

WISDOM AND COMFORT OBTAINED **FROM GOD'S ENSAMPLES**

We must all feel it to be a relief to come away from our daily occupations and anxieties and troubles and to sit down to contemplate the scenes of other days exhibited to us in the Scripture readings we have together at such meetings as these. It is a relief to look at any scenes that take us away from our own troubles; how much more when the scenes not only give the pleasure of change, but contain the promise of benefit in all the directions and forms of our need. Such are the scenes we look at in these readings we have had this morning. We will look in a cursory way at each of them by way of getting that relief and encouragement which the pilgrims of the Lord require so long as they are in the desert of the present evil life. They are all co-related, though differing in form and aspect. In all of them, we are in contact with the wisdom that comes from above, though dealing with men and matters transacted on the earth.

The first shows us Moses—Moses the flockmaster—Moses, the servant of Jethro, the Midianite, before the Lord had called him to bring His people out of Egypt. It shows him in the act of looking after the flocks in the pastures of Sinai (for there are pastures there, though the neighbourhood is in the main a wilderness). How came he there? For he had originally belonged to Egypt, and had been born and brought up in high station there. He had arrived in Midian as an exile from Egypt from which he had had to flee for killing an Egyptian in defence of a Hebrew. Why was he so zealous on behalf of a Hebrew, seeing the Hebrews were a serf race in the country, and he an Egyptian courtier, as the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter? Because he had faith in the promises made by the Lord God of the Hebrews to their fathers; and he—

“chose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season, esteeming the reproach of Christ (which was associated with the Hebrews) greater riches than the treasures of Egypt” (Heb. 11:25).

Why did he take upon himself to interfere in so practical and decisive a form in the affairs of his brethren? Because—

“he supposed his brethren would have understood how that God, by his hand would deliver them” (Acts 7:25).

Why did he entertain such a thought before God had appeared to him? Probably, because the time spoken of by God to Abraham having drawn near, he concluded that his own elevation to a position so near the throne of Egypt was a providential indication that God would make use of him in accomplishing the promised deliverance. In this thought, events ultimately proved him right; but in proceeding to act upon it without authority, he made the mistake of beginning 40 years before the time, and had to flee from the country and take refuge in Midian where the chapter read Exodus shows him to us at the end of forty years. Forty years! Consider the length of this time under such circumstances. We glibly say “40 years;” but in no light or rapid manner would forty years pass with Moses as a tender of flocks and herds in the solitudes of the Midian desert. Look back forty years, and see what it means. Most of us here can look back forty years. In a certain way, it does not seem a long time to look back upon, but how sufficiently long it is for a man's ardours to abate, we all know. The impulsive zeal of Moses had evidently cooled all down. It turns out that he did not circumcise the children born to him during this time. This would indicate, not exactly the abandonment, but certainly the subsidence of the hopes and convictions that led him to slay the Egyptian. And now he sees a bush all aflame on the hillside, but not consuming. He draws near to inspect the

curiosity. He discovers that the hour has come for God to commence the work of Israel's deliverance, and that he, after all, is to be employed in it.

Now, it is not difficult for us to make a comforting application of this case to our circumstances. Having been led to discern the arrival of "*the time of the end*," we have been looking for the Lord for a number of years. We have not exactly slain Egyptians, or taken judgment into our own hands in any way but our conviction has not been without practical effect. Some, perhaps, have refrained from enterprises upon which they would have entered, if they had not entertained the conviction of the Lord's nearness. Some have spent money upon projects which perhaps they would have let alone if they had supposed the time of the end in the indefinite future. All have, more or less, been the subjects of premature impulses like Moses, and reapers, it may be, like him, of the depression of deferred hope and prolonged disappointment in the wilderness. But shall we lose heart? Shall we not rather renew our courage? Look at the flaming bush at the end of forty years. These forty years were not lost. They were probably necessary to prepare Moses for the mighty work he had to do. How could he have been admitted to the privilege of face-to face communication with God—how could he have been qualified to be a god to Pharaoh, and a prophet and lawgiver to the hosts of the Lord—without the weight and gravity and wisdom that came with years and adversity? So it will, doubtless, appear in our own case. The delay has not been without its necessary effect on all the servants of the Lord who are waiting for the promise, fearing God and doing His commandments.

We have not yet been waiting 40 years. We have seen many signs, and we are seeing them day by day. The manacled despotism of the Vatican, —the exhausted power of the sick man at the Golden Horn—the totally eclipsed French imperialism after a 20 years' war—causing control of European diplomacy at its three leading centres—and the reviving vitality of the Lord's land and people, with Britain's shadow extending in their neighbourhood, are all signs that cheer the heart with a rational confidence that the long night of God's hidden face is near its end, and that the time is at hand for the Lord to "*revive His work in the midst of the years and in wrath, to remember mercy*." One of these days, the counterpart of the flaming bush will suddenly arrest our attention. It may be an angel's presence—it may be a well-founded report concerning the same. In one way or other, the moment will come when we say, "It is enough—the Lord has come—at last, at last!"

In our second reading, we are with David. The attitude in which we see him differs from that of Moses, but yields us practical guidance in another way. Moses shows us the certainty of deliverance after long waiting. David, in Psalm 56, illustrates to us a man of God in trouble. His trouble is deep; the prayer heartfelt. He is among enemies—enemies numerous, strong, lively and clever.

"They be many that fight against me, O Thou most High . . . Every day they wrest my words: all their thoughts are against me for evil."

"Be merciful to me, O God, for man would swallow me up; he fighting daily oppresseth me."

Now, we know that God loved David and brought him at last out of all trouble, and will place him high in the Kingdom of God. It is this that makes it so helpful for us, who are in trouble, to see him in trouble. The very fact that he is in trouble is instructive. Why should it be so? The Eliphazes of the natural mind always reason that it should not be so, and as a fact is not so, that a righteous man should get into trouble. They argue that the fact of a man getting into trouble is a proof that he is a God-forsaken man. They did so in the case of Job, whose case has been placed on record to enable the children of God in all ages to correctly interpret trouble. Job was in the deepest trouble it is possible for a man to get into. His friends said it was evident that he must have been a wicked man in secret. But Job would not have it. He protested his integrity. He said he would die, asserting his innocence. To God he said:

“Thou knowest that I am not wicked.”

He could not account for the terrible calamities that had overtaken him. His philosophy of the case was that God had a right to do as He liked with His own; that He had given him great blessing in the past, and now He had taken it away, and who could hinder or find fault?

“Shall we receive good at the hand of the Lord, and not receive evil?”

He recognised God’s right to kill:

“Though he slay me, yet will I trust in Him.”

God endorsed Job’s speeches on the matter, and reproved the views of his three friends. So it is no strange picture that we see, when we see David in trouble. It is the portion of all God’s children at one time or other of their lives. It is necessary. It is refining and improving every way when not carried to the point of destruction—which God does not allow.

“He will not suffer us to be tried above that we are able to bear.”

A good man is made better by trouble. It chastens and subdues and humbles him. It enables him more acutely than ever to discern and feel the vanity of all mortal excellence, and the intrinsic majesty and authority of the Eternal One, from whom all have proceeded and in Whom they subsist from day to day. It enables him to sympathise more easily with others. It prepares him for the Kingdom. The way to the Kingdom of God is therefore, a troubled way. Rich men find it difficult to enter the Kingdom. Their hearts are liable to be satisfied with the creature, instead of seeking rest in the Creator. It is through much tribulation that God brings men to Himself. Moses had to spend a long, hopeless time in the wilderness, before God judged him fit to be entrusted with the mighty works accomplished by his hand. Joseph had been fitted for his exalted part by the ignominy of slavery, slander, and imprisonment; David was prepared for the throne by exile and implacable and deadly persecution. Jesus himself, we are told, learned obedience by the things that he suffered. Reviewing these facts, are we not more able to reconcile ourselves to the troubled day through which we are called to pass in this period of the world’s history? It is only preparatory. It will not last forever. It cannot last for ever. It must end in a few years at the very longest, even if it come in the form of death. Death itself is a welcoming ending to those who have entered into the new covenant; for, by one short step, it transfers them from their present evil state to the Lord’s presence at his coming. Let us then be comforted in all our tribulation that we endure, knowing that though painful to endure, it is working out for us a great result, for which we shall thank God in great gladness, when the work is done, the night past, and the morning arrived.

The third scene introduces Paul seated before a parchment, with pen in hand, or rather sitting by the side of one so seated, dictating words to be written to the brethren at Rome—words reputed at the time to be weighty and powerful, and which we find to be so to this day. The particular portion of those words read this morning brings before us a strong feature of Paul’s character, which it is of importance for us to realise and consider, in view of the fact that Paul was put forward by Christ as *“a pattern”* for the guidance of all who should afterwards believe on him to everlasting life. The feature brings before us the very sorrow we have already been considering.

“I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart.”

Let us stop for a moment and think of this. Here is Paul a sorrowful man—a continually sorrowful man—and such a man, a pattern set forth by Christ for our imitation. It is evident that there is here a radical difference from the ideal character of modern times. The central feature of the modern ideal is stoicism—grinning and unwincing submission to every pang that comes along. Sorrow is marked off as a weakness—an effeminacy. British pluck, British hardihood, British insensibility to pain and sorrow (the bear-it-and-come-up-smiling-mood), this is the type that is applauded as manly and strong. *“Great heaviness and continual sorrow of heart”* would be scouted as a species of monomania, unfitting a man for the society of his kind—especially sorrow of the sort that burdened Paul. He tells us what it was—

“For his kinsmen according to the flesh, Israelites,” who “having a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge,” had placed themselves in opposition to “the righteousness of God” in Christ.

This is a sorrow for which the world has no sympathy. It can understand sorrow for the loss of a wife, the loss of money, the loss of friends, but sorrow because Israel is not in harmony with God—this, in their eyes, is theological craze. Yet here it is, a foremost feature in the character pattern set before us by Christ. What shall we say? Why, that Christ and the world belong to two different systems of thought. Christ was not of the world, the apostles were not of the world, nor are the people of Christ in any age. The joys and sorrows of the children of God are not the joys and sorrows of the world. Why is this? There is a reason. Joy and sorrow are results. They are not fixed attributes of character. When they are, it is madness. Joy or sorrow depends upon love. What the mind loves, it will joy to receive, and grieve to be deprived of. Paul’s sorrow was because of the absence of that which he would have rejoiced to see. He would have rejoiced to see Israel in submission to God. This was because he delighted in God and loved man. He would have rejoiced to see God had in reverence and man in the way of true well-being in fearing and serving Him. The world cares for none of these things. The world cares only for those things that minister to its pride or its love of folly, or its appetites in various departments. For this reason, it has no sorrow for the absence of godliness. It detests godliness, and would have looked upon Paul as a maundering bigot. It shows these characteristics in various forms. From some of them we are in danger. Its offensive forms have little power to ensnare. The ribald jest of the pot-house frequenter repels by its ugliness and manifest unreason, but there are polite and elegant forms in which the same spirit is distilled through all society, and is liable to infect us, and assimilate us to itself. Let us be on our guard. We have a standard. It is not in the newspaper press, it is not in the classics of any age or country; it is not in “society.” It is in the Bible. It is in the apostles and prophets. In their written minds, the Spirit of God breathes and moulds. Let us surrender to its power in reading, meditation and prayer. Thus we shall become finally incorporate in the family of God’s elect:

For “whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His son.”

This image is a noble image. The world may boast of manliness and heroism, but there is no manliness that comes near the beauty of Christ-likeness, which is brave without boasting, frank without pride, cheerful without folly, patient without insensibility, submissive without fear, indomitable without stupidity, gentle without effeminacy, kind without weakness. The fear of God, and the love of man, in the confidence of what God has accomplished in the past, and promised in the future, combine to give a combination of strength and beauty that far outshine the cold glitter of the Greek elegance so much admired by the natural man. The Greek glitter is the glint of an iceberg, destined to thaw and disappear before the sun, whose waxing warmth will shortly fill the world with light and heat. With that sun comes the day, and we are not of the night, but of the day. Let us walk as the children of the day.

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