Isaiah 49:6).*

The exact meaning of this has been made plain to us. Paul, in turning from the Jews to the Gentiles, at Antioch in Pisidia, quoted this very verse (Acts 13:47), so that it comprises the very work of the gospel which has been brought to bear upon us, as well as that lightening of all lands with glory which will take place at the second coming of Christ. Those who think Christ’s work a human work, and who suggest that the extension of the gospel to the Gentiles was an afterthought, are wholly condemned and silenced by this prophecy of Isaiah, which

not only foretold the failure of the Messiah's work in the first instance, but that the work should go beyond the Jews, and enlighten the Gentile nations. They have already been enlightened by Christ in a degree which is not a small degree when we contrast the state of the Gentile world as it now is with what it was in the days of Augustus Caesar. This is the guarantee to us—the actual living, visible guarantee—that that far greater illumination will come when the God of Israel will be known in all the world, and ignorance and poverty and sorrow shall be no more.

Again a wonderful thing—yet the wonderful thing already noticed merely repeated—the powerful instrument of all this coming glory is described as “*Him whom man despiseth, whom the nation abhorreth.*” Who but the Spirit of God could have reconciled such enormous apparent contradictions? Yet it is all before us in historic accomplishment. Jesus was despised: the nation—his own nation—did abhor him and do abhor him to this day. What the prophecy goes on to say has been accomplished too.

*“In an acceptable time have I heard thee: in a day of salvation have I helped thee.”*

Jesus has been personally delivered from all the tumults of his enemies and from the burning fires of their hatred. For eighteen hundred years he has been in the joyful seclusion of the Father's presence. To this, his ascension introduced him. In this was fulfilled the psalm which says,

*“In my distress, I called upon the Lord and cried unto my God: he heard my voice out of his temple and my cry came before him, even to his ears . . . He sent from above: he took me: he drew me on to many waters. He delivered me from my strong enemy, and from them which hated me, for they were too strong for me.”*

The prophecy in Isaiah proceeds to tell us the object of the interposition.

*“I will preserve thee and give thee for a covenant of the people; to establish the earth, to cause to inherit the desolate heritages, that thou mayest say to the prisoners, Go forth, and to them that are in darkness, Show yourselves.”*

The exact character of these prisoners is revealed later on. They are not men languishing behind iron bars, but men imprisoned in the grave: “prisoners of hope,” shut up in “the pit wherein is no water” (Zech. 9:11-12)—a pit of which Jesus alone has the key (Rev. 1:18). Their comfort and joy when they emerge, after the long night of their sorrow, the prophecy proceeds to describe in language of rich figure:

*“They shall feed in the ways, and their pasture shall be in all high places. They shall not hunger nor thirst, neither shall the heat nor sun smite them (no fear of sun-stroke; no oppression from heat) for he that hath mercy on them shall lead them, even by the springs of water shall he guide them. And I will make all my mountains (at present a desolation) a way, and my highways (now downtrodden) shall be exalted.”*

How natural it seems, in view of the prospect thus drawn out, that the prophecy should break out into song:

*“Sing, O heavens: and be joyful, O earth: and break forth into singing, O mountains: for the Lord hath comforted his people and will have mercy upon his afflicted.”*

Then there is a coming back from this finish of glory to consider certain aspects of the present state:

*“But Zion hath said, the Lord hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me.”*

It looks like it, and often we may hear the Beloved of God speak thus. The very telling us that it would be so is a help in the enduring of a state that seems for a time as if God took no notice, or had forgotten all the great and precious promises He has made. What is God’s comment?

*A woman may forget her sucking child, but “I will not forget thee. Thy children shall make haste: thy destroyers and they that made thee waste shall go forth of thee . . . thy waste and thy desolate places and the land of thy destruction shall even now be too narrow by reason of the inhabitants, and they that swallowed thee up shall be far away.”*

The prophecy proceeds to say many other beautiful things which there is no present time to go into. We may take them as summed up in the pregnant observation of verse 23:

*“They shall not be ashamed that wait for me.”*

Brethren and sisters, we are waiting for God: waiting for the fulfilment of His promises, in that patient continuance in well-doing which He has both prescribed and required. For the time being, we suffer shame because of our trust in apparent fantasies. Let us hold on. The time will come, and it is not far off, when the shame we suffer for our obedient belief in the promises of God will turn to glory and joy that will never pass away.

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