

STRENGTHENED BY THE WORD

OF HIS GRACE

When Paul parted with the Ephesian brethren at Miletus, he said,

“I commend you to God and to the Word of His grace, which is able to build you up.”

Do we not find it so? The reading of the Bible is so up-building. It makes us feel so strong when we receive into the mind and heart the things it contains. Let us endeavour this morning to realise the truth of this in the consideration of the three portions that have been read. It must necessarily be a mere skim—something in the nature of the bee’s hurried visit from flower to flower; still it will give us strength.

We have first the case of Hannah’s prayer, and its answer. She was barren, and besought the Lord for a son, and received Samuel. This is among the things *“written for our learning.”* What do we learn from it but this, that God regards the prayer of those who fear Him, and that it is our privilege, in the spirit of faith and hope, to make our requests known unto God? Shall we say it does not apply to a time like ours, when *“there is no open vision”*? This was the very character of Hannah’s time, as we are informed in 1 Sam. 3.

“The Word of the Lord was precious in those days; there was no open vision.”

Shall we say we sometimes ask and receive not? Perhaps there may be some mistake here. John says,

“We have this confidence, that if we ask anything ‘according to His will,’ He heareth us.”

Our requests in particular cases may not be according to His will. His will concerning those who please Him is that they shall have what is for their best interest in the ultimate sense. Of this we cannot be judge; but it must certainly be our desire that we should have this and this only. When, therefore, we ask a specific thing, it is because we think it would be for the best; but in this we may be mistaken; and if God withholds it, He is really answering our prayer in not giving us what we ask. We would not desire what might interfere with our relation to God. So we should reason fallaciously and do ourselves an injustice if we were to conclude that God disregards our prayer because He grants not what we request. We know how it is with our own children sometimes; they ask us to do this or that in their innocent inexperience. We have to say, “My dear, I could not possibly do it.” Why? Because we love our children not? Nay, but because we love them. Let us have this faith towards God, then, that the best answer He can give us sometimes is not to permit us what we ask.

But there are things He is willing we should have, things perhaps that He may be purposing, and yet which we have to ask for. Samuel was in God’s purpose; yet see the interesting method by which He is brought upon the scene—the agonized and tearful prayers of a beloved daughter. It is the principle expressed in His words to Ezekiel concerning His purposed favour to Israel:

“For these things will I be enquired of.”

The practical use to make of this principle would be here. Let us conceive to ourselves, from our acquaintance with the word, what God would have us to be and to do; and then submit this ideal in earnest and constant prayer to Him that we may be permitted and assisted to conform to it—for the glory of His name and the comfort of His people.

“If we ask anything according to His will He heareth us.”

So much we get from Hannah. Turning to Isaiah 47, the instruction lies in a different direction. The Word of God is in this case against Babylon. It was uttered at a time when Babylon was great and prosperous beyond measure. We all know how completely the prophecy of Babylon’s overthrow was fulfilled. This is not the striking feature this morning, however. It is something else. It is the divine light we get upon a matter which has been set in a strongly human light in our generation.

Not only have the remains of Babylon been recovered in our century, but her records and even her books have been exhumed and brought to light—records preserved through all these ages, through being written on burnt clay tablets. Amongst these are prominent the monthly observations of the Chaldean astrologers, by which modern astronomers are enabled to obtain access to valuable astronomical facts of ancient date. These monthly astrological tables are greatly prized, and their compilers greatly praised. They are had in far higher reputation than the Scriptures. The human learning in the case (which did not amount to much), is had in high human repute in an age that does not shrink to disparage the God of Israel. Well, in the chapter read from Isaiah, we have a divine allusion to the very class in question, in the very age when they were busy compiling their monthly astrological tables. The thing that strikes us, is the great difference between this allusion and the spirit of human allusion.

“Let now the astrologers, the star gazers, the monthly prognosticators, stand up, and save thee from those things that shall come upon thee.”

Babylon is said to be *“wearied in the multitude of her counsels.”* Reference is made to *“the multitude of thy sorceries wherein thou hast laboured from thy youth.”* Babylon is called on ironically to fall back upon these her wise men, who are thought so well of in times of prosperity: *“if so be thou shalt be able to profit, if so be thou mayest prevail.”* The divine message continues: *“behold, they shall be as stubble; the fire shall burn them; they shall not deliver themselves from the power of the flame; there shall not be a coal to warm at, nor a fire to sit before. Thus shall they be unto thee with whom thou hast laboured . . . none shall save thee.”* Thus we see how differently are human wisdom and human authorities estimated by divine and by human judgment. And the course of events has entirely borne out the divine estimate. Where Babylon has gone to all know; and where are her wise men, her star gazers, her monthly prognosticators? Swallowed up in the same oblivion. It is all very reasonable in everybody’s eyes as they look back; but see how the same mistake is made from age to age. The so-called great men of the day are allowed to run away with the public judgment in divine matters. People do not seem able to realise, till the great men are dead, how powerless and unauthoritative they are in those issues of destiny which are practically important to us all. God’s appeal to the Chaldean star gazers might well be made to the public leaders of our own day, who make light of Yahweh’s Word. Britain might be apostrophised as Babylon was: *“Stand now with thy scientific speculators, thy professors, thy telescopic heaven-sweepers, thine analytic nature-triflers with instruments of all sorts, let them arise and save one of you from what I will bring upon them.”* The appeal was vain in the case of Babylon, and it would be equally vain in the case of Britain. It is for us who have had our eyes opened to the wisdom of God to resist the elegant impositions of all sorts that are practised upon the public. God can save us if we are faithful to His requirements, which an arrogant and self-conceited age despises. To Him let us hold on: in Him let us trust, remembering the joy which we shall yet verify in our actual experience, the truth of God’s own saying, *“they shall not be ashamed that wait for Me.”*

From Isaiah we go to John in Patmos (Rev. 2), and receive by him a message from Christ, addressed in the first instance to the seven ecclesias in Asia, but also to *“whomsoever hath ears to hear what the Spirit saith unto the ecclesias.”* He says much more in the chapter that has been read than we can even glance at. But one or two features are very striking. His message to Sardis, for example.

“Thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.”

This is a verdict which only a divine discernment could pronounce, but the fact that such a verdict should be applicable to any ecclesia (especially one existing at the end of the first century) is suggestive of grave reflections for all, as intended. A name to live is a reputation for spiritual life. Men are liable to work for a reputation. This is in fact the very inspiration in our age of public life of all sorts, and it is liable to intrude into the realms of divine truth. To have *“a name to live”* is with some an object of ambition and a motive of effort. That there should be some susceptibility to reputation is legitimate, but it is a dangerous incentive, and should be kept in a very small place. Suppose you succeed in establishing *“a name to live,”* what then? You have in all likelihood only made a snare for yourselves—for it is a name or reputation with whom? Very likely with those who

see on the surface; with those who cannot recognise genuine life; with those whose standing is false; for this is the character of the bulk of mankind, professing or non-professing. If this be the case, you are likely to be drawn to the kind of things the doing of which will perpetuate it with them, and thus you will be held in the wrong line of things. Or, if it is otherwise, you will be led to act the part of the hypocrites in the doing of things for the reputation thereof, and not for the inherent character thereof. The best plan is, to be on the whole heedless of the name of the thing, and to be bent on the thing itself. What is this? Why, to be really alive, whether men know it or not; whether they acknowledge it or not. And this being alive is an affair of quickened understanding and affection towards God, as revealed in the Scriptures. This state of mind is not only independent of human recognition, but naturally shrinks from it, for the favour of God and the favour of man are on two such totally distinct foundations that they do not in their nature mix. How pitiable is the opposite state, in which there is feverish care to be right in the eyes of man, with little or no concern towards God. Jesus declares this to have been the case with the ecclesia at Sardis. He warns them, and in warning them, warns us.

“I have not found thy works perfect towards God.”

It is not, however, for the sake of fault-finding, or in the spirit of condemnation that he speaks thus gravely. It is that there may be reformation.

“Remember how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast and repent.”

“Be watchful, and strengthen the things that remain, that are ready to die.”

Jesus would not speak in this strain if change and reformation were impossible. They may be difficult of achievement: but under the right pressure—the pressure of truth and wisdom arising from enlightened desire and fear—they can be brought about. The human mind is a flexible thing, and adapts to pressures. The result of education is the universal proof of this. Therefore, the pressure of the Truth, continually brought to bear will change a condition of the mental man. And bring him into the state which Jesus desired. The Truth, consisting of many things, includes this fact: that the eye of Christ is on communities professing his name; that *“he walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks.”* That he reads the heart, and will cause every man to find according to his own ways, even now (Rev. 2:1, 23). If men could but see it, there is reason to fear the judgment of Christ even now. He appeals to this in his message to Sardis.

“If, therefore, thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I shall come upon thee.”

This statement, *“thou shalt not know what hour I shall come upon thee,”* shows that the threatened retribution does not refer to the judgment seat at his coming, for that will be open and recognisable by all. It is a retribution in the ways of providence in which his hand is not visible. The wrecking of an ecclesia, or the separation of a body of people through some apparently human issue may be the result of this interference. There is always reason for an ecclesia being on its guard towards Christ. But an ecclesia as a whole may be dead, and a few in it alive. This is shown by the words with which Jesus concludes the local part of his message: *“thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments, and they shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy.”* Here is comfort for those living and true brethren and sisters who may find themselves in the unhappy position of being associated with dead professors whom they are powerless to galvanise into life. Remember that Christ’s approval of you will not be weaker but only all the more cordial that your souls are grieved from day to day with the insipidity and the death of the nominal professors of the Truth with whom you have now to mingle;

“Spots in your feasts of charity when they feast with you; feeding themselves without fear; clouds without water; carried about of winds; trees whose fruit withereth, without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots; raging waves of the sea; foaming out their own shame; wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever.”

There may be on the other hand ecclesias where there is no redeeming feature at all, as in the case of the Laodiceans, who while on the best possible terms with themselves, and even bragging of their capital state, are so odious to Christ as to be fit only for indignant rejection.

“Thou sayest, I am rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing, and knowest not that thou art wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.”

Wherever there is a tendency to boast, there is a bad state of things in a spiritual point of view: for in a truly healthy state men perceive that the very best state possible at a time when God is rejected on the earth, is necessarily a poor and an afflicted one, and that the only tolerable attitude at present is that of gratitude for so much mercy in the midst of so much sin, and a patient waiting for the good things promised when the earth is purged by judgment. But even in the Laodicean state, Christ waits with gracious intentions if men will but give him the attention that is reasonable.

“Behold I stand at the door and knock, if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him.”

How does he knock? By all the instrumentalities he has employed to secure the attention of men. These all focus in the Bible. In this he is knocking, knocking always. To open the door is to listen to the knocking in the reading, and to open the mind and heart to the glorious matters he has to present. Even the Laodiceans received time to act wisely in this matter. *“I gave her space to repent,”* is characteristic of all God’s dealings. But there is a limit, and there comes a time when He *“fights against them with the sword of His mouth.”*

In all these things there is a comfort and warning. The time is hastening for the full issue of them all. “The way is long and weary,” but has an end for us all, either in the consuming judgment that waits the disobedient and unworthy (which God forbid should be our portion), or in the favour and exaltation with which God will crown the course of a patient continuance in well-doing with joy unspeakable and full of glory.

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