

THE WORLD DISOBEDIENT TO GOD

In Jeremiah 14, as in many parts of the prophets, a calamitous state of things is depicted as prevailing in the land of Israel. It is a picture of death—no rain, the ground chapt, the gates languishing, a black aspect on everything; Jerusalem and the country round full of mourning—the children of the nobles themselves on the outlook everywhere for water. If we enquire the meaning of it, we are led straight into the heart of instruction. We do not require to go far to get the meaning. It is asked and supplied in the chapter. The question is put why God should thus neglect His people—why He should be as a stranger in the land—why He should let it seem as if He had no power to save. The answer is straight and strong, and it is an answer from God.

“Thus saith Yahweh unto this people.”

What saith He? Why, that they have loved to wander from Him, that they have forgotten Him. What then?

“Therefore Yahweh doth not accept them: He will now remember their iniquity and visit their sins.”

This then is the explanation of the evil things that befell Israel in their land. It was as Moses told them when they came out of Egypt.

“Beware that thou forget not Yahweh thy God in not keeping His commandments and His judgments and His statutes, which I command thee this day . . . If thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God . . . Yahweh shall make the rain of thy land powder and dust . . . Thou shalt not prosper in thy ways” (Deut. 8:11; 28:24).

It may be said, this is all ancient history, what has it to do with us? A moment’s enlightened reflection will bring the answer. It is ancient history written for us. It is among the *“whatsoever things ‘that’ were written for our learning,”* of which Paul speaks in Romans. Paul says the same thing even about the incidents that happened to Israel on their way from Egypt to Canaan. Referring to such unlikely things as their murmurings and God’s manifested displeasure, he says, *“all these things happened unto them for example: and they are written for our admonition”* (1 Cor. 10:11). If this is true of the events of the Exodus, how much more of the messages of the prophets. They are intended to convey instruction. It is not difficult to see that they do so. If God was displeased with Israel for wandering from Him, will it be any different with us? It is the great crime of the present age that God is ignored and forgotten. It is a crime we were once guilty of. It is a crime into which it is very easy to relapse. Hence the wisdom of reading and studying the prophets, as well as other parts of the Scriptures, that we may come quite into harmony with God’s views of human actions, and be preserved from those wrong views which only bring misery and destruction at last. In the case of Israel, it was the Law of God by Moses they neglected; in our case, it is the same voice speaking from heaven by Christ and recorded in the apostolic writings and nowhere else. It is this that the whole world neglects and leaves out of account as entirely as if it had never been delivered. It is this that we may be drawn into forgetfulness of, by the influence of other things, and the supreme power of universal example.

How serious a matter it is to forget the Law of the Lord and act in opposition to its prescriptions, few men in our generation realise. How serious a thing it is we may learn from what God said by Nathan to David, when he sinned in the matter of Uriah.

“Now therefore the sword shall never depart from thine house because thou hast despised Me” (2 Sam. 12:10).

David had no thoughts of despising God when he sinned the sin which God condemned. He merely yielded to pleasant desire in the first instance, and then sought to screen himself from shame in the second. David feared God exceedingly and had not changed his mind towards God at all. Yet this was God’s construction of his act: that in going contrary to the commandment God had given for the

guidance of human action, David had *“despised God.”* Men do not think of this when every day in their lives they do the things God has forbidden to be done, and leave undone the things He has commanded to be done. What a fearful accumulation of guilt lies upon the children of disobedience! What a fearful crime for men to despise God. Those despise God who despise His Word; and those practically despise His Word (in God’s estimation) who neglect it or disobey it. They do so with impunity now. No harm seems to come to their negligence. It would be foolish to be misled by appearances. It was so with Israel for a long time. It did not seem to matter whether they observed the Law of Moses or not. The sun rose, the rain came, the harvest matured, prosperity reigned as much as when the first generation of their fathers feared the commandments. Yes, for a while; but mark the expression in this chapter.

“He will now remember their sin.”

Look out upon their calamitous history and see what this means. Look at their desolate land; look at their wandering and downtrodden race; look at their scattered polity, headless and powerless. Now make the application. It has an application in other directions. See what is said of Rome, respectable and respected Rome which notwithstanding her sins, which have *“reached unto heaven,”* rears her head in complacent and prosperous authority among the nations of the earth.

“Great Babylon came in remembrance before God, to give unto her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of His wrath.”

There are things long past—deeds and transactions which are ancient and forgotten history with the world—to come up again in divine reckoning and be made the basis of terrible acts of retribution—just as with Israel of the 42nd generation of whom Jesus said that upon them would come *“all the righteous blood shed upon the earth from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zecharias”*—an imprecation so terribly fulfilled in the destruction of the Jewish state by the Romans. Men may individually insulate themselves from the guilt of a generation in which they live. Hence Peter exhorted those who were responsible to *“save themselves from that generation.”* But men who drift with the stream, partake of the guilt of their generation and may find themselves involved in the whirlpool of judgment that will destroy the present wicked world when the time for “remembrance” arrives. This remembrance acts both ways. Forgotten deeds of evil will be remembered and so will forgotten deeds of obedience to God. We read—

“A book of remembrance was written before Him for them that feared Yahweh and that thought upon His Name; and they shall be Mine saith Yahweh of Hosts in that day when I make up My jewels.”

What encouragement we have in view of these things to continue patient in inconvenient well doing and constantly avoiding convenient evil doing. The day of the issue of things, which is as sure to come as the next eclipse, will show the supreme wisdom of such a course and the supreme folly of those who allow themselves to be cheated into forgetfulness of God and disobedience of His commandments.

There are some people for whom God will not be prayed to—people that are in a nominal sense His people. Thus concerning Israel—God’s own people—He says to Jeremiah in this chapter—

“Pray not for this people for their good. When they fast, I will not accept them.”

The reason of His severe attitude, we have already seen. Israel had forgotten God and discarded His law. Consider in this light the community among whom we live. Jesus said,

“I pray not for the world.”

It is a parallel case. Prayer is only acceptable on behalf of those who fear and love and obey God. The world does none of these things. It is in the position of Belshazzar to whom Daniel said,

“The God in whose hands thy breath is and whose are all thy ways hast thou not glorified.”

It is therefore in a position of great wickedness, with all its education and refinements; and it has not ceased to be true that *“the friendship of the world is enmity with God.”* We have stood aside from the

world: are we acceptable with God? Yes, if we fear and love Him, and listen to Him in the daily reading of His Word, and serve Him in the observance of the *“all things whatsoever He has commanded us by Christ.”* If we do not these things, but merely mind earthly things like all the world around us, in what are we better than they? In that case we are worse than they, because we know better and have promised differently. To be *“condemned with the world”*—to have part in the *“judgment that will devour the adversary”* is the destiny divinely written beforehand, of all who are in this relation to these things. Here the matter comes home to us. We have been separated like Israel, to be a people, but God’s pleasure in us depends upon our faithfulness to Him. If we hold our position in the gospel, merely as a man holds a policy of insurance or a deed of conveyance—that is, as an instrument of personal advantage in a futurity for which we find it our interest to provide, God will have no pleasure in us, and we shall find the gospel of no advantage. Christ will refuse to pray for us, and we shall go to his judgment seat at last to find our sins unforgiven, and our path closed by condemnation. Looking at Israel as exhibited to us in the Scriptures of truth, we learn what is pleasing to God and what is not.

Jeremiah’s words were very unpalatable to the people—at which we cannot wonder. The words of another class were quite acceptable. These were the false prophets, but who were not discerned to be such by the people in general. Their words were pleasant words—assurances of peace, where Jeremiah was warning them against the coming calamity because of their sins. Such words were naturally very powerful with the people, and Jeremiah found their influence a great barrier to the work God had sent him to do. Of this he makes complaint in the chapter before us:

“Oh, Lord God! Behold the prophets say unto them, ye shall not see the sword, neither shall ye have famine, but I will give you assured peace in this place” (v.13).

What was God’s response to this? It is most worthy of note:

“The prophets prophesy lies in My name. I sent them not, neither have I commanded them, neither spake unto them. They prophesy unto you a false vision and divination, and a thing of nought and the deceit of their heart.”

What is most noteworthy of all is the fact that these pleasant-spoken, people-misleading false prophets were tolerated side by side with a true messenger from God. What are we to make of it? God could have paralysed them all in a moment so that no doubt could have been left in any one’s mind as to their true character, and all would have seen that Jeremiah’s message was from God. He did so manifest his discriminating power on important occasions, as when the envious Korah, Dathan and Abiram were supported by a phalanx of the most influential of the congregation against Moses, and as when God answered one man by fire on the top of Carmel, and ignored hundreds of sycophantic priests whom he left to slaughter. But in the case before us, He left the false prophets to say their say unmolested. The people had to exercise their judgment as to which represented the mind of the Lord. It is an illustration of the wise principle that there is a time for everything. There is a time for God to place the seal of His open reprobation upon wickedness, so that men may have a basis of test in other times and matters. But there is a time when the false is allowed to flourish with absolute impunity and even with prosperity, and when the true is allowed to be under a cloud, in order that the minds of faithful men may be exercised and proved. God expects and requites that we have “senses exercised to discern both good and evil.” This capability could not be developed by a situation in which evil did not have a chance. For this reason, these false prophets were allowed to have all the weight that came with numbers, influence, and unanimity, while the Truth was with one meek man against whom all were speaking (15:10). May we not from this gain consolation for our own position? God has allowed the Truth to come into the most humbling circumstances, having scarcely any friends among men, while error is organised with great and respectable and wealthy and educated systems with multitudes of supporters. Judging by appearances, men would judge wrongly. Judging by the Scriptures, we are enabled to judge clearly and strongly and boldly, and to maintain the Truth against the whole world in arms against it. The situation is one calling for and compelling an almost violent exercise of judgment. God requires this at our hands. By the mouth of Christ he says, *“Beware of false prophets”*—and false prophets are necessarily the numerous, popular, and well-to-do. How are we to discern them?

“Ye shall know them by their fruits.”

Are they like the true? Oh yes; you would think they were the genuine sheep: they have got sheep skins on. How are we to distinguish them from the true? You must “try” them.

“Believe not every spirit: try the spirits whether they are of God.”

How are we to try them? God Himself tells us: *“By the Word.”*

“If any man speak not according to this Word, it is because there is no light in them.”

There is no other form of God’s Word in the earth at present but the Bible. Therefore, it comes to this: the Bible is the standard. Every claim must be judged by this. But before men can judge by the Bible, they must be acquainted with it; and before they can be acquainted with it, they must study it—not reading a chapter now and then, as a pious, conscience-soothing performance, like the orthodox people, but reading it in a daily, regular, earnest manner, at stated times set apart for the purpose. By this method, a man becomes so acquainted with the Scriptures as to be able to make that practical application of them in judgment that qualifies him to discern the things that are of God from those that are only so in name and appearance.

Jeremiah was instructed to utter the sentence of God against the plausible men who were stealing the hearts of the people away from a divine allegiance. They were saying,

“Ye shall not see the sword, neither shall ye see famine.”

God commanded Jeremiah to say,

“By sword and famine shall those prophets be consumed; and the people to whom they prophesy shall be cast out in the streets of Jerusalem because of the famine and the sword, and they shall have none to bury them.”

Here was a direct issue between one man and many, as to whether good or evil was in store for the God-neglecting inhabitants of Jerusalem. The people who heard the one contradicting the many, had to wait to see which was right, so far as actual realisation was concerned. We are not in that position. We look back and see that the Truth was with Jeremiah and not with the community who were opposed to him. In terrible reality, sword and famine came and desolated the country, almost destroying the whole population for the time being. The application to ourselves is plain. The Word of God by the prophets has been proved true over and over again. Therefore what they have written concerning the future will come to pass. On this we stand, however much appearances may be against us. It is written,

“Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is set in them to do evil.”

This is our experience. Because the declared purpose of God seems to tarry, the bulk of men hang back or turn away from the testimony, and give themselves entirely over to “the desires of the flesh and of the mind.” Here is the trial of faith and patience.

“Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried he shall receive the crown of life which the Lord hath promised to them that love him.”

The purpose of God will surely be accomplished, and happy will they all be who hold fast their confidence to the end. We know what God says,

“If any man draw back, My soul shall have no pleasure in him.”

One more point in the chapter before concluding. Because of impending judgment Jeremiah was instructed thus:

“Therefore shalt thou say this word unto them: Let mine eyes run down with tears night and day, and let them not cease; for the virgin daughter of my people is broken with a great breach and with a very grievous blow. If I go forth into the field, then behold the slain with the sword, and if I enter into the city, then behold them that are sick with famine.”

There are two features about this deserving of notice. One is obvious, and will be allowed by all who receive the Scriptures, and that is that it is according to the mind of God that we have such sympathy with all things pertaining to Jerusalem as to mourn for her in the day of her desolation. A sorrow on this account is not on the list of the world's virtues by any means. It belongs notwithstanding to those mental states which are unto God as a sweet smelling savour. Probed to its root, it is a sympathy with all things that are truly divine and wise and true and good; for Jerusalem represents the work and purposes of God in the earth as distinguished from the mere likes and schemes of man which are all destined to perish. The other point which might not perhaps catch attention so easily is the light incidentally thrown by this prophecy on the subject of inspiration as affecting some portions of the Scripture that would not seem by their form to be inspired. Jeremiah is commanded to use words that would appear to be a mere personal lament of his own:

"Let mine eyes run down with tears."

The words so written were the words of God, though apparently the words of Jeremiah. God made use of the expression of Jeremiah's feelings as the form in which His own mind concerning Israel was to be expressed. Study shows this to be the case in hundreds of cases where it is not expressly stated to be the case. For example the Psalms of David are all in this form, so much so, that some have a difficulty realising that they can be the words of the Spirit. Yet the Psalms of David are repeatedly quoted in the New Testament as the expression of the Spirit. The case of Jeremiah before us may show us how this can be; for of David, as of Jeremiah, it is true that the Spirit of God was the moving power of his utterance, though these utterances took a personal form. As David declares:

"The Spirit of God spake by me, and His word was on my tongue."

A recognition of the all-prevailing presence of the Spirit is essential to a right estimate and a right use of these inestimable writings. By this, we are enabled to read them with the result that Paul tells us they were given by the inspiration for viz.:

"That the man of God may be thoroughly furnished unto all good works and so be prepared for 'entering abundantly' the everlasting Kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."

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