

HISTORY FOLLOWS BIBLE PROPHECY

We meet this morning for more objects than one. The leading object is to worship God through Christ—to disengage our feelings from the various matters that engross our minds during the six battling days of the week, and concentrate them upon things eternal, which are things most real, though things unseen. Our meeting is a successful one individually only in so far as we accomplish this, opening our eyes to the vision of God, as it were. There is a difference between our act in this matter now, and the act in which we hope to be privileged to engage when we reach the perfect state. We shall then walk by sight, and not by faith; we shall be able to worship God with the overpowering sense and joy of actual sight, but at present our walk is a walk of faith. It pleases God to prepare His children for the living worship of the Spirit state by the worship of faith in the natural state. The natural state is the first stage of being, in which things divine have to be mentally perceived and received. There is a perfect wisdom in this, which we shall see clearly in the end. Meanwhile we have to recognise the fact that at present we are called to worship by faith. This worship is not a less real worship than the worship of the angelic hosts who see the Father's glory; but to a weak creature like man, it is neither so easy, nor so strong, nor so sweet as the worship we hope with them to take part in by-and-by.

Faith recognises God's existence though we see it not. We do this as the result of evidence, for there is no other road to faith than evidence; but the faith that rests on evidence is as great a reality in its way as the conviction that comes from sight. Many people have a wrong idea on the subject of faith; they think it is a shadowy, sentimental thing without roots in anything substantial. This is a mistake; faith is *"the substance of things hoped for,"* as Paul says; hoped for because promised. What God promises He will certainly perform; the question is, How do we know He has promised?

This touches the root of the matter. We do know He has promised; it is not a matter of opinion or speculation. When a friend makes a promise you know it, either by having heard him speak or having received his written word. Your faith in his promise rests upon the evidence. The evidence of our senses is direct or indirect, either in having seen or heard, or having received information from those who have done so. This rule holds good in matters of divine faith; our faith is the result of the evidence of God having spoken.

Here is where the importance lies of our keeping in habitual contact with the evidence. This is where many people die. Separated from the evidence, their faith withers as inevitably as a plant cut from its root. A person who embraces the Truth, and then subjects his senses to things not related to the Truth, while at the same time keeping himself apart from the things that constitute the evidence of the Truth, is bound to lose his faith, and become what Christ calls *"a withered branch."* The evidence in the case is multiform; we are in contact with it in coming to break bread, for this very institution is in itself in a certain way an evidence of the Lord having been upon the earth. It has its origin, as we know, in the persecution of those who received it direct from his hand, as in the case of Paul, who says,

"That which I received of the Lord, the same delivered I unto you."

When we come here we are in contact with other evidence. We are in contact with the Word in the reading of its various parts. Our readings this morning are strongly illustrative of the power of the Word to purify faith. Take this chapter in Isaiah which we have read. It may not seem on the face of it to have much to do with the subject; but consider it—what is it? An expostulation with Israel by the God of Abraham. Not only an expostulation, but a condemnation in the extremest terms.

"I know," He said, *"that thou art obstinate, and thy neck an iron sinew, and thy brow brass . . . I knew that thou wouldest deal very treacherously, and wast called a transgressor from the womb. For My name's sake I will defer Mine anger, and for My praise will I refrain from thee, that I cut thee not off."*

You may say, what has that to do with the subject? Well, whoever heard such a speech in any nation, from any pretended prophet, priest or god? Do you ever find in pretended supernatural communications to a people, the condemnation of that people in this powerful shape? On the contrary, these communications are always complimentary. They are bound to be so, because they are the utterances of men who live by the good graces of the people, and are therefore bound to conciliate them by sweet speeches; just as in business a man who hopes to get a benefit by dealing with his neighbour, assumes a suave aspect, and apparently becomes a most benevolent man.

This peculiarity is not confined to Isaiah, as you well know. It is found all through the Scriptures. It begins at the very beginning, in the message of Moses, who said to Israel,

“Think not ye are entering the land because of your righteousness.” “Understand that the Lord thy God giveth thee not this land to possess because of thy righteousness for thou art a stiff-necked people. From the day that thou didst depart out of the land of Egypt until ye came to this place, ye have been rebellious against the Lord” (Deut. 9:5-7).

And again in taking leave of them he said,

“I know that after my death ye will utterly corrupt yourselves, and turn away from the way which I have commanded you, and evil will befall you in the latter days, because ye will do evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke Him to anger with the work of your hands.”

All the prophets spoke in this vein. When we come to the days of Christ it is the same,

“Woe unto you Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites; ye outwardly appear righteous unto men, but inwardly ye are full of rottenness and dead men’s bones.”

How are we to account for this extraordinary and unique peculiarity—a peculiarity that belongs to the Bible alone—that the Bible condemns man, while all other books praise him? There are two views in the case: the view the Bible gives us and the view that opponents of the Bible try to believe. We have to judge between the two views. The Bible view is that God has spoken by the prophets since the world began. The opponents of the Bible say nothing of the sort has happened; the prophets were men carried away by their own notions. Upon only one of these views is the peculiarity in question intelligible. If God spoke to Israel by Moses and the prophets, we can understand the lofty and reproving tone of their utterances, and the small place given to man—*“as a flower of the field he passes away.”* If the prophets spoke without inspiration, then they were as other human utterances. Jews are in no respect different from Gentiles in this matter. Jewish natural writers have praised the Jewish race for 1800 years past. None have spoken like the prophets since inspiration ceased. If their inspiration is denied, then there is a total lack of explanation of this extraordinary peculiarity which pervades the whole Bible. But, on many grounds, this inspiration cannot be denied, as we know; and therefore in this single feature of the chapter read from the prophets, we are in the presence of God, whom we have assembled to worship, and of whom we can say, as Peter said about Christ,

“Whom having not seen, we love.”

We cannot see Him as we are now. We may be permitted this sublime privilege in the state to which we are going forward, and of which Jesus said,

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

Though we cannot see Him, we can love Him; we must, it is the first and the great commandment,

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart.”

True brethren and sisters are God lovers and God worshippers. Men who do not love and worship God are not His children. All other spiritual attainments go for nothing. How can knowledge or strength or cleverness commend a man to God?

“The Lord taketh pleasure in them that fear Him.”

All the teachings of the Law and the Prophets converge upon God. Look at the encampment in the wilderness; the tabernacle was the central object, and the kernel of the tabernacle was the glory of God between the cherubim. All the sacrifices, all the utensils, all the furniture, everything connected with the tabernacle, looked to God, which is a lesson in parable remaining good for all time. Men knowing the Truth, whose hearts are not fixed upon God, are mere doctrine mongers.

Another and perhaps more palpable evidence comes before us in this chapter. In the course of His expostulations with the disobedient nation, God refers to the fact that He had foreshown a number of things that had come to pass. He refers to these as a proof that He is the living God, and that the idols whom they worshipped were the creations of superstition. There is a strong argument here, on which we do well to lay hold. It is the argument of prophecy. We are in a position peculiarly favourable for putting it to the test. We are better placed than any previous generation for judging this point. We have behind us 40 centuries to which prophecy has stood related, in some form or other. And here is the fact that looking in upon the world at any time during these 40 centuries, we find the state of things that Bible prophecy required. Let us apply this in a rough way, that we may quickly perceive its power. If we go back 3,000 years, we find there was a universal monarchy, but congeries of co-equal sovereignties divide the earth amongst them. If there had been a universal monarchy now, it would have been out of harmony with prophecy, for prophecy requires that in those days there should be a divided state of the Roman Empire, with at least ten separate royalties. Why have not we a universal monarchy now? Is it because it was out of the line of desirability or possibility? Why, it is only a hundred years since Napoleon 1 made the attempt to establish such an institution, and nearly succeeded. If it had not been for the burning of Moscow, humanly speaking, he would have succeeded, and in that event he would have been able to make short work with the position of the British Islands, for the invasion of which he had prepared a formidable armament. There was nothing humanly impossible or undesirable in the establishment of a universal government in our age; in fact, politicians recognise that it is the one panacea for the world's leading afflictions, since it would not only abolish war, but the expense of getting ready for it, and allow plenty to circulate amongst the populations.

But here is the fact: prophecy forbade the existence of a universal empire in our age, while, on the other hand, it required the existence of such an empire 3,000 years ago. The time of Christ's manifestation is drawing on, and it has been revealed that when that manifestation occurs the earth is divided among many kings who coalesce in opposition to him when he comes.

You may apply the same argument to Israel's condition. Two thousand years ago Israel was a nation in the holy Land. It is no longer such, but a mere race in dispersion. Why is this? Why is Israel scattered now? It is not because they did not want to be together; and they left the land 1,800 years ago, not because they wanted to go, for they tried hard to do as the Chinese have done, and which they might have done if the purpose of God had not been against them—that is, to hold together in unbroken national continuity from age to age; but had they succeeded in this the Word of God would have been broken, for the Word of prophecy, as you all know, required that Israel should be wanderers among the nations, and that their land should lie in desolation. The same Word required that they should be in Babylon for only 70 years, and beyond 70 years they did not remain. The same Word required that Babylon, which then was great, should cease to exist; and, lo! It is so in all particulars.

We are able to apply this test in very particular matters. We have had this morning a chapter from the apocalypse, which the friends of Christ have been privileged to possess for 1,800 years.

“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him,” as the first verse informs us, “to show unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass.”

By only a few at any time has this Book been understood. We have come to discern its import in our age, and to see that it is a political programme covering the interval that has elapsed since Christ departed, and reaching up to his coming again. Whatever part of this programme we look at, we find it has been carried out to the last detail in the accomplished history of the world. We can only roughly glance at the chapter before us in illustration of this. The empire of Rome is before us in the horse, a horse in various states under the various seals, representing the various experiences through which it should pass from John’s day up to its dissolution by Constantine. The figures harmonise completely with history year by year. First the horse was white with a rider carrying a bow but no arrows. White signifies peace and righteousness, and a Bowman with no arrows is a warrior fighting without carnal weapons. This was the situation in the apostolic age. Peace reigned throughout the empire; the apostles were busy fighting paganism with those weapons referred to by Paul.

“Not carnal,” he says, “but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds.”

An effective work of righteousness in a time of peace. The colour of the next horse was red, and the rider was armed with a great sword. This is in harmony with the state of things prevailing in the next generation, which was a most sanguinary period. Plots and intrigues and mutual assassinations prevailed in official life. A great many emperors reigned in a short time, and all of them came to a violent end. It was not only the emperors who perished but multitudes of their partisans. The best families of Rome were exterminated in the broils of this period. Then the horse was black, and ridden by a man with scales in his hand, which naturally speaks of scarcity. This was the experience of the empire after the termination of the assassination period. Public disasters interfered with trade, and lessened trade reduced food supplies. Farms went out of cultivation, and by-and-by famine prevailed, requiring fiscal measures of extremest wisdom to save the state from dissolution. Then the horse was pale, because death was the rider, followed by the yawning grave. Naturally upon a time of scarcity came a time of pestilence and death. It is calculated that half the human race died during the time covered by the fifth seal. The empire became a vast charnel-house. The next seal shows no horse, but an altar with the mangled bodies of the saints at its base, and in a figure, prayer to God from them for vengeance on their adversaries. This finds its counterpart in the fact that when the empire had revived from its calamities, the pagan priesthood threw the blame of those calamities upon the Christians, upon whom burst a terrible tempest of persecution. Thousands were tortured and slain.

And so throughout the whole Apocalypse you will find the prophecies realised in the actual events that have happened. It is so down to this very moment, when the drying Euphrates and the arming of the nations are the notorious political features of the hour, connected with which is the portentous parenthesis,

“Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth and keepeth his garments.”

(Taken from: - “Seasons of Comfort” Vol. 2 Pages 573-578, by Bro. Robert Roberts)