

## AN ORACLE OF WRATH

The prophetic oracle (Zeph. 2) read in our hearing is fraught with lessons that do not lose their force with the flight of time, but become, on the contrary, the more needful as we prolong our stay in an evil world, like that in which we dwell. Continuing contact with the world, we all know, is liable to have the opposite effect from that desired by Paul when he said:

*“Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind”* (Rom. 12:2).

At first when we become acquainted with the truth, the power of a new and enthusiastic ideal may keep us separate from the spirit and principles of the world; but as time goes on and the friction of life becomes more trying, and the resources of perishing human nature fail, that ideal is apt to lose power unless nourished and cherished by that daily renewal of our acquaintance with the divine ways and thoughts which God has provided for us in the oracles of His truth.

The particular portion of the Word before us this morning relates to defunct cities and peoples. It is none the less our property, however, for that. These things were written, not for the sake only of the places and persons primarily affected. Even the incidents that transpired so long ago as the Exodus of Israel to the promised land under Moses, were written, Paul says, *“for our admonition”* (1 Cor. 10:11). In this sense, the Scriptures generally—all the Scriptures—are *“profitable for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works”* (2 Tim. 3:17). It is a very unenlightened view that regards them as a historically record merely as a literary monument of antiquity. This unenlightened view we have perhaps all shared, more or less, one time or other, in the days of our ignorance. Emancipated by the truth, we are enabled to recognise in them the living illustration and interpretation of divine wisdom, of which their historical form is but the effective vehicle.

The oracle before us is one of wrath, first against Israel, then against the Philistines, Moab, Ammon, Ethiopia and Assyria. The reason of the wrath is that which mostly concerns us. In the case of Israel, it is directed against *“the men that are settled on their lees; that say in their heart, The Lord will not do good, neither will he do evil.”* This class are said in Malachi (2:17.) to have *“wearied the Lord with their words,”* in saying,

*“Every one that doeth evil is good in the sight of the Lord,”* and, *“Where is the God of judgment?”*

Isaiah (5:19) represents them as saying,

*“Let him make speed, and hasten his work, that we may see it: and let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw nigh and come, that we may know it.”*

In these delineations, it is not difficult to recognise a form of sentiment by no means uncommon in modern times. Men *“settled on their lees,”* well to do and comfortable in the surroundings which they have chosen, easily slip into the mood which is expressed in our day by the word Deism. They practically come to believe that there is no God. The Deity, according to their comfortable thoughts, is indifferent; creation is a huge machine which He works mechanically upon certain fixed principles, without any discrimination of individuals or individual action. They think He takes no concern and probably has no knowledge of the ways of men, good or evil; that He leaves all things in general to work themselves out by a series of blind chemical adjustments in which the idea of Yahweh meting out good and evil and taking pleasure in one class and not in another, is excluded. This is the impression made by nature, which as the platform of operations, is, doubtless, constructed upon the principle of fixed relation of forces, and men in general have a bias in favour of the notion that unsupplemented nature seems to favour, and are pleased to think that God takes no interest and exercises no control in the domain of human life. In prosperity this notion, favoured by natural bias, is liable to obtain the ascendancy, and to find expression in easy-going theories that minister to the comfort of healthy people in good circumstances.

Such theories receive indignant repudiation at the hands of the Eternal Possessor of heaven and earth. Speaking by the prophets, He declares that the rich among His own nation wearied Him with their foolish sentiments on the subject; and His weariness, reaching at last the end of endurance, found terrible vent in destroying judgment described in the following language:

*“Therefore their goods shall become a booty, and their houses a desolation . . . I will bring distress upon men, that they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the Lord: and their blood shall be poured out as dust, and their flesh as the dung. Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the Lord’s wrath.”*

*“That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness.”*

What God regarded with displeasure then, we may be quite sure is no less displeasing to Him now, for He is unchangeable. He has revealed that however much appearances may teach the contrary, He attentively regards what is pleasing in the earth; that He taketh pleasure in those who fear His name and is angry with the wicked every day; and that, in due time, He will cause every responsible man to find according to His ways. Contrary as it may be to the philosophy of human brains, *alias* sinful flesh, He will finally do good to those who please Him by their affectionate interest in His ways and obedience to His commandments, and inflict unspeakable evil on those who regard Him not and presumptuously set at nought His appointments. Narrow-minded as it may seem to the philosophers, evildoers are objects of aversion to the Eternal Father of all; and the impunity they now enjoy is only the result first of the divine patience, and, secondly, of the fact that God hath appointed a time, not yet arrived, for judging the righteous and the wicked. No rational mind will, therefore, be guilty of the scoffing enquiry that wearied Yahweh in Israel,

*“Where is the God of judgment?”*

Rather will he solemnly ponder the words of wisdom by Solomon:

*“Though a sinner do evil a hundred times, and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him: but it shall not be well with the wicked . . . For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.”*

As regards the Gentiles inveighed against in the portion of scripture read, their crime was of a different order, but one also common in our day. After describing the evils that would come upon them, the prophet says:

*“This shall they have for their pride, because they have reproached and magnified themselves against the people of the Lord of Hosts. The Lord will be terrible unto them: for he will famish all the gods (or rulers) of the earth; and (as the final result) men shall worship him, everyone from his place, even all the isles of the heathen.”*

It is interesting to recollect that in these oracles of truth we have a divine view of human ways: a picture of the situation of things among men as they appear to God’s eyes. It is here where their value lies. As the children of God—constituted such by the obedience of the gospel—it is of the first importance that we should use all diligence to obtain and cherish such an insight. In fact the possession of it is the one thing that distinguishes the children of God from the children of the devil. Human literature reflects human views of the situation, and the student of this literature gets only the human view. We have to go to the Scriptures to get the divine view, and this view is in complete contrast to that which is popular with society in general. As Jesus says,

*“That which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God.”*

The point is illustrated in the statement before us. Who among men in general would make it a crime that a man or a nation should be proud? And that they should reproach the people of the Lord of Hosts? Why, this is the characteristic of all polite society in our day. They are proud—oh, so proud! —and it is considered one of the cardinal points of a true civilisation to have and to cultivate pride. As for divine things and divine people, whether you understand the Jews nationally, or the poor who are rich in faith, there is no richer theme of jest among them. The characters of Scripture and their imitators among the living alike come in for their mirth, and they are not considered to sin very grievously in having their joke on such topics. Yet scripturally viewed, they are *“sinners before the Lord exceedingly,”* and have no need to tremble in the presence of the patient Creator of Heaven and Earth. Their pride and their scorning will evoke the appointed visitation in due time. It is written,

*“The Lord of Hosts hath purposed it, to stain the pride of all glory, and to bring into contempt all the honourable of the earth”:*

And though His anger is held back against the appointed time, and men in their temerity make defiant use of the liberty God allows them meanwhile, the hour will arrive when the truth of His word will

become manifest in the tempest that will strike confusion and terror into the hearts of His enemies, and bring their power in ruins to the earth.

*"The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down; and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day" (Isa. 2:11).*

The perfect reasonableness of all this will be manifest to those who realise that man is a creature only permitted to live by the power of the Creator, and that no ground of pride or glory exists in the possession of privileges. Even the angels, "*greater in power and might*," vaunt not themselves, but veil themselves in the presence of the terrible Majesty and power of the Eternal Self-existence filling heaven and earth, from whom they have derived their glorious attributes. How odious and unreasonable then, are the pomposities and insubordinations of "*dust and ashes*." Even human reason rightly applied can see this: how much more hateful must it be in the eyes of the Eternal, from whom nothing in heaven and earth is hid? How hateful it is we may learn from the silent and dreary desolation that prevails where once flourished the busy, prosperous, and boastful communities of Phenicia, Moab, Ammon, Idumea, etc., against whom Yahweh's anger was declared.

And if hateful then, is it offensive now? Can we walk through the streets of the great towns that thrive in Britain without realising that the anger of God has equal cause to burn as in the days of old? This is an important question, for it bears upon a scriptural estimate of the ways of the world, and helps us rightly to shape our course as those who seek to walk as children of the light. Let us look at Nineveh, which is mentioned among the other objects of the divine displeasure. In the days of the prophet, she was a great city. She was not only the seat of military empire, but she was the centre of a thriving commerce. We learn this, not only in the declaration of Nahum (3:16), that she had "*multiplied her merchants above the stars of heaven*," but from the testimony of certain clay-burnt tablets just brought from Nineveh and landed at Liverpool and stored in the museum there. These tablets (nearly 3,000 years old), just dug up from the ruins of Nineveh, comprise the books of a certain firm whose transactions they record, and from which it transpires that a large trade was done between Tyre and Nineveh. These silent documents in stone, exhumed from the rubbish mounds where they have slept for ages, bring before us Nineveh in the days of her power—the day of her trade—the day of her bustling merchants—the day of her active, practical, thriving city life, when crowds thronged her streets like the Liverpool of today, and when, as now, under similar circumstances, the thing that seemed of least consequence was the purpose of Israel's God, spoken through Israel's prophets, and quietly recorded in Israel's holy oracles against the day of fulfilment. The ruins themselves tell us of her architectural greatness—a greatness throwing modern cities into the shade. Birmingham is a mere collection of brick hovels compared with Nineveh with her spacious broadways and pillared edifices, where military power and mercantile importance held joint and powerful empire. We ask where is Nineveh? Where her glory? We have but to read the prophecy before us as if it were history:

*"He will make Nineveh a desolation, and dry like a wilderness. And flocks shall lie down in the midst of her, all the beasts of the nations: both the cormorant and the bittern shall lodge in the upper lintels of it: their voice shall sing in the windows; desolation shall be in the thresholds: for he shall uncover the cedar work."*

Living nearly three thousand years after the day of Nineveh's greatness, we are witnesses to the truth of this prediction. Nineveh has disappeared from the path of commerce, where she once occupied a position as supreme as that of London today. She is obliterated from the sphere of human greatness; she is no more. Nahum's words have been fulfilled:

*"The voice of thy messengers shall no more be heard."*

At the time these words were uttered, nothing seemed more unlikely; but the word of the Lord endureth for ever, and Nineveh has succumbed to its power.

*"This is the rejoicing city that dwelt carelessly, that said in her heart, I am, and there is none beside me: how is she become a desolation, a place for beasts to lie down in!"*

Are there no rejoicing cities in our day, dwelling carelessly, securely, and boasting in their greatness like Nineveh? Have we never heard that "Britannia rules the waves," and that "Britons never shall be slaves"? Have we never witnessed the roaring tempest of patriotism and seen the swelling waves of popular self-laudation and braggadocio? We have seen all this. We are surrounded by it. We have nothing to do with it. It is mere paganism; it is all of the flesh; it is nothing at the root but the foolish

boast of the savage. The false prophets of the day call it “Christian Patriotism,” and many are carried away by the deceit; but in truth there is no such thing as Christian patriotism, unless it be zeal for the land of promise. “Patriotism,” so-called, is the mere glorification of the bit of earth’s surface where you happen particularly to dwell, and the boasting in the privileges you happen to possess. What is there reasonable in this? The patriotism of Nineveh, the glorification of Ninevite institutions and interests, brought Nineveh to perdition; and it will bring all other countries to the same end, and with them all who share in the unenlightened nonsense of the rejoicing cities that dwell carelessly.

What brother of Christ would be found in the ranks of patriotism, blowing the bubble of national pride? Only one who has not yet realised the calling to which he is called, which separates all brethren in every age from every *“kindred and tongue, people and nation,”* and forms them unto God a royal priesthood against the day when He will, by Christ, break all nations with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel. Such, in the day of their probation, have nothing to do with the potsherds of the earth but to let them alone to their own strife and their own toil in the fires of vanity. With John, their brother, they take high ground. They say “We are of God.” They acknowledge themselves strangers and pilgrims in the world to which their coming captain has told them they do not belong. They refuse to be of it. They accept the consequences: the contempt of the rich; the opposition of the poor; the enmity of neighbours; the loss of privilege; the deprivation of honour; exclusion from profit; exposure to loss and shame and poverty and suffering; yea, unto death itself, if, in the will of God, such a result await the course of faithfulness. It is only for a time. The day of trial will soon be over. *“He that overcometh”* will abide for ever in the day of the new heavens and the new earth, when the present state of things and all the glory of it will have passed away like a dream. The meek will then inherit the earth. He will be no stranger in it, but will be one of its great and powerful and honourable ones, established on the unmovable foundation of immortality. He will no longer have to struggle with the mortification of contempt and self-denial: every knee will bow to him as a constituent of the corporate Christ in all the earth, and all earth’s plenty and delight will be at the disposal of his hand. He will no longer have to discipline himself from day to day to a patient continuance in well-doing by the power of a faith in the word of God, enabling him to overcome the world: for the day of light and liberty and the open vision will have come; weakness will have given way to praise-inspiring strength; patience, to the delights of perfect joy; faith, to full, satisfying sight; toil and conflict, to the open award of the victorious wreath and a bountiful share in the glory, honour and immortality of Yahweh manifest in the Son of David.

Taken from: - “Seasons of Comfort” Vol. 1

Pages 304-309

By Bro. Robert Roberts