

The Prosperity of the Wicked

IN the portion read from the prophets this morning, we find expression given to the thoughts that must, at one time or other, exercise every lover of righteousness. More than this, we get the divine rejoinder to the thoughts expressed, and thus through Jeremiah (12) we enjoy the great comfort of communion with God on the subject, and are helped to rest in the day of evil. Jeremiah says: "*Righteous art thou, O Lord, when I plead with thee: yet let me talk with thee of thy judgments.*" As much as to say, "I wish to have some explanation of a matter which is apparently inconsistent with what I know of thy righteousness." "*Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? Wherefore are all they happy that deal very treacherously? Thou hast planted them, yea, they have taken root; they grow, yea, they bring forth fruit.*"

This is the very picture we see around us—a picture liable to depress and even stagger, apart from the explanation of the case—a picture of men established in wealth, health, influence, and authority, who neither fear God nor regard man; a picture in which the meek among men go to the wall, their righteousness a cause of poverty and contempt, and in which God appears to take no notice, and to make no interference on behalf of His dishonoured Name. This state of things distressed the Psalmist. He says, "*I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no bands in their death: but their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men. Therefore pride compasseth them about as a chain; violence covereth them as a garment. Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish.*" Habakkuk expresses the same anxiety on the prosperity of the lawless: "*Wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he, and makest men as the fishes of the sea, as the creeping things that have no ruler over them? They take up all of them with the angle, they catch them in their net, and gather them in their drag: therefore, they rejoice and are glad.*"

We often may be distressed with the same situation of things. It is a comfort to know that we have such company in our distress as David, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and the Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief, of whose experience the Psalms are an inspired reflex. But it is a great comfort to know that there is an explanation to this distressing state of things. Let us look at the explanation this morning, and let us indulge in the delicious prospect in connection with it, that that state of things will as assuredly pass away as night vanishes before the morning, and that, in due time, righteousness and praise will spring forth before all nations.

Let us first look at the answer that Jeremiah receives. It is not, at the first sight, comforting: "*If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses? And if in the land of peace, wherein thou trustedst, they wearied thee, then how wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?*" This was as much as to say that worse was coming. Jeremiah was distressed to see the wicked and the treacherous in prosperity among Jehovah's [Yahweh's] own people in Jehovah's [Yahweh's] own land; but this was but as the running of footmen to the race of horses. A more terrible triumphing of the wicked was coming, foreshadowed in the intimation, "*I have forsaken mine house ... I have given the dearly beloved of my soul into the hand of her enemies.*" That more terrible triumph came in due course. The enemies of Israel poured into the land like a flood and banished the very

form of all divine institutions from the earth. The times of the Gentiles set in with all the terrible vigour implied in the question addressed to Jeremiah. They have prevailed during the long succession of dark ages; and the night still broods over all the earth.

The horse-running and Jordan-swelling age is not yet over, and the panting Jeremiahs are sore pressed with the triumph of the wicked. But there is good hope in the situation. The morning is at hand. The kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ. The time for prosperous wickedness has nearly run its course. The war of the great day of God Almighty will break in pieces the power of all nations. In these, the days of the voice of the seventh angel, the mystery of God shall be finished, as He hath declared to His servants the prophets. This we know by the later information vouchsafed to John in Patmos. Then shall we see the joyful gathering from all directions of the many of different ages past, whose part it will be to sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of God. Jeremiah will then no longer have to reason with God as to the meaning of His ways with man. *"The righteous shall rejoice when he seeth the vengeance; he shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked. So that a man shall say, Verily there is a reward for the righteous; verily he is a God that judgeth in the earth."*

In view of this consummation, the direct answer to Jeremiah's lamentation about the wicked being apparently planted and rooted in the earth, is to be found in the word written in Isaiah 40: *"Yea, they shall not be planted; yea, they shall not be sown; yea, their stock shall not take root in the earth: Jehovah [Yahweh] shall blow upon them, and they shall wither, and the whirlwind shall take them away as stubble."* Their being planted and sown is only an appearance. They are planted and sown and established for the time being, but only as the vegetation of a season. When the season is over they will be sought for in vain. This has been the comfort of the saints in all ages. It was the promise made to Abraham, that his seed should possess the gate of his enemies; it was the prophecy by Balaam that a star should come out of Jacob and a sceptre out of Israel, which should have dominion, and should destroy the children of the enemy. It was the song of Hannah in the days of the Judges, that the adversaries of the Lord should be broken to pieces, and that Jehovah [Yahweh] should exalt the horn of His Anointed, and judge the ends of the earth.

It was the consolation of David, that his throne should be established for ever, and that evil-doers should be cut off, when those who wait upon God shall inherit the earth; yea, saith he, *"When the wicked spring as the grass, and all the workers of iniquity do flourish, it is that they shall be destroyed for ever."* All the visions of Daniel are to the same purport, as witness the splendid image of the king's dream, crumbled to powder under the stone, although made apparently of materials that could not be ground to powder. The terrible monster of Daniel's own vision meets destruction at the hands of the Ancient of Days, and is given to the burning flame. The prophecy of the seventy weeks is accompanied with an intimation of Roman triumph, only until *"that which is determined shall be poured upon the desolator."* The vision of the ram and the goat finishes with the intimation that the Gentile adversary of Israel shall finally be *"broken without hand,"* while the concluding vision of the time of the end glows with the brightness of the great Prince that standeth for the children of Daniel's people, at whose head the Gogian confederacy comes to its end, with none to help.

And what shall we say of the fulness of the light that came with the age which witnessed the production of the New Testament? Jesus rejoiced in Spirit when, looking forward, he beheld the Satan as lightning fall from the heavens of exaltation and power. *"Woe unto you,"* said he, addressing the Satan class of his day, *"ye have received your consolation:*

Woe unto you that are full, for ye shall hunger; woe unto you that laugh now, for ye shall mourn and weep." And comforting his own disciples, he said that they should weep and lament, and the world should rejoice. . *"But your sorrow shall be turned into joy; I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you."* Let us hear also the consolation by the mouth of Christ's special messenger to the Gentiles, whom He gave to us for a pattern to all who should after him believe on Christ to life eternal: *"God shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly"* (Rom. 16:20). *"God shall recompense tribulation to them which trouble you; and to you who are troubled, rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven"* (2 Thess. 1:7). *"God will render unto them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile"* (Rom. 2:8).

When we come to the last communication of Christ to his friends, we find all these things brought to a brilliant focus. In his revelation to John in Patmos, he tells us that he has received from the Father the commission expressed in Psalm 2:9: *"Thou shalt break the nations with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."* The execution of this work he expressly promises to share with those who are faithful, to him, saying: *"To him that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron; and as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I have received of my Father."* He exhibits to us in advance the spectacle of the collision which results in this catastrophe to the power of the enemy. He shows us "the kings of the earth and their armies" on the one side, gathered together against himself and "those that are with him," on the other; and he tells us of the victory which remains with the latter in *"the war of the great day of God Almighty."* He shows us in dragon symbol the power of the enemy chained and imprisoned; the wine-press of God's indignation against the world, trodden by himself in terrible works of judgment, and all the kingdoms of the world become the kingdoms of Jehovah [Yahweh] and His Christ, and their glorious possession by the saints who live and reign with him a thousand years and beyond.

The answer to Jeremiah's question is therefore obvious and complete. He did not receive that answer in the fulness in which we possess it, nevertheless he had it with sufficient definiteness for the day of his need. We have the answer more abundantly, because our need is greater in a day when God holds His peace as appointed, and when there are no visible tokens of His presence. The answer is plain and strengthening, so that he who readeth may run with patience the toilsome race set before him in the Gospel. That answer is, that in a time appointed the prosperity of the wicked will come to an end, when there will be no more need to ask the question which distressed Jeremiah. There is great need to emphasize this fact, both for the encouragement of those who have set their hope in God, and the warning of such as are liable to weary in well-doing. God Himself says, *"Say ye to the righteous that it shall be well with him, for they shall eat the fruit of their doings"* (Isa. 3:10). The deferring of this dispensation of judgment may weary, but it cannot alter the reality of the fact when it shall come. On this point the word speaks to us comfortably, thus: *"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. Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know it shall be well with them that fear God."*

It is against this apparent slowness in the execution of the Divine decrees that we have to fortify ourselves. We must remember what Peter says: that the Lord is not slack concerning

His promise as some men count slackness; a thousand years with Him are as a watch in the night, to use the expression of Moses; and as one day, according to Peter. What we have to do is to wait in patient obedience all the days of our appointed time. We must not forget how much reason there is in it. Judgment, which was to include ourselves and all who have gone before us, could not take place in the days of Adam, nor of David, nor of Christ. It was needful that God should appoint a day when all His servants should be vindicated and glorified together; and the fixing of this day involves the deferring of all judgment till then. Let us not be little children and murmur at the delays of wisdom.

Not only the delay of judgment, but the triumph of ungodliness in the earth is a necessary preparation for the results involved in that judgment. For how could we be exercised in faith and patience, and how could the unspeakable joy of release from the present evil world be prepared for us, without that very planting and prosperity and establishment of the wicked which distressed Jeremiah, and which will wring groans from the pilgrim's breast till the very hour of the avengement? The plan is great and wise, and only becomes the more apparently so to every effort of enlightened reason. This is the case even when we confine our view to man's side of the question only, but how greatly is our perception of the matter quickened when God's side of the case is taken into account. The earth and its inhabitants are His, and He has made them for His pleasure. His holiness and His majesty are ineffably exalted beyond our conceptions, yet His will has been violated and set aside in the history of mankind. It is of His own pure beneficence that there is any arrangement at all for a rectification of the mischief that has come from this rebellion. That there should be slowness in the development of this arrangement is not for created man to complain of; rather is it for us to rejoice and give praise that in the good pleasure of His own will He hath purposed in the ages to come to show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness towards us through Christ Jesus.

The one danger to which we are exposed is the liability to forget the consolation applicable to the sorrows of the new man in Christ Jesus. It is consolation that may be called far-fetched in more ways than one, but it is the consolation in which God has been pleased to exercise His children in the cloudy and dark day of their probation. It is a consolation only to be found in the word of His testimony, and it requires to be constantly renewed. Our knowledge of the consolation today will not serve for next week's conflict. Our minds are forgetful, even of human things, and much more of those thoughts and ways of God which are so much higher than our own ways and thoughts, therefore our poor memories have to be continually refreshed. Our special danger is that we may not feel the need of this refreshment. The lust of other things enters in and chokes the word. There are many objects of interest and affection in the economy of our present life, and between these and the natural mind, which is nearly omnipotent with us all at the start, there is almost the affinity of chemical force. When we give place to those things the mind is pleased and entertained, and as the entertainment has its source in human ways and present things, there is not only no need felt for the consolations of the word, but a feeling of aversion is liable to spring up towards them.

The Scriptures have to do with divine ways and future things, and are therefore liable to lose their interest for those whose affections are not set upon these. This is at one time or another the case with us all, and here we must fight and conquer, or be conquered. In the course of daily life there are things we can choose to have to do with, or let alone. Paul recognizes this in advising us to lay aside every weight; that is, everything that will act as a drag in the race we are running, for eternal life. Some do not choose to lay them aside, but cumber themselves with occupations and associations at variance with the objects of the

calling which every man has accepted who has put on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Such a choice can only be due to a want of recognition of the practical nature of the demands which the Gospel makes. Those demands have to do entirely with the present life; and if men exclude them, there can only arise one result, the decay of the spiritual man now, and denial by Christ at his coming. Spiritual vigour now, and recognition by Christ at his coming, can only be secured in the way the Spirit itself has provided, and that is, first, by a diligent submission to its tuition in the word, which practically means the daily and methodical reading of the Scriptures, and secondly, by an avoidance of the pleasures of the world and the society of fools. Compliance with the Spirit's requirements in these particulars may entail a sense of deprivation sometimes, but in the long run it brings great satisfaction and peace, and lays up in store a harvest at the appointed time of joy and well-being, which it is alike beyond the power of speech to exaggerate, or human imagination to conceive.

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