

The Other Side of God's Character

It is an apostolic exhortation to "*behold the goodness and severity of God.*" Both these sides of the Divine character have to be recognised before we get a wholesome and scriptural view of Him with whom we have to do. Both are amply illustrated in the operations of nature, and in the historic doings of God with His people Israel. It is with the latter illustration we have more particularly to do on the present occasion. The chapter read from Isaiah (58) brings before us the severe side of God's character, and at the same time reminds us of some important lessons we are liable to forget, and upon the remembering and carrying out of which depends our ultimate individual acceptance with Him. The prophet is commanded to "*cry aloud, spare not; lift up thy voice like a trumpet and show **My People** their transgressions and the house of Jacob their sins.*" The prophet was not sent to the surrounding heathen to tell them of their sins, but to Israel: God's own people. Sin is by no means confined to those who know not God. The need for condemning sin exists as much, and in a certain sense, more, within the house of God than in the outer darkness. The outer darkness is insensible to appeal; wickedness is its normal condition, so to speak. It knows not God and cares for none of His ways, and reproof would be altogether objectless. But the house of God is professedly founded on submission to the expressed and enjoined will of God. And the people composing it are in danger of resting on this collective profession while individually acting inconsistently with it.

Thus it was with Israel: "*They seek Me daily,*" says the Spirit of God by Isaiah, "*and **delight to know My ways** as a nation that did righteousness and forsook not the ordinance of their God.*" They crowded the temple at the appointed times: they brought the sacrifices and kept the feasts, and took a certain delight in these things, but privately, they acted in opposition to the spirit on which the whole institution was founded. Jesus tells us what this spirit was. He says, "*All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for **this is the law and the prophets***" (Matt. 7: 12). Or, as he on another occasion expressed it, "*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and all thy soul, and all thy strength, and thy neighbour as thyself: **on these two commandments hang all the law and the Prophets***" (Matt. 22:40). That is, the whole framework of the Divine work on earth hitherto, owes its form to the need there is for these two principles obtaining the ascendancy. The whole object of the law and the whole end of the things revealed to the prophets is the establishment on earth of "*Glory to God in the highest; peace on earth, goodwill among men.*"

In view of this, we can comprehend the odiousness in the Divine eyes of religious exercises, devoid of the double-sided animating principle which is the very root and spirit of "*pure religion and undefiled.*" Israel gloried in the temple: boasted of their law, attended with a certain delight on the Divine institutions connected with them; but they gave not God the glory: they took it all to themselves, which is the universal weakness of human nature. Their boasting was carnal: their pride was a fleshly pride altogether as it is at this day: their satisfaction was with themselves. Therefore God took no pleasure in their approaches to Him. "*To what purpose*" saith He (Isaiah 1), "*is the multitude of your sacrifice unto Me? I am full of the burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts . . . Bring no more vain oblations. Incense is an abomination unto Me. The new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies I cannot away with. It is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and appointed feasts My soul hateth; they are a trouble to Me. I am weary to bear them.*" Or again (Zech. 7:

5), "*When ye fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months . . . did ye at all fast unto Me? When ye did eat, and when ye did drink, did ye not **eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves***?"

So that as regards what Jesus declares to be "*the first and great commandment*," Israel's approaches to God were lacking of the one element which above all other makes God take pleasure in the worship of His people. With their lips they drew near: but **their heart** was far from Him. Consequently, their attendance at the temple and offering of their sacrifices, though actually required of them, were in vain. Their rendering of them was to an extent obedience, because they had been required, but it was obedience without the right intention. There was no intelligence of love towards God. It was salt without savour.

And as regards "*the second commandment which is like unto it*," their religious observances were equally devoid of the acceptable spirit. They were not controlled by a benevolent regard for their neighbour's case. "*Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness . . . Is not this the fast that I have chosen; to loose the bands of wickedness, to **undo the heavy burdens**, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? When thou seest the naked that thou cover him: and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?*"

Now, is there no lesson for us in all these things? Doubtless there is. Paul tells us that these things were "*written for our learning*." And is it not plain as the noonday that like Israel, we may deceive ourselves as regards our standing towards God, if we content ourselves with a merely technical compliance with the instructions of the house of God? Is there no possibility that we may presume too much upon our knowledge of the truth, and our baptism, and our breaking of bread from week to week? These ways are Divine, and in their right place indispensable: but what if at the same time it is man more than God that is before our eyes in the doing of these things? What if we sing and pray merely as the right sort of thing to do without opening the heart to God in all sincerity and fervency and fear? What if the glory of God be but a phrase on our lips, and a sentiment in reality foreign to our hearts? What if we shut up the bowels of our compassion towards those who suffer? What if with plenty in our hands, we think only of our own need, and our own comfort, and our schemes are shaped and burdened only and continually with our own cares and our own interests? What if we never help the heavy burdens under which so many around us are staggering to the grave? What if we practice a habit of absolute indifference to the yokes, and the oppressions and difficulties which are crushing to the earth our neighbours on every hand?

Is it not obvious that in that case, we are in the exact position of Israel, "*delighting in Jehovah's [Yahweh's] ways*" after a fashion, but to no profit, because He takes no pleasure in us? It is a frequent thing in the New Testament for reference to be made to the experiences of Israel as affording lessons for those who have come into the bond of the covenant through Christ in baptism. A Calvinistic and unscriptural theology has destroyed the force of all such allusions for the majority of persons; but it is our privilege to have been delivered from this as well as other corrupting forms of human tradition. Let us therefore seek to realise the full import of Israel's experiences as bearing on ourselves. Paul says (1 Cor. 10: 6), the things that happened unto them were "*our examples to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. All these things happened unto them for ensample, and they are written for our admonition upon whom the ends of the world are come. **Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.***" This last sentence is the whole point of Paul's allusion to

Israel in writing to the Corinthians. In writing to the Romans (11: 20-22), he says something substantially the same: "*Because of unbelief they (the Jews) were broken off, and thou standest by faith. **Be not high-minded, but fear.** For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest **He also spare not thee.** Behold, therefore, the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity: but toward thee, goodness, **if thou continue in His goodness, otherwise thou also shalt be cut off.**"* Again, in writing to the Hebrews, he says (3: 12; 4:1), "*Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God . . . for some (Israelites) **when they had heard did provoke** . . . so we see they could not enter in because of unbelief. **Let us, therefore, fear** lest a promise being left us of entering into His rest, any of you should seem to come short of it."*

With these apostolic instances before us, we see how warrantable and wholesome a thing it is to judge ourselves in the light of what God has said so largely in the prophets concerning Israel's position and behaviour before Him. From this source, we shall be able to draw large supplies of practical guidance and instruction on points that even the "New Testament" may have left dim; and in this treatment of the prophetic Scriptures, we shall see new force in Paul's declaration that all Scripture (by which he referred particularly to the prophets) given by inspiration of God, is "*profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works*" (2 Tim. 3: 16).

Returning to the point which I introduced this to illustrate, it is very possible for us to be in the position of Israel. We may be zealous of the Divine ordinances in the same way. We may have a liking for the Gospel theoretically; we may attend and enjoy the meetings: and in a manner be as strongly in love with the Christadelphian position as the Jews were with their temple, and yet be lacking in the spiritual element that makes these things acceptable to God as part and parcel of a faithful service. They are good in their place: Divine in their place: indispensable in their place: but if unaccompanied by the sentiment toward God which sincerely offers all to Him, and that disposition toward man which prompts to deeds of blessing and mercy, it may be all in vain, for on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets, and therefore, all the Gospel and all the meetings and the whole machinery of the Divine service of our day. Therefore, what can we say more to the point than what Paul says? "*Let us, therefore, fear.*"

Jesus says "*Salt is good; but if the salt have lost its saltiness, it is thenceforth good for nothing but to be trodden under foot of men.*" The connection in which he said this shows his meaning, and his meaning strengthens the idea before us. He was being followed by a large multitude of people (Luke 14: 25). "*And he turned to them and said, If any man come to me and hate not his father and mother, and wife and children, and brethren and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. . . . Salt is good, but if the salt have lost its savour, wherewith shall it be seasoned? It is neither fit for the land nor fit for the dunghill*"; which was as much as to say, "This coming after me is good, but not if it is disconnected from the state of mind which I require in my disciples." This state of mind is the savour or saltiness of the salt. The appropriateness of the simile must be apparent to all who have any experience of men in spiritual things. The man of spiritual understanding in whom this understanding has developed spiritual affection or a decided, pronounced, and fervent affinity for the things of God, in all their relations and manifestations, is a man of saltiness, pleasant to the taste. But how often it is that with a knowledge of the truth, there has failed to come the loving espousal of Divine views of men and things. The man knows the Gospel intellectually and has a faint desire to be saved but his affections are with the thoughts, ways, aims,

movements, men and things of the present evil world. There is no fervent submission to God; no adequate appreciation of Christ. Dull and irresponsible to spiritual things, he is quick, active, intelligent and enterprising in all directions of self-interest. The salt is there in the profession of discipleship, but it is a mere powder without taste, of no use for the King's table.

The great object of the Gospel is to bring men into the well-salted state in which their relation to God is a very thorough, hearty, pronounced and uncompromising thing. Christ is the illustration of what is wanted. He is the first-born among many brethren, to whom all the rest are pre-required to be conformed as to the likeness of an image. Now there is no mistaking his case, and we are in no danger of going beyond him. He declared in simple but expressive terms, "*I am not of this world*," and his whole course illustrates the meaning of the language. He stood aloof from men in so far as they stood away from the Divine foundation. He took no part in their movements, patriotic or otherwise. The duties of citizenship he discharged passively, as in the case of paying taxes. His attitude towards the world was that of protest and dissociation. He "*testified of it that the works thereof were evil*," by which he earned hatred and destruction. He had no apologies or spare sympathy for the enemies of God. He pursued a perfectly independent course, as insensible to the censure of the world as He was above their favour. He never took public opinion or public criticism into account. His one simple aim was to do the will of Him who had sent him— a will utterly inconsistent with popularity and favour.

Now his testimony concerning his disciples, is, that their part is to try to follow in the course he has pursued before them. "*I have given you an example*." "*Ye are not of the world even as I am not of the world*." "*It is sufficient for the disciple that he be as his Master*." "*If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you*." "*Ye cannot serve God and mammon*." "*No man is worthy of me who loves himself or his friends more than me*." Consequently, there is no room for the contention of those who are fain to think that Christ's case is no standard for us to go by. Christ's case is the standard and the only standard: and those who speak of it as too high, are speaking against the word. There will be no other standard in the great day of Christ which will shortly come upon us all. The so-called "churches" have so lowered and bedraggled the Gospel in the mire of human sentiment, that it has become almost constitutionally difficult with many to receive the truth on this point.

Well, there were disciples in Christ's own day who, when they heard him on certain topics, said "*This a hard saying: who can hear it? and from that day, turned back and walked no more with him*." It is not wonderful, if in our deserted day, there should be a similar resistance to the claims of the Eternal Spirit, speaking in the holy oracles. It will be found at last a terrible thing to fight against God. The only course of sane men is to receive and follow Christ without the least reservation, regardless of disadvantage to themselves or misconception on the part of others, knowing that it is written, "*Let them that suffer according to the will of God commit their souls unto Him in well-doing, as unto a faithful Creator*." They cannot do more than lose their life for Christ; and thousands have done this before them, concerning whom Christ says, they shall be saved in the day of his power when all merely human hopes and schemes and honours will be wrecked for evermore.

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