

LOOKING FOR GREAT THINGS

The Scriptures are mainly directed towards instruction and reproof. Nevertheless, they have much to do with comfort—that is, where the instruction and reproof have taken effect. Paul expressly declares of them that they were written that we, “*through patience and **comfort** of the Scriptures, might have hope*” (Rom. 15:4). God is described as the “**God of all comfort**” (2 Cor. 1:3). God Himself commands:

“*Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people*” (Isa. 40:1).

Jesus makes promise to them that they “*shall be comforted*” (Matt. 5:4).

We have, this morning, to look at some of the things that are comforting, the contemplation of which enables us to realise in ourselves the condition which Paul describes as being “*filled with all joy and peace in believing*.” They are suggested by a question which has occurred in our recent daily readings addressed by God to Israel after the return from Babylon—a question which we may have read many times without perceiving anything specially suggestive in it, but which we shall find the gate to a path which leads to rich pastures. It occurs in Zech. 8, verse 6.

The question arises out of the circumstances of Israel at the time it was addressed to them. They had just returned from Babylon. The land was in desolation; Jerusalem was in ruins; and the adversaries of Judah were active and successful, as we learn from Ezra. The people were discouraged at this state of things. They were, in fact, “*in great affliction and reproach*” (Neh. 1:3). They had returned from Babylon with the expectation of a prosperous restoration, according to the promise by the prophets; and finding so many difficulties, they seemed to have lost heart and faith, and to have come to the conclusion that “*the time was not come that the Lord’s house should be built*” (Hag. 1:2). In those circumstances the prophets Haggai and Zechariah were sent to encourage them and strengthen their hands, and as a matter of fact, the work was finally accomplished through their influence (Ezra 6:14). It is one of the messages by Yahweh that the question occurs which demands our attention. The encouragement takes the form of an assurance which, in their circumstances, they were tempted to think too good to be true. The assurance was:

“*I am returned unto Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem: and Jerusalem shall be called a city of truth; and the mountain of the Lord of Hosts the holy mountain. Thus saith the Lord of Hosts; There shall yet old men and women dwell in the streets of Jerusalem, and every man with his staff in his hand for very age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets thereof.*” (Zech. 8:3-5).

It matters little for present purpose whether we understand this to apply to the prosperity realised in the Babylonish restoration, or to the far greater well-being that will be Israel’s portion under the Branch of Righteousness raised up unto David, when he shall execute judgment and righteousness in the land (Jer. 33:14-16). It doubtless refers to the latter, in so far as it exhibits a picture of the future; the future glory being held up to view as an incentive to labour for the development of Jerusalem’s then-coming well-being.

The point lies in the question that follows:

“*If it be marvellous in the eyes of the remnant of this people in these days, **should it also be marvellous in mine eyes?** saith the Lord of Hosts.*”

It would appear from this that some who heard the words of the prophet were incredulous on the subject of the promise. It was “*marvellous in their eyes*”: they could not practically believe it; it was too good to be true. Jerusalem was in adversity, and it seemed to them as if it must always remain so. They could not realise that it was possible for Israel to regain the consequence and prosperity that departed from them when Nebuchadnezzar overran the country, destroyed the cities and took the people captive more than seventy years before. The question put to them is, was this inability of theirs to realise a promise of God a reason why it should not come? Was their incredulousness a reason why the thing promised should be difficult to God?

It seems to me the question has a very profitable application for us. We are looking for great things, because God has promised them. We are looking for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ from heaven, after an absence of more than eighteen centuries. We are looking for his interference in human affairs when he arrives. We are looking for the violent overthrow, at his hands, of all the governments of the world. We are looking for the establishment, in his person, of a government in Jerusalem which shall rule the whole earth in righteousness, and kindness and true enlightenment and irresistible power, as the result of which mankind shall become a universal brotherhood, blessed with plenty and wisdom and joy. We are looking for a participation in that government. We are looking for a place in the innumerable body of kings and priests,

through whom the authority of their One glorious Head will be administered in all the earth. In preparation for this exalted position we are looking for a physical renovation at the Lord's coming, such as it hath not entered into the heart of physiological speculation to conceive. We are looking for that which will change this vile body that it may be fashioned like unto the incorruptible, glorious and immortal body of the exalted Lord Jesus Christ; by which all the saints of every age and nation will become a corporation of immortal rulers, gifted with exhaustless vigour, unerring wisdom, angelic grace, and endless life. We are looking for the abolition of the present order of things, and the setting up of a new world in which joy will be established in righteousness and glory to God.

For our hope of these things we are called mad. This we can easily endure. We know it is a mere question whether God has promised them. If He has promised them (and no man in true reason can dispose of the evidence that He has), then the madness lies with those who ignore them, and not with those who give good heed to them and rejoice in them. But there is an enemy more difficult to deal with than those who call us mad. That enemy we carry about in ourselves. It is our own short-sighted, weak, finite, sense-controlled mentalities. The natural mind is swayed by its own impressions, and these impressions are, in most matters, the very reverse of truth. I speak not only of spiritual but of natural things. For instance, a man feels as if he had never had a beginning; he feels as if he never would die; he feels as if the people that lived before him never had an existence. He feels as if his own town were the only town, his own feelings the only feelings, and so on. Knowledge corrects these feelings, and enables a man to be confident, though he does not feel it, that he was born not very long ago, that he will die in due course; that other people's existence before him is no myth, etc. This knowledge comes partly from testimony. But suppose we were influenced by reason and cut off from access to testimony, what would be the result? The feelings would remain in their unmodified force and we should be barbarians, as exemplified in the untutored millions that inhabit the earth; and as illustrated in varying degrees among all who are more or less educated.

Now this tendency to be victimised by fallacious feeling, styled by Paul "*an evil heart of unbelief*," and defined by the Spirit in Isaiah (should be Jeremiah) as "*the heart of man, deceitful above all things and desperately wicked*," is much more powerfully operative towards divine than towards human things—for two reasons: first, because divine ways and divine thoughts are as much above the ways and thoughts of human experience as the heaven is high above the earth (Isa.55: 9), resulting in a natural inability on our part to sympathise with them; and secondly, they are more entirely beyond the range of human observation. They are matters of history, matters of promise; matters of present invisible fact. Consequently, the mind has less opportunity, so to speak, to become impressed with them than to be impressed with matters that are of everyday perception. Hence it is that wisdom is a thing that has to be "*sought for as hid treasure*"—a thing we have to go out of our way to take pains to get.

The natural man is an ignoramus with us all—both in the things of man and in the things of God, but a much more invincible ignoramus in the latter than in the former. Education reforms him a little in natural things; the instruction of the Word will bring him into comparative submission in spiritual things. Left to himself, he is a fool and a liar. We must shut our ears to him, he is whispering to us all the time; we carry him about with us. It was this old man, who is not only ignorant, but "*corrupt according to the deceitful lusts*," that led a class in Israel to speak incredulously of the promises of God. We hear him in our day saying, We are mad to believe the gospel: in a milder voice, he says, It is too good to be true. In a still more subdued tone, he is apt to suggest in our own bosoms, in the very midst of our faith, that we shall never know anything better than the present evil world and the present failing, stricken, groaning nature.

This is the foe which the power of faith will enable us to vanquish; never forgetting that "*faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God*" (Rom.10: 17). It will enable us to say to the gloomy maunderings of the flesh, "*Get thee behind me, Satan*"; God hath spoken at sundry times and in divers manners. We have evidence of it in our hands. The Bible alone is proof of it if we had no other evidence in the world. In what He has said there are "*great and precious promises*." What if the things promised transcend my brightest dreams? Is that a reason for doubting them? Is anything too hard for the Lord? Have I not received from Him even the little of good I now possess? Shall I say that He can do no better? Shall I set myself up against His own declaration that He will withhold no good thing from them that love him? Shall I shut my eyes to the express information that "*eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him*"?

No, no, brethren and sisters, let us look beyond ourselves. Let us mistrust the doleful feelings of the flesh. Let us lean on the Rock that is higher than we. Let us fix our thoughts on what He has promised. Let us not measure God or the hope of future good by our own thoughts or experience. The flesh is weak. Our fears

are very largely due to this. Let us not be unduly distressed by them. They are known on high, and the cause of them.

“He knoweth our frame: he remembereth that we are dust.”

Therefore, the context informs us, His pity is directed towards us if we fear Him. The fact of this pity was exemplified by the Lord in Gethsemane, when, finding his disciples asleep at the supreme hour of his mortal service, he said,

“The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

This same Lord is our High Priest, *“who ever liveth to make intercession for us, and who is able to save to the utmost those who come unto God by him.”* It is expressly testified of him that *“having suffered, being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted.”* We may therefore take comfort. Our comfort is in God. We do not rely for comfort upon the state of our feelings. These may be depressed enough from physical causes. God is not displeased at our weakness; He is displeased at a lacking faith and a faltering obedience.

This lesson has been obscured by the religious teaching in which most of us have been brought up, and some of us may be liable to suffer from the error now. We have been led to look at ecstatic feelings as the symptom of spiritual life, and to regard depression or even sobriety as indicative of deadness. Whereas faith and depression may co-exist as in the case of Job, David and the Man of Sorrows; for faith is the confidence of things hoped for, as in the case of Abraham, the father of the faithful, who against hope believed in hope, being fully persuaded that what God had promised He was able also to perform. Not only so, but ecstasy and unbelief may co-exist, as in the case of the highly-wrought “revivalist” who mistakes the electrical excitement of the brain and nervous system for “religion,” and rejects the testimony of God and His prophets and apostles while shouting “Glory, Hallelujah.”

Let us not give way to mere temperamental despondencies when they come. Let us remember they belong to us and not to God. They are as the clouds that hide the sun from view; the clouds are all on the surface of the earth: the sun shines on with undimmed brilliancy in the perpetual blue beyond. One thing we may always remember:

“Without faith it is impossible to please Him.”

We may have plenty of animal spirits and no faith; plenty of mental and physical comfort, and no favour with God. Faith is not excitement. It is the calm conviction that God will fulfil the promises He has made, leading, through the love of those promises, to the fruit of an obedient life, even if oftentimes clouded with that *“heaviness through manifold temptation”* which was no less the portion of saints in apostolic days than in our own (1 Pet. 1:6).

The hope set before us in the gospel will certainly be realised whatever human feelings may suggest to the contrary. The saints will certainly yet rule the world, however unlikely such a consummation may appear to human wisdom. The politician of this aion is filled with contempt at the idea, because he looks no higher than men. He looks at the *“poor of this world, rich in faith,”* whom God hath chosen as *“heirs of the kingdom he hath promised to those that love him,”* and he jeeringly exclaims, “Are these the people that are to rule the world?” If we say “Yes,” he enlarges: “What! These poor decrepit decaying creatures? These illiterate, unpolished creatures—these wretched people who do not know how to speak their mother tongue correctly, who lack the commonest capacity to deal with matters of business, let alone affairs of government!” If he goes as far as I have heard some go, he will say, “God save me from the age to come if it is to be managed by such people.” In this he speaks unwisely, through not having a due regard to the facts of the case. He might master these facts of the case if he had sufficient simplicity and earnestness to look into them. Instead of this, he glances with pride at certain superficial aspects of them, and blunders with a childish ignorance, where he thinks he displays a superior wisdom. He looks at the raw material and scorns the use to which wisdom can turn it. He looks at a mass of unwrought iron. He is told that by means of it, men will yet travel in comfort at sixty miles an hour. He exclaims: “God preserve me from such a concern.” He is shown a piece of wire, and informed that by it, a man may converse with his friend at many miles distance. He cries out, “You mock me!” He is shown the stuff out of which the rulers of the future age are made, and he says, “God save me from them.”

The saints will not rule the world as they now are. They would be incompetent for the work in every sense of the term. Such of them as are chosen will be qualified for the work before they are called to enter upon it. To begin with, they will be immortalised, which of itself will give them a vigour of body and mind that will go a long way towards making them fit to hold a divine commission. In addition to this, they will be endowed with powers and gifts unknown to the human organization. We learn this from the gifts of the Spirit vouchsafed in the apostolic age, which are styled *“the powers of the world to come”* (Heb. 6:5), *“the earnest*

of the inheritance” (Eph. 1:14). Paul, on this point, expressly says, that “*when **that which is perfect is come, that which is in part shall be done away***” (1 Cor. 13:10). What is styled “*that which is in part*” may be learnt from 1 Cor. 12: 4-12, where we read of supernatural gifts of wisdom, faith, knowledge, tongues, and healing. He further says,

“*Then shall we know **even as we are known.***”

In speaking, then, of the saints ruling the world, we are not to picture to ourselves the world governed by the poor, fainting, failing, ungifted men and women who constitute the saints in the days of their probation. The saints in the age to come will be a noble, vigorous, beautiful and brilliant order of beings, equal to the angels: the sons and daughters of the Lord God Almighty in the final aspect of their development. As we see them now, they are only in the preliminary stage of their development, poor, weak, and ungifted. In one thing only are they rich, without which they are not saints. They are “*rich in faith*,” without which it is impossible to please God; and this one thing that is most of all derided by the class of proud scorers to whose objections I have been referring. So entirely do the ways of man differ from the ways of God that, if they were called upon to select an order of rulers for the coming kingdom, they would choose the rich, the talented, the well-favoured, the good-looking, the physically-developed, the finely-educated, the well-mannered, the people of good breeding—in short, the respectable and the great, or as Paul expresses it, “*the wise after the flesh, the noble, the mighty*” (1 Cor. 1:26). Even Samuel leant a little in this direction when he was sent to anoint a successor to Saul.

“*He looked on Eliab, and said, Surely the Lord’s anointed is before him. But the Lord said unto Samuel, **Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: FOR THE LORD SEETH NOT AS MAN SEETH; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart***” (1 Sam. 16:6).

What state of the heart is it that is appreciated by the Eternal Creator? He tells us:

“*To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and that trembleth at my word*” (Isa. 66:2).

This is the state of mind which makes a man a saint in the present mortal state; it is this that qualifies him for the future rulership of the world. It is not creature strength or excellence; it is not human culture or attainment. It is the faith that receives the kingdom of God as a little child, and as a consequence, rejoices in it as the supreme good and excellence of existence.

It pleases God that it should be so. Paul tells us the reason: “*that no flesh should glory in his presence.*” The rich man glories in his riches; the wise man (so considered) glories in his wisdom; the strong man glories in his strength. It is the universal rule in the present evil world. It is barbarism, for all these things are held in trust as favours from God, and can be only rationally held when this is recognised and expressed in the ascription which belongs to God. Holding them as the world holds them, it is theft and robbery. God makes choice of His sons and daughters among those who are in a position more favourable for learning wisdom in the matter—among those who having nothing to boast of, learn to make their boast in God; who having no possession but the possession of the word, are able to rejoice in it and esteem it more than their necessary food (Job 23:12); who having none of the perishable riches, prize the riches of Christ at their true unsearchable value, counting all things but dung that they may obtain them (Phil. 3:8). Let the poor then rejoice in the comfort that belongs to them, taking care only to see it that while poor in this world, they are not poor also in faith, for then they are poor, poor indeed.

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By Bro. Robert Roberts