

The Character of God

The longer we are acquainted with the Scriptures the more do we appreciate the perfect wisdom of the plan upon which they have been constructed. We find them so constructed that we can read them year's end to year's end, with an interest that never wanes, and a pleasure that never satiates. If we had had the making of the Bible, this would not have been the case. We should have produced a book so precise in its definitions, so methodical in its arrangement, so guarded against repetition, and so limited in demeanour, that one acquaintance would have exhausted our interest. Instead of this, we have a book so diverse in its composition, though uniform in its design; so loose in its style, though accurate in its statements; so incessant in its assertion of first principles, though free from prolixity; that we read it with renewed and growing interest each year of our acquaintance. In this respect it is like Nature as contrasted with art. Man can make beautiful things: but his productions fail to satisfy as Nature satisfies; their beauty is petty, limited and superficial. Nature's beauty is thorough and inimitable, whether it be the structure of a flake of snow, the organisation of a plant or meanest insect under the microscope, or the stupendous revolution of the starry firmament. Nature and the Bible both bear the impress of Divinity. There is one great plan, and on the basis of that plan, infinite diversity of beautiful detail. There is a unity in all parts of the Bible, and yet a certain diversity which maintains the interest of the persevering reader ever fresh and fair. "Line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little." This is its plan as defined by itself. It explains the fact that we never meet on the basis of Bible reading without having something new to interest brought under our notice.

This morning furnishes a new illustration. We have two chapters before us (Jonah 4 and Heb. 9) as different as possible one from another, and yet both converging from different points upon a common subject, and that a subject the sublimest of all—the character of God. This is the foundation of all well-being—present or to come. We are so familiar with that, we are apt to take it as a matter of course. Let us exercise our thoughts upon it, so that we may awake to a full sense of its joyfulness. Let us look at it in this way: before we were born, we knew nothing about the constitution of the universe. For anything we knew, and for any necessity that existed so far as we were concerned, we might have come into being to discover that the universe was in the grasp of a monster, whose delight consisted in producing painful excitement in all the subordinate creatures of his power. We might have found God who made us, a devil to afflict us, and His great house of heaven and earth an abode of deformity and despair. What could we have said against it? Nothing. We could but have accepted facts beyond our control. We might have raved and cursed, to the delight of the fiendish contriver of our misery; we might have wailed with despairing agony, that God was not a beneficent being, and that existence was not a delight; but we could have altered nothing, nor made out a case of reasonable grumbling.

A picture like this helps us to rejoice in that fact stated by Jonah: "I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil." We behold with unspeakable relief and admiration that, subject to vanity though we are by reason of rebellion against the Most Blessed and Only Potentate, yet we live in a glorious

sphere, whose ordinances are based in the highest beneficence. The grandeur of the glittering firmament on high; the overpowering glory of the splendid sun in the heavens; the softness and benignance of “the blue ethereal sky”; the pleasant play of light in its infinite variations of colour and shade; the invigorating rush of the beautiful breeze; the charming fragrance of opening flowers; the beauty of earth’s variegated carpet; the pleasure of every healthful function—in fact, the whole paraphernalia of being, reveals the fact that the creating, sustaining, and presiding Genius of heaven and earth is the good and wise and gracious Being revealed to the fathers of the house of Israel. When to all these we add the promise of life everlasting, a nature incorruptible, society joyful and ennobling, a kingdom unfading, we can see what reason we have for joining—and that rapturously, too—in the exultation of David: “I will extol thee, my God, O King; I will bless thy name forever and ever. Every day will I bless thee; and I will praise thy name forever and ever.”

The goodness of the character of God comes out in a way that all can easily see in the case of Nineveh. A large city given over to wicked life, like all large cities—and small ones, too, for the matter of that—is threatened with destruction in forty days. The occupant of the throne hears the threat (proclaimed by Jonah); orders and takes part in a fast and humiliation in which all the citizens join. Their penitence moves Yahweh to pity, and he suspends the execution of the sentence, to the mortification of Jonah, who feels he will be personally discredited as the herald of a vengeance that never came—an incident by the way which is one among hundreds which prove the genuineness of the narrative, for an inventor writing to sustain the credit of the prophets would never have invented such a story. Jonah’s vexation, and his reference to Yahweh’s well-known placability as a reason why he shirked his duty in the first instance, are features in an artless narrative of truth, and bring out the kindness of God in a very practical and matter-of-fact way.

The chapter in Hebrews brings out the same lesson in a different way. In this, we are brought into contact with the Mosaic tabernacle and the service of sacrifice connected with it; and we are taught that these were but the preliminary “example and shadow of heavenly things”—the things from heaven centring in Christ. We look first at one and then at the other, and find the same evidence of the graciousness of God. The Mosaic system constituted a meeting-point between God and man—a place where God was approached in worship and supplication and friendship. When we realise that this meeting-point was solely of God’s contrivance, and that it was appointed for a sinful nation who deserved no forbearance at His hands, we realise the fact that was proclaimed on Sinai, that Yahweh is “merciful and gracious, long suffering, and abundant in goodness and in truth.” And what shall we say when we see “God in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them”? —what but join in the exclamation of John, “Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us!” “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be a propitiation for our sins.” “God commendeth his love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

But here there is a point which has arrested the attention and excited the deep thought of reflecting men: How is it that there is this difference between the kindness shown to Nineveh and the kindness shown to us; that whereas the men of Nineveh were forgiven

without sacrifice, believers in the gospel are called upon to recognise the fact that “without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sins”? The truth has cleared away this difficulty, though some, who once knew (at least, in a measure), would restore the difficulty by their “renunciationism.” The truth enables us to perceive that in spirit, there is no difference between the case of Nineveh and the case of believers in the Gospel; and that the difference in form is due to the difference between the goodness bestowed in one case and in the other. The Ninevites humbled themselves absolutely before God, in fasting and clothing themselves in sackcloth. This supplied the one condition which He himself has defined as the one that secures His favourable consideration: “To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.” Consequently, He relented towards them, and remitted the penalty of that immediate destruction which their prolonged wickedness had nearly brought upon them. This was the extent of the goodness bestowed: exemption from sudden death.

In the case of believers in Christ, the goodness is of a very different nature. They are called to the fellowship of the Father, and that fellowship an eternal fellowship, and involving a participation in His incorruptibility and deathlessness. Now, considering who they are, members of a race condemned for sin at the start, and guilty each one of “many offences,” and considering the exalted nature of the privilege of friendship and companionship with God, it is no marvel that a special and adequate form of broken-heartedness and fear should be provided for them. God is great and holy: and He receives not sinners to His eternal society without the utmost recognition on their part of His position of prerogative and their position of no claim—yea worse, deserving death. Hence, His requirement of the shedding of blood, as the basis of propitiation. But we are too far astray for Him to accept even this at our hands. Therefore, in the Son of Mary—His own Son—He gives us one in whom He will accept it, and in whom He has accepted it, for “by his own blood he entered once into the holy place, *having obtained eternal redemption*” (“for us” is not in the original, and is excluded by the “voice” of the verb—the middle—which concentrates the application on himself). Yet this Son of Mary, and Son of God, was one of the sufferers from the evil that sin has brought into the world, though without sin as regards his character. His mission as the propitiation required this combination in harmony with the principle to be exemplified in his death, namely, the declaration of the righteousness of God as the basis of His forbearance in the remission of our sins (Rom. 3: 25, 26). In the righteous Son of David, the law of sin and death was destroyed by death and resurrection, and now in him is “the law of the spirit of life” established in harmony with the indispensable requirement of God’s supremacy and righteousness. In him now is life for all who will come unto God by him, morally participating in his crucifixion, and sharing his death in the act of baptism. God will grant forgiveness to all who come to Him in the way appointed. It is no case of substitution or debt-paying, which would obscure the righteousness and the goodness of God. It is a case of God approaching us in kindness, and giving us, by His own arrangement, one from among ourselves in whom His “law is magnified and made honourable” (Isa. 42: 21), that by his blood we may be washed from our sins, in the sense of being forgiven unto life eternal for his sake; and that of his righteousness we may partake in the assumption of his name.

The fact that sacrifice is required in order to gain life eternal, is therefore not inconsistent with the goodness which God showed to the Ninevites without sacrifice. It is rather the form which His goodness takes in a higher matter, and required by its greater importance. It is the same goodness manifested in both cases. It is the same God who shines in all parts of the Bible. "What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth; who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? . . . I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8: 31-39).

There is one thing, and one thing only, can separate us from this love. It is specified in the words of Isaiah to Israel: "Your iniquities have separated between you and your God." God will have no regard for those who forget Him or neglect His commandments. Those who sink into a state of self-service, who live exclusively for their own comfort and well-being, who let God slip from their practical recognition; His word from their studies; His honour from their concern; His commandments from their lives, will awake to find that where life and death, and men, and angels, and heaven and earth, were powerless to interpose an obstacle between them and the friendly regard of the Almighty, their own folly has done it without further remedy. God is love; but our God is also a consuming fire. He will not be mocked; He will not be put off with the fag-ends of our service. He demands the whole heart and the whole life; and he is not his own friend who refuses the call: for there will come a time when the man who has served himself will find he has served a master who can only pay him at last with tribulation, and anguish, and death; while the man who obeys the divine call will at the same period discover that in making God his portion, he has secured the joyful inheritance of all things.

(Taken from "Seasons of Comfort" Volume 1, pages 79-83 by Bro. Robert Roberts.)