

UNDERSTANDING ACCORDING TO THE WORD

Our readings for the day present a pleasing variety of subjects. We may profitably spend a few moments in skimming over them. The process, though hurried and superficial, may help to revive the knowledge we have acquired by more thorough study at other times, and re-animate our courage in the battle which must continue with us so long as we are in the present evil state.

The reading from Moses may to some lack interest. There has been a time with all of us when we should have failed to see anything in it suggestive of hope or wisdom. But this time must be long past—with some, at all events. Such no longer see a dry and heavy “chapter” divided into “verses.” They are able to look through the mechanical structure of the writing, and to see the living things expressed by the words. The subject is that of the three annual feasts enjoined upon Israel. Three times in the year were they all to come together to an appointed place in the land—prepared to spend a week or fortnight together in a joyful manner. They were to cease all work, and to come provided with plenty to eat and drink, and to bring with them all belonging to them. In Scotland they have “fast days,” but these were to be feast days. In England, we have Easter and Whitsuntide holidays, in which people who can afford it scatter about in all directions to see friends, or get a little fresh air or change. But Israel’s feasts were the munificent originals of these modern seasons. They were feasts in which the whole nation was called upon to take part by the plenty secured for all by the blessing of Abraham’s God, and by the operation of the splendid land law He had given them, by which the wealth of the land was kept permanently divided among all. They were feasts with an ennobling tendency. They were not mere secular holidays like Gentile holidays—not mere times of merriment. More gladsome than any Gentile holiday, they were times when God asked the nation to meet Him collectively, and to call to mind the great things He had done for them in the past, to remember His Law, and to rejoice with a grateful joy before Him in all the plenty He had bestowed upon them. A well-dressed, well-provided, healthy, and prosperous multitude coming together under such auspices, in such a beautiful country, for such a length of time, once every three or four months (roughly speaking), presents such a picture of effective human life as has never been seen in any other country in the world. In Gentile lands the mass of the people are too poor to be cultivated, and times of holiday, when they come, are times of either simple inaction or degrading revelry. Their mirth lacks an ideal. In Israel, plenty was diffused; and the centre of their festivities was God and the memory of His deeds on their behalf.

It is true that it was only occasionally in Israel’s history that this beautiful ideal was realised. Had they remained faithful to the Law, they must needs have realised the perfection of human life upon the earth as it now is; and never would have ensued that desolation of their country and dispersion of their race which we see at this day. But they were disobedient, and the Law for long seasons was a dead letter in their midst. And now God has withdrawn Himself from them. No more, for ages, have her joyous and beautiful feasts been seen upon their beautiful land, Jeremiah’s words portray the situation:

“How doth the city sit solitary that was full of people . . . the ways of Zion do mourn, because none come to her solemn feasts: all her gates are desolate . . . Her adversaries are the chief, her enemies prosper, for the Lord hath afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions.”

God has deserted Jacob for a time—but only for a time. The time is nearly at an end. For a long time, darkness and chaos have prevailed with all things Israelitish as foreshown to Daniel—yea to Moses long before him. But the time draws near for the promised return of God’s favour. God Himself has told us:

“Israel went into captivity for their iniquity: because they trespassed against Me, therefore hid I My face from them and gave them into the hands of their enemies, so fell they all by the sword. According to their uncleanness and according to their transgressions have I done unto them and hid My face from them. Therefore, thus saith the Lord God, now will I bring again the captivity of Jacob, and have mercy

upon the whole house of Israel and will be jealous for My holy name after they have borne their shame."

It is this purpose of God to restore His favour to Zion that imparts such peculiar interest to the record of the feasts. They are not wholly things of the past. They are much less things of the past than of the future. The "*restitution of all things which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began*" includes the restitution of the feasts, for the law of which they are the most glorious features will be re-enacted in Israel's midst in the day of their return (not as the ground of their acceptance but as the rule of their action which circumcision of heart would qualify them to adopt) as saith Moses.

"The Lord thy God will turn thy captivity and have compassion upon thee and will return and gather thee from all the nations whither the Lord thy God hath scattered thee . . . and thou shalt return and obey the voice of the Lord, and do all His commandments which I command thee this day. And the Lord thy God will make thee plenteous in every work of thy hand, in the fruit of thy body, and in the fruit of thy cattle, and in the fruit of thy land, for good, for the Lord will again rejoice over thee for good, as He rejoiced over thy fathers" (Deut. 30:2-9).

The law of the feasts will therefore again become the law of the land—the Passover, the first fruits, and the in-gathering). A joyous and wholesome system of periodical and collective travel will again come into vogue among the populations inhabiting the happy land of promise in the day of restoration. God will be known among them, from the least to the greatest, and intercourse to them will be a joy that is not possible in the present state of things. But the beauty of the feasts will not be confined to Israel's land.

"Many nations shall be joined unto the Lord in that day," and the law is to "go forth" to them with no ineffectual result: for they shall say, "Let us go up to the house of the God of Jacob, and He shall teach us of his ways and we shall walk in His paths."

We shall therefore see the whole earth taking part in the happy life springing from the Lord's land. Plenty will be among the nations as in Israel, and with the plenty righteousness and wisdom will blend, finding gladsome public expression at recurring periodic seasons, differing as much from the holidays of British life, as the Kingdom of God will differ from the present evil world.

From Moses to Solomon is a long stride in point of time (as men reckon), but it is not leaving one system of teaching for another. We are with the same spirit of wisdom in Ecclesiastes as in Deuteronomy, but the same spirit applied to a different topic: In Ecclesiastes, we have such a picture of the present state of existence as is not to be found in any other book under the time. It is a picture differing from all others in its truth, and therefore in its gloom. Mere human writers paint life in gay colours, and deck human nature in tinsel—partly as the result of the theory that man is immortal and full of latent excellence, and partly as the result of the limited view of existence that is visible from the standpoint of mere human sensation. Solomon writing by the Holy Spirit in his opening sentence dashes all complacent views of human life to the ground. He strikes a bold key-note, which sounds harshly but not discordantly, through all his piece:

"Vanity of vanities," saith the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labours which he taketh under the sun?"

By a certain class of thinkers, this is considered misanthropy. Deeper thought will find it simple truth. It harmonises with experience. Human life in its completeness, is not the good thing it is pictured, either by the writers of this world, or the ardent imagination of our own breasts in youth. Its efforts, its aspirations, its enjoyments, end in weariness, decay, and death. Its programme is an abortion at the end. It is well to know it. Life pursued with false expectations becomes a bitter disappointment at last. Most men, coming on the scene with eager hope, retire at last baffled and spirit-spent. If they knew life at its reality, the result would be different. This reality is made known in the Scriptures and nowhere else. The knowledge of it is a key to problems that otherwise vex and overwhelm. Such for example, is the puzzle pointed out by Solomon—that there be just men to whom it happens according to the work of the wicked, and that there be wicked men to whom it happens according to the lot of the righteous. Just men suffer equally with the wicked and the wicked prosper equally with those whom God has blessed. On the face of things, there seems an absence of what men call "moral government" in the world. "*Time and chance happeneth to all*" with an apparent disregard to justice

as man conceives it. This is one of the heaviest stumbling blocks to men of thought, leading, in many cases, to the unhappy conclusion that there is no God at all, and that the world is a fortuitous evolution of blind inscrutable forces. Bible revelation comes as a solution. It is the only solution. It may be an unwelcome solution to our feelings, but it is inexorable as the facts of chemistry and as futile to quarrel with it. The revelation is that God and man are not friends, that human life is consequently in an abnormal state upon the earth at present which nothing but vanity and vexation of spirit can attend. Man disobeyed God at the start and has disobeyed Him ever since. God having left man to shift for himself, man the noblest creature upon earth, for the time being, is the greatest failure. The vanity is inevitable. Man was made for God, and by his constitution, cannot be satisfied without Him. Two things cannot be denied, not even by unbelievers: first that man is seen at his best when controlled by the fear and love of God, and animated by hope of promised goodness to come, and second that few men upon earth are now to be found in that state. Here man is without God, and preferring to be without Him with ignorance of His highest need. Therefore the misery of man is great upon him. If this were all that is revealed, it would not be much comfort. It would be satisfactory as the explanation of a dismal phenomenon, but it would not bring the comfort that God has associated with it. The revelation goes further: it tells us not only that man is estranged from God, but that God has a plan in progress by which man will at last be reconciled—not every man of the race as it now is, but every man at last found upon earth. The plan is large, as the case requires, and involves a variety of instrumentalities—beginning with a system of family worship at the beginning, and ending with a Kingdom which will govern all the earth *“in the dispensation of the fulness of times.”* For the time, it seems a failure; but no matter is to be judged by appearances. It only seems a failure to those who do not understand the plan. They look around, and see man miserable, and at enmity with God and man. They say, where is the *“glory to God in the highest, the peace on earth and goodwill toward men,”* sung of by the angels? We say, “Wait a little, the plan is far advanced, though seemingly abortive.” The plan involves and requires the prevalence of evil for a time. During this time, God is preparing the instruments of blessing for the next stage. He has prepared Christ. Through him He is preparing *“many sons”* whom He will lead to glory, and who will reign with him, and bless all families of the earth. Most of them have been prepared. Most of them are in the dust—forgotten of men, but not forgotten of God. They are all as distinct to His memory as living men; and at the appointed time they will stand forth from the grave, a multitude that no man can number. Part of the number is even now being made up. When the hour arrives for their manifestation, some are found in the land of the living;

“We shall not all sleep.”

Consequently, as their preparation is in progress, the darkness continues; for darkness is needful for a generation of the children of light. Like the brilliant gem, they are prepared in the bowels of the earth, and only appear in glory when the light has come. The two things together, the hopeless vanity of a state of things in which man is estranged from God, and the proposed redemption of all things by the establishment of reconciliation in God’s appointed way—are a precious revelation bringing peace and joy. The first prevents us from looking for good where it is not to be found—a vexation with which all the world is afflicted; and the second solaces the mind with the anticipation of good things to come, imparting resignation and patience in the midst of the evil and giving us the rational and satisfactory policy of aiming at life eternal by a patient continuance in well-doing that God has prescribed. We are taught and made to feel that the frets and disappointments of this vain life are of a transient nature, and that peace lies beyond them all like the calm glory of a summer evening.

Our third reading (Acts 7) shows us a brother accused, and replying to his accusers with a *“mouth and wisdom,”* which they were *“not able to gainsay or resist”* as Jesus promised. At first sight, it seems strange that the inculcation of the way of truth should lead to enmity. It only seems so to inexperience, and, therefore, to ignorance. Deadly opposition has been the uniform fortune of the Truth in every age of the world. Therefore it must be a natural result of the forces at work. We find upon investigation it is so, and this may help us to accept our own share of this experience without undue dismay. The reason for the opposition to Stephen is more obvious than opposition sometimes is. The authorities in Jerusalem had condemned and (by the Romans) killed Jesus a deceiver. The apostles in a variety of ways proved that he was the Christ. In this demonstration, Stephen took a leading part. He was an active controversialist. He enters the lists with the Alexandrian Jews who were in repute for superior acumen. They *“could not withstand the wisdom and spirit with which he*

spake,” so, as it is usual in such cases they resorted to calumny and false accusation. Under cover of this accusation, they were able to do what is now out of the power of the most malignant foe. They handed him over to “*the power and authority*” of the magistrates, who in Jerusalem were the priests and scribes. Arraigned before them, we find him delivering an argument which was too strong to be answered on the merits, and which they met by stopping their ears and marching him out to execution. The question turned upon the murdered Jesus: was he or was he not the Christ? It was one of the Jewish arguments that he could not be the Christ, because he had been crucified. Had he been the Christ the nation would have accepted him: he would have delivered himself from the hands of his persecutors. Stephen’s answer fastens on Moses of whom these rulers made their boast. He reminds them of the circumstances connected with the appearance of Moses as the deliverer of Israel. Israel would have none of him, “*who made thee a ruler and a judge over us?*” was the question with which they first greeted his interpositions on their behalf; and Moses had to fly. Yet this Moses whom they refused was afterward established and accepted as their leader and deliverer. Their rejection of Jesus was therefore no new thing. Nay, they had rejected all Yahweh’s servants age after age.

“*Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted?*” exclaimed Stephen, “*The prophets who showed beforehand the Just One, of whom ye have now been the betrayers and murderers?*”

They made it an objection that Jesus was from among themselves instead of being, as they contended the Messiah would be, of an unknown origin. Stephen reminds them that Moses himself had told them that the Lord would raise them up a prophet like unto him from among themselves. And now that He had fulfilled His word they had despised and rejected him . . . The argument was powerful . . . its consequence to Stephen was fatal. It cost him his life. He will presently awake none the worse, but glad rather at having, even at the sacrifice of his life, borne to Christ a testimony that has blazed before the eyes of men in all the dark ages since . . . May we catch his spirit and emulate his example and be found with him and his fellow heirs when the age of conflict is past, and when there has been established in all the earth the rest that remains for the people of God.

Taken from: - “Seasons of Comfort” Vol. 2

Pages 217-222

By Bro. Robert Roberts