

SUNDAY MORNING NO. 301

‘Tis well the Lord said,

“Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them.”

We might have thought it scarcely worth while for two or three to come together: whereas we find it greatly worth while. It is sometimes more effectual for true edification to come together in two or three than to come together in a large number. Sometimes we see Christ more and each other less when the meeting is small than when it is large. The object of our coming together is that we may be enabled to see him. We cannot see him in the ordinary circumstances of life. All such circumstances by sea or land tend to hide him from sight. Yet he is in the world of human history to be seen, and it is by the seeing of him that we get the better of the vanishing world, of which for the time being we form a part. God has taken care that we shall be helped to see him, not only by the full, clear, and simple account of his life that we have in the “Gospels,” but by the obligation laid upon every believer to come together, even if only *“two or three,”* to call him to memory.

It is remarkable that the special phase of his history chosen for memorialisation should be—not his birth, not his resurrection, not his ascension, but his death.

“As often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, ye show forth the Lord’s death until he come.”

Seeing he is alive, one would have thought that his death would be a thing to be covered out of sight, to be forgotten, as a transient shame and anguish. So, no doubt, it would have been if the mind of man had had anything to do with the contriving of this ordinance of the Lord. Instead of being allowed to slip out of memory as an untoward incident, it is placed in the very forefront of the truth, not only in this breaking of bread, but in the exhibition of the glory that is coming on.

“To him that loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood.”

“These are they that have . . . washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

“Thou hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred and tongue and people and nation.”

What is the meaning of this—that in the assembly appointed for calling Christ to remembrance, it should be his death that is put forward in the rite we are called on to perform—the breaking of this bread? the pouring out of this wine? It would be very hard to answer this question if the ideas that find favour with some were true ideas. If Christ “died because he was killed” and not because the Father required it as the basis of human reconciliation; —if Christ was crucified because the Jews and Romans succeeded in their plots against a righteous man and not because the righteousness of God required his death (at human hands) as the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world, *“foreordained before the foundation of the world;”*—if he “might as well have died in his bed as have offered himself a sacrifice to God on the cross, then indeed would reason fail in accounting for an ordinance in which Christ says by one parable what he uttered in another:

“My flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed;” and,

“Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.”

With the truth before our minds, we have no such difficulty. The blood represented in the cup which we drink is what Jesus calls, *“my blood shed for the remission of the sins of many.”* Its essentiality in this respect is shown by the statement that its propitiatory efficacy comes to us *“through faith in his blood”* (Rom. 3:25), and that we are *“justified by his blood”* (Rom. 5:9), and that *“in him, we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins”* (Col. 1:14). The

significance underlying the fact we have often had to consider on other occasions. It is the fact itself upon which we have now to dwell. The bread which we break, he calls "*my body which is given for you.*" His body and blood given up—life **wholly** surrendered—that by faith therein we might be forgiven and saved—such a fact enables us to understand why the death of Christ should be selected as the central significance of a memorial institution to be observed in the absence of him in whom the great work was accomplished. His coming again we might have remembered; his death we should have been sure to forget if it had not been fixed before us in this imperative character in a weekly observance of binding obligation. How could we in such a forgetfulness have been qualified for a place in the ranks of those who will give Christ pleasure by joyfully proclaiming:

"Worthy is the Lamb that was slain and hath redeemed us to God by his blood."

And how could we in such sterility of divine understanding and memory have been fit for approach to the footstool of Him who is High and Holy—whose worship is a rapture of self-abnegation, and acceptable only when there is enlightened recognition of the mutual relations of God and man.

Assembling around these emblems, our minds are opened out to many things not expressly connected with them. Jesus stands as the centre of the law and the prophets, and we cannot embrace him in an enlightened manner without also embracing whatever may at any time be under our notice out of those Scriptures which he commanded the Jews to "*search.*" Whatever part of these Scriptures we may read, will bring us into contact with that mind of God of which he was the expression. Even the most unpromising part of Scripture will be found fruitful in this respect, for those whom Paul describes as those having "*senses exercised by reason of use.*"

How unpromising at first sight is the story we have read this morning (1 Sam. 15) of Saul's unfinished work with Amalek and consequent rejection as king. But let us draw closer and see what we get. Saul was sent to "*smite Amalek.*" He was told to "*utterly destroy all that they have and spare them not, but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.*" To men who do not recognise God's side of human affairs, this is very shocking. It is barbarism pure and simple. But with Christ, God's side of human affairs was the great side, and if we are Christ's, it will be because we share his views. Now he said "*the Scripture cannot be broken.*" Therefore to him, there was nothing barbarous in this dooming of the Amalekites to destruction. And I think to unbiased reason, there can be nothing but sober propriety in it when all the elements of the case are allowed their place. The first element is that—

*"The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof: the world and **all that dwell therein.**"*

Grant that God has made, who can deny His right to destroy? And if He have the right to destroy, who will deny that He is the sole judge as to when and for what reason that right is to be exercised? He made man, not merely for human satisfaction, but for divine pleasure. When man ceases to please, may He not send him forth from Eden to death, or drown a whole population in a flood of waters, or give over seven wicked nations to the sword of Joshua? Reason cannot falter in the answer, though human feeling may have its objections. Reason illuminated by knowledge feels no jar as it listens to the command issued to Saul to extirpate the Amalekites who proved themselves adversaries to the work of God when He brought Israel out of Egypt, and who ever since had walked in their own evil ways. We may also discern a certain teaching of wisdom which is also unpalatable to human thought, namely, that human life is not the precious thing in God's eyes that it seems in man's. The whole sentiment of Scripture is strong on this point.

"All nations before him are as nothing, and they are counted unto him as less than nothing and vanity" (Isa. 40:17).

"All flesh is grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass" (1 Pet. 1:24).

And is not experience in harmony with this declaration? A man cooped up in a confined line of life in which he only sees certain persons and does certain things and reads certain books all the year round, may nurse himself into the idea that human life is of sacred and lasting interest. But let a man go abroad and live long enough to behold not only the endless multitudes, but the endless diversifications

and the endless abortiveness of human life, and the bottomless abyss of decay and death that everywhere yearly receives into itself a ceaseless stream of gigantic volume, he will feel within himself the sentiment that David expressed when he said,

“Lord, what is man that thou takest knowledge of him and the son of man that thou visitest him.”

Saul goes and does the work, but he does not do it thoroughly. He devastates the country of Amalek, destroys the bulk of the population, but he saves alive the well-bred king, and brings back a vast quantity of livestock. God tells Samuel of the unsatisfactory performance, and Samuel meets Saul at his return. He taxes him with his imperfect work.

“Yea,” said Saul, “I have obeyed the voice of the Lord, and have gone the way which the Lord sent me . . . and have utterly destroyed the Amalekites.”

“What meaneth, then, this bleating of the sheep in mine ears and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?”

Saul’s answer was that the people had brought these for sacrifice. Samuel’s rejoinder brings the whole principle of the case to a powerful focus:

“Hath the Lord so great delight in burnt offerings as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice and to hearken than the fat of rams”

(1 Sam. 15:22).

It requires no particular penetration to see here the lesson of all Christ’s teaching. The essence of all righteousness is obedience to what God has commanded. The unenlightened mind of man is naturally self-willed and disobedient; and even when, by the force of circumstances operating through many generations, it has been brought into conformity with divine appointments, it easily loses the disposition of obedience and stiffens into a mere habit of compliance, or still worse, adopts thoughts and theories of the divine institutions that amount to superstition. Thus circumcision and the sacrifices and the temple came to have imputed to them an inherent virtue that made their observance an act of heroism and superiority quite apart from the principle of obedience. And thus Paul had apparently to go against divine appointment and exclaim, *“Circumcision is nothing”* but the keeping of a commandment. Thus too, God himself, who had enjoined the sacrifices, had to apparently repudiate them as an unacceptable service (Isa. 1:11-14; Amos 5:21-23). The thing that is acceptable is the spirit of child-like faith and obedience—which is nothing but purely reasonable: for what other fitting attitude can there be for created beings than that of absolute and trustful submission to the Power that created them. The thing that is unacceptable is the thought, inspired by the self-consequence, that we can put God under some kind of obligation by the magnitude of the acts we perform. This was Saul’s muddy thought—a state of mind that disqualified him for the divine use.

And so the chapter tells us that it repented the Lord that he had made Saul king. On this there is a great outcry among the enemies of the Bible that the Bible contradicts itself, because it says (even in this very chapter—1 Sam. 15) that—

“God is not a man that he should repent.”

There is no ground for this outcry whatever as regards true reason. There is merely the differing use of a similar term, which “gives a handle” to those who are on the unfriendly alert, but presents no obstacle to candour. There is a repentance or change of purpose which is not only possible but inevitable to unchanging character where purposes depend upon changeful circumstances. The two clearly separable aspects of the matter, the repenting and the unrepenting (which are not incompatible with each other), are clearly manifest from the context of the two supposed contradictory passages occurring in the chapter before us. The cause of the repentance is stated where we are informed the repentance occurred:

*“It repenteth me that I have set up Saul to be king, **FOR he is turned back from following me and hath not obeyed my commandments**” (verse 11).*

From this we deduce that Saul was made king on the assumption that he would be obedient, and would be continued in that position conditionally on the continuance of his obedience. This being so, there is nothing strange in the change of sentiment with which Saul's elevation was viewed when his public acts in several instances plainly manifested his unreliability. It would rather have been strange if God had not altered His mind. Those who have the artificial views of God created by the metaphysics of Calvinism bring a difficulty to the subject that does not belong to it. To those who recognise God as revealed (operating through angelic subordinates), His operations are as clear as those of human beings are to a child of the village. In the case of the declaration of God's non-repentance, the sense is equally clear. Saul, when informed of his rejection, importuned Samuel to return to him—evidently thinking to alter the divine decision by importunity, as one human being alters another. Samuel's answer affirms a truth not inconsistent with the change that had taken place:

"The Strength of Israel will not lie nor repent, for he is not a man that he should repent"—

That is, in the absence of any reason for repentance. God does everything for reasons. He sent Adam out of Eden for a reason; He chose Abraham for a reason; He brought Israel from Egypt for a reason; He destroyed the Amorites for a reason; He afterwards broke up Israel for a reason; He will save men for a reason. His reasons He has declared in every case. These reasons remaining unchanged, His line of action is unchangeable, because He is in Himself unchangeable and not subject to the whims and sensations that affect human action. This is all sensible enough, and disposes of the clouds and dimnesses that owe their existence to misapprehension.

This principle of the adaptability of the divine action to changing circumstances is the key to all the Scriptures. Just see how simply it explains our second reading.

"The Lord's hand is not shortened that it cannot save"—yet Israel were not saved; "neither is his ear heavy that it cannot hear"—yet Israel were unheard.

What then?

"Your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear."

Israel's insubordinate attitude was the reason of God's withdrawal from them, hiding his face and relapsing into silence—with what terrible results, the chapter describes:

"Therefore is judgment far from us, neither doth justice overtake us. We wait for light, but behold obscurity; for brightness, but we walk in darkness. We grope for the wall like the blind, and we grope as if we had no eyes. We stumble at noon-day as in the night; we are in desolate places as dead men. We roar all like bears and mourn sore like doves. We look for judgment, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far from us. Truth is fallen in the street, and equity cannot enter. Yea, truth faileth, and he that departeth from evil maketh himself a prey."

This terrible state of things has lasted a long time; and if the divine mind were inaccessible to what we might call the power of new considerations, there could be no end to the evil. Rejection and desolation would prevail for ever on the earth, because of the absence of any change with Israel. But new thoughts come into play after a certain continuance of the evil.

"The Lord saw it and it displeased him that there was no judgment. And he saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor. Therefore, HIS arm brought salvation; and his righteousness, it sustained him. For he put on righteousness as a breastplate, and an helmet of salvation upon his head. And he put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, and was clad with zeal as a cloak. According to their deeds (that is, the deeds of Israel's persecutors), accordingly he will repay—fury to his adversaries, recompense to his enemies; to the islands he will repay recompense."

It is a painful sight to God to behold the triumph of mere brute force over the arrangements of His wisdom which He placed in the midst of Israel. While that triumph is by His own appointment, it is no pleasure to Him, but the reverse—a puzzle to those who treat matters superficially, but none the less true nor intelligible. The truth of it rests on His own declarations in the Scripture: for the intelligibility of it, we have only to fall back on our consciousness. Do we not often decide upon the doing of things that we don't like to do in the accomplishment of the aims of wisdom? Undoubtedly. The punishment of our children, the performance of disagreeable acts of duty are instances. There is, therefore, no difficulty in understanding that God should in one and the same act, both appoint and disapprove. This conflict of feeling as we might call it, is visible from the beginning of His communications. At the very beginning, in the song of Moses, He said, with reference to Israel's stubborn insubordinations:

"I said I would make the remembrance of them to cease from among men, were it not that I feared the wrath of the enemy—lest their adversaries should say—Our hand is high (in the overthrow of Israel), the Lord hath not done all this" (Deut. 32:26-28).

So in the case of the Assyrian whom He said He would use as the instrument of His anger against Israel, He said:

*"Howbeit **he meaneth not so** . . . He saith, By the strength of my hand, I have done, and by my wisdom, for I am prudent . . . Therefore it shall come to pass when the Lord—(by the Assyrian's hand)—hath performed his whole work upon Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, I will punish the fruit of the stout heart of the King of Assyria, and the glory of his high looks" (Isa. 10:7-13).*

We may understand, then, that the prolonged down-treading of Israel by the power of the Gentiles becomes offensive in God's eyes without any new circumstance intervening as regards Israel's state. The mere continuance of Gentile prosperity in ascendancy over His own offending people, provokes at the last what we might call a reaction in God's mind in favour of Israel.

*"**When he seeth that their power was gone**, he will repent himself concerning his servants and . . . will have mercy upon his land and upon his people."*

This is the sentiment of the entire prophetic word on the subject:

*"Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished and that her iniquity is pardoned, for **she hath from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.**"*

As the chapter before us has it,

"He wondered there was no intercessor on Israel's behalf."

It is, of course, difficult for us to see the situation as it appears from God's point of view: but here is an intimation that there is to him cause for marvel (in all the circumstances) that no one should arise to plead Israel's cause and take measures for their rescue.

"Therefore His arm brought (will bring) salvation."

The form of this interposition is clearly stated:

*"**The Redeemer shall come to Zion**"—*

A statement which Paul, in Rom. 9:26, applies to the recovery of Israel after the flesh. This interposition is not because of any revival of excellence in Israel. The very reverse is carefully stated by God Himself:

"I do not this for you sakes, O house of Israel—(Be ashamed and confounded for your own evil ways)—but for my holy name's sake which you have profaned among the heathen . . . The heathen shall know that I am the Lord when I shall be sanctified in you before their eyes. For I will take you from among the heathen and gather you out of all countries and bring you into your own land" (Ezek. 36:21-24, 32).

Then follows, in today's reading, the sublime apostrophe of Zion in the era of her uprise from the desolations of many generations—without exception, the most magnificent delineation of the glory of the age to come which the Scriptures contain. Every son of Zion should commit this address to memory:

“Arise, shine, for thy light is come and the glory of the Lord is risen upon you. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light and kings to the brightness of thy rising,” &c.

Every truly enlightened and obedient believer of the Gospel is a son of Zion, and more deeply concerned than any mere Jew after the flesh in the coming restoration of the kingdom again to Israel. As with David, so with him:

“This is all his salvation and all his desire.”

Every hope—every aspiration—every desire—which has been created within him by the word of truth is bound up in the building again of the fallen tabernacle of David and the uprise of Israel's glory in the earth. They are the watchmen whom God has set upon Jerusalem's walls, who never hold their peace, who give God no rest day or night, till He make the righteousness thereof to go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth. They only can intelligently or acceptably—

“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.”

Not only do they desire to see God honoured, Israel saved, and mankind blessed, but they remember that God has said to all who love Jerusalem and mourn for her,

“Ye shall be delighted with the abundance of her glory . . . As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you, and ye shall be comforted in Jerusalem.”

(Taken from “Sunday Morning” No. 301 by Bro. R. Roberts)