

DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN OF PROMISE

The Truth is for everyday use. It is not, as some people imagine, a theory of things which, once known, may be put away in an intellectual drawer or cupboard, in reserve, like a useful document or a memorandum of reference. It is not a sensational thing, or an exceptional thing. It is a thing of sober and practical necessity. We require it every day, like our food. God lives every day, and must be thanked and supplicated every day, as the daily incense in the tabernacle typified. This is what he requests, and what we need. Christ lives every day, and makes intercession every day, and every day we must come to the Father in his name, as the morning and evening lamb of the first year on the altar showed forth. The need for hope is with us every day, and the need for help and the need for learning and guidance in the ways of righteousness and danger.

“Be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long,”—

is one of the standing exhortations of the Spirit, and it points to a constant actual need which the Truth alone supplies. If there are some who have no experience of this need, but on the contrary, get along the most comfortably with the Truth out of sight, it is because they are dead while nominally alive, abortions of human development while supposed to be sufficiently after the divine type to be fitted to become the sons of God.

Because the Truth is for everyday use, God has given it to us in a diversified form, admitting of a constant familiarity without mental weariness. The wisdom that has varied natural food in so wonderful a manner has done the same in the supply of the spiritual man. The Scriptures exhibit a constant variety. It is not all history; it is not all prophecy; it is not all precept. It is not all joy; it is not all sorrow; it is not all reproof. It is sometimes one thing and sometimes another, but all spiritual, and all fitted to furnish the man of God thoroughly for the life and state that God requires in him. It matters not what comes before us in our daily readings; we find something fresh, and always profitable when thoroughly seen into.

This morning we have a theme causing sorrow at first sight—a sorrow which every deeply thinking mind is made to feel in his own particular way—yet a sorrow for which there is an entire antidote in a very unexpected place—also before us this morning. The theme comes before us in a message by Jeremiah to Israel. The message is one of reproof. The reproof is based on this accusation, that the whole land is estranged from God; that every one, from the least to the greatest, is given to covetousness; that none are valiant for the Truth; that none are zealous for the ways that please God in their midst—because of all which, the prophet is instructed to say there will be calamity and desolation. The sadness of the theme is partly connected with the date of the message—in round numbers, 600 years before Christ. Israel came out of Egypt over 1,500 years before Christ. When they came out, Moses bewailed them as a stiff-necked and faithless generation, and here, nearly a thousand years afterwards, is the same apparently hopeless state of things.

Not only so, but we come 600 years—nearly 700 years further down the stream of time, and what have we here—in Romans 9. The same thing. Paul speaks of “*great heaviness, and continual sorrow of heart, for his kinsmen after the flesh, who were Israelites*”—who were the people of the covenant—and yet who were blind and obdurate and disobedient—from age to age, the work of God an apparent failure.

We come to our own day—1,800 years later, and we have the same sad discouraging state of things—Israel disobedient, and not only Israel, but the Gentile nations, to whom the word of invitation was sent in the days of the apostles, given over to entire indifference and disobedience; nursing lies when they give any attention at all to religion, and for the most part despising all wisdom and following ungodliness with eager steps. This prolonged spectacle of failure and sin is liable to be depressing to the point of destruction. It is liable to present itself to the mind as a problem that defies solution. We are liable to ask ourselves, Why has not God constructed the world upon a principle admitting of better results than these? Why has He not managed things in such a way as to secure some sensible measure of success to the efforts put forth from the beginning to bring mankind to ways of wisdom and life?

Now, there is an answer, and it is profitable to get thorough hold of it, for with the getting of it comes great rest. In the first place, we must remember the obvious truth that it is God, and not man, that has invented the universe—to use human language; and that, however incapable we may be in following His plan of management, it must be that His plan is a wise one, and must, in the upshot of things, be a successful one. We are always liable to look at the affair from the human standpoint—as if man had made the world and could work it. Man forgets that he is himself a part of the system of things, and cannot, of himself, judge the working of it. We must ascend to the standpoint of the mind that contrived the universe, and the power that upholds it before we can see the drift and understand the enigma. If God had not spoken to us, we could not have done this. But He has spoken, and so we are able, in some measure, to enter into His mind.

We get the clue in the chapter read from Romans, and in a verse in it where it does not seem to be lurking. It lies in verse 16:

“It is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy.”

To see wherein this furnishes the clue, we must follow the line of thought of which it is the climax. Paul having deeply lamented the perverseness of Israel, anticipates the suggestion that in that case, the Word of God has been without effect—has failed in its mission. He demurs decisively to this suggestion: He says:

“Not as though the Word of God hath taken none effect, for they are not all Israel that are of Israel, neither because they are the seed of Abraham are they all children, but in Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, they who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted for the seed.”

The argument is that though the Word has failed to transform the mass of Israel to whom it has been sent from generation to generation, it has not failed as regards the result aimed at, viz., the development of the children of promise. As it is written in Isaiah, concerning the word that goeth out of Yahweh’s mouth,

“It shall not return unto Me void. It shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it” (Ch. 55:11).

But who are “the children of promise”? They are mentioned in contrast to “the children of the flesh.” Of the children of the flesh, Paul plainly says, “these are not the children of God!” In this he condemns the doctrine which is becoming so prevalent in our day, that all men are the children of God. It is a pleasing doctrine to the mind of man, but is not a true doctrine. It cannot be made true by any amount of human concurrence. Those are the children of God whom God recognises as such, and, by the mouth of Paul, he here tells us who they are not and who they are. The children of the flesh are not they, the children of the promise are. What this means is made plain by the illustration of Isaac which he introduces,

“This,” says he, “is the word of promise. At this time will I come and Sarah shall have a son.”

This was the promise in the case, that Isaac should be born of a barren and aged mother. It was something more than a prophecy. The conception of Isaac at Sarah’s time of life was outside the resources of nature. It was a divine performance, because of promise, and the promise was given because of purpose, and the purpose was performed because of faith: for as Paul says—

“Through faith, Sarah herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised” (Heb.11: 11).

So that Isaac stands before us as the prototype of the children of promise. They are a divine development by a divine agency, as the result of a divine purpose by the power of faith in the divine performance. As Paul said to the Galatians:

“We brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise” (Gal. 4:28).

They are of the promise, and by the promise, that is, God promises them, and by His promise, begets them. As James says,

“Of His own will begat He us by the Word of His mouth”—which is a word of promise.

“We are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:26).

The kernel of the whole idea lies here, that a divine purpose underlies the history of human life upon earth, and that this is the truly governing element in the situation. Man may plan, and theorise, and work, but he can effect nothing against the purpose of God. The purpose of God will prevail. Paul further illustrates it by reference to Jacob and Esau, whose respective places were marked out before they were born *“that the purpose of God, according to election, might stand, not of works (that is, not of human contrivings or accomplishment), but of Him that calleth”* (Rom. 9:11). There is a purpose of God according to election. Some people see Calvinism here, but Calvinism gives us only half the thought, and by leaving out the second half, turns the first into a lie. Calvinism makes the election, or selection, an act of sovereign prerogative without reference to fitness, whereas Bible election is always according to fitness. God foresees and foreordains, but always in harmony with all His will. Jacob was a God-fearing man, a man of faith, whatever his personal frailties were. Esau was a mere man of nature—lusty, strong, and ingenious, but with no fear of God before his eyes. God had regard to the one character and not to the other. God’s foreordination did not place an Esau in Jacob’s place. It always put the right man in the right place. Paul refers in further illustration to Pharaoh, and to God’s statement to him by Moses:

“For this same purpose have I raised thee up that I might show My power in thee,” adding, *“Therefore hath He mercy on whom He will have mercy and whom He will He hardeneth”*

—in reference to which, he immediately anticipates a natural rejoinder:

“Thou wilt say then unto me, why doth He yet find fault? For who hath resisted His will?”

He disposes of this by asking on what ground a thing formed can say to Him that formed it, why hast thou made me thus?

“Hath not the potter power over the clay of the same lump, to make one vessel unto honour and another unto dishonour?”

This is absolutely final.

“We are the clay, and Thou our potter” (Isa. 64:8).

Until a man accept this position, he is not in a state of true reason.

“God hath made all things for Himself, yea even the wicked for the day of His power.”

The untutored mind cannot realise this, but is enslaved by a feeling that things exist for man.

Now applying the principle to the problem before us, we can see where perfect rest comes to the jaded spirit. The masses of mankind that come and go—Jew and Gentile—are *“the children of the flesh”*—the mere mechanical propagation of sinful flesh—an adjunct to the working out of God’s purpose with the earth, but not a vital element thereof in its ultimate form. It pleases Him, in the execution of that purpose, to ordain that the children of the promise shall be counted for the seed. He has made the identification of these a possibility. Those who answer to this designation are those who are generated by the promises—those who believe the promises, and are so powerfully constrained by faith in them as to conform themselves to the will of Him who is their author. It is here where the matter bears practically. If God’s purpose, according to election were carried out on the inscrutable and arbitrary principle inculcated by Calvinism, we should simply stand distressed and bewildered in its presence, powerless to hope for ourselves or others, except as a mere chance that we could not discover till the Lord Himself declared it. But the matter stands in no such painful position. Though the purpose of God is conceived in His own absolute prerogative—*“after the counsel of His own will”*—it is worked out on principles of perfect reason and justice. In its work of individual selection it is carried out by the gospel, which is the sum of all promise. The gospel having come to us is a proof that we are in the scope of its call. If we are so controlled by it as to be obedient to its requirements, then we are included in its choice, as the judgment seat will make manifest. We know we are the children of promise, if we believe the promise, and comply with the conditions and requirements associated with it. Our hope towards God is not based on anything we are in ourselves, or that we can do for ourselves. It is based solely upon God’s declared purpose, and the invitation we have received in connection with it. Salvation is *“not of him that willeth or of him that runneth, but of God, that showeth mercy.”*

By the reverse application of this rule, we can see where the world is. From the days of Socrates to the days of Henry Ward Beecher, it has been busy “willing” and “running,” and scheming and teaching according to its own ideas. It is all bootless.

“The Lord knoweth the thoughts of the wise that they are vain.”

Their subtle disquisitions—their eloquent harangues—their mutual glorifications, cannot alter things. The word of the Lord standeth sure, and that alone. By this word it is made certain that *“the children of the flesh are not the children of God,”* but that *“the children of the promise”* alone *“are counted for the seed.”* Man can neither alter nor improve the ways of God. Man’s wisdom lies in simply finding out what those ways are and conforming to them. His purpose is to populate the earth with *“children,”* not with mere human creatures. The existence of the latter for generations is necessary to the development of the former, but will not be continued a moment longer than required. The destiny of flesh and blood is to disappear from the earth for ever. The children of God immortal will take their place. Those children are drawn from the generations of flesh and blood. They are *“taken out from among them”* by a change of mind. Their ideas, their loves, their policy, and their aims become revolutionised by the Truth which is the developing power.

The effect of the change is disadvantageous to present surroundings. They become strangers and pilgrims upon the earth, “having here no continuing city, but looking for one to come.” They cease to belong to the world, and the world consequently ceases to love them, for the world loves only its own. But the bitterness of this discipline is only for a time. The day will come when none but the saints will be tolerated upon the earth. A clean sweep will be made at the last of every human creature that ignores God. Earth’s inhabitants at last will consist of those only who are in the mental attitude symbolised by the ceaseless ejaculations of the four living creatures of the Apocalypse—

“Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come.”

Time is all on the side of godliness. Peace and joy are on the wing for all the children of God. God is managing the world for Himself. The sands of the hour glass are running out for the children of the flesh. The ripe hour hurries when a numberless multitude of the forgotten righteous will spring into being by the fiat of Yahweh’s power; and unite in a shout of glad thanksgiving to Him who worketh all things after the counsel of His own will. From the presence of that long purposed manifestation of glory, the darkness of earth’s long estrangement from God will flee; the wicked will perish, and the children of promise will arise in light and beauty forever.

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

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