

SUNDAY MORNING NO. 159

The object of our meeting this morning cannot be better expressed than in the words used by the Lord at the time he appointed it, "*for a remembrance.*" We come together to call to mind the things we know of Christ. We come together, not because we do not know him, but because we do know him. John says in one of his epistles that his reason for writing it was, not because those to whom he was writing did not know the truth, but because they did know it. Had they not known the truth, he would have had to address them in a different style from what he did. Were we ignorant this morning of Christ, we should have to speak to each other very differently from what is appropriate to a state of knowledge.

It might be imagined that our knowledge of the truth would be a reason for not assembling. Many plausible imaginations are erroneous, and none more than this. Although we know, we are liable to forget—not in the complete sense, but in a sense sufficiently serious for all that. The truth may cease to be a motive-power long before it is absolutely forgotten. It is to preserve it as a motive power that we are invited, week by week, to renew our recollection of it in the breaking of bread and those mutual exhortations which the occasion calls forth. How well this weekly exercise is calculated to have this effect, we know by experience. We see it at once if we compare, on any one morning, the feelings with which we separate with those which would be ours if we stayed at home. We shall have things passed under our review this morning, for example, which would not have come before us in the passive quietude of our own homes. This experience repeated week by week makes a wonderful difference in a year's time as to the state of the inner man.

We can never have any portion of the word under our consideration without having something connected with Christ brought near—something related to that remembrance of him which is the object of our meeting. To remember Christ in an intelligent and Scriptural sense is to remember many things. Christ is the meeting point of a past and a future: and that past and that future embrace many details of fact and wisdom, in the contemplation of which, we are brought to him. We shall find an illustration of this in our readings this morning, although, on the surface of them, they bear not much promise of him. Our readings are from Isaiah 54 and Revelation 17 & 18. They bring before us two cities now on the earth—Jerusalem and Rome—which we cannot look at in the past or future without seeing Christ, and learning something for our present profit. Let us look at them for a moment, however, as they now are, and estimate and interpret their position in the light of what is written in the chapters read.

Without this light, we should read the situation wrongly. There is nothing about Jerusalem or Rome viewed by the eye of the mere tourist, that would tell us of the momentous truths that entwine around them. We could take steamer tomorrow at Southampton, and in a fortnight or three weeks' time find ourselves outside the walls of Jerusalem. We know the sort of spectacle we should behold. We have never been to Jerusalem, but pictures have made us familiar with her aspect. We should see an insignificant looking town enclosed within walls on the level top of low-lying elevation—not a town presenting any marked features. With the exception of the mosque of Omar, and here and there a minaret or dome, there is nothing to relieve the monotony of the mass of tumble-down, closely-packed and decaying buildings that lie within the walls. If we were to go inside, we should not find the aspect of things to improve upon acquaintance. Narrow streets, badly-lighted houses, unswept thoroughfares, dirty people—would increase the feeling of dreariness created by the outside view. If we had no Scriptural enlightenment, we should come away disappointed and demoralised—feeling that however interesting Jerusalem might be in an antiquarian sense, it was no place for the life and intelligence of modern times—a place without a spark of nobility not to speak of divinity—a mere Turkish town of ruins and stagnation and filth, which might be wiped out of existence tomorrow, not only without the world being anything the worse, but probably a good deal the better. As mere natural observers, we should be liable to come away disgusted, and with faith considerably dilapidated.

But we look at the place in the light of the chapter read, and we see with different eyes. What is it we read concerning the present position of Jerusalem and all connected with her? —

“For a small moment have I FORSAKEN thee . . . In a little wrath, I hid my face from thee” (verses 7-8).

This explains the present desolation: but it does more. It tells us by implication of a time when Jerusalem was not forsaken: when God’s face was not hid from her—when she was not in her present lowly, outcast condition. We look back, and we see such a time: a time long before the greatness of England had risen from the sea: long before these ends of the earth were the abode of civilisation. We see Jerusalem, the dwelling place of Yahweh’s name: the seat of David’s throne and Solomon’s glory. Jerusalem under the divine defence and basking in the sunshine of Yahweh’s favour—Jerusalem for a thousand years Yahweh’s candlestick in the midst of the earth, and honoured at last to be visited by Yahweh’s own Son—the Messiah promised—the Word made flesh—crucified in her midst, and taken up to heaven outside her walls.

We ask the cause of the great change, and we get it plainly and fully in the writings of the prophets. Isaiah says:

“How is the faithful city become an harlot! It was full of judgment: righteousness lodged in it, but now murderers. Thy princes are rebellious and companions of thieves: everyone loveth gifts and followeth after reward: they judge not the fatherless, neither doth the cause of the widow come unto them” (1:21).

Jeremiah says:

“Run ye to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem and see now and know and seek in the broad places thereof if ye can find a man—if there be any that executeth judgment, that seeketh the truth and I will pardon it. . . Go ye up upon her walls and destroy: but make not a full end. Take away her battlements for they are not the Lord’s” (5: 1, 10).

Ezekiel says:

“Thus saith the Lord God, this is Jerusalem, I have set it in the midst of the nations and countries that are round about her: and she hath changed my judgments into wickedness more than the nations, and my statutes more than the countries that are round about her: they have refused my judgments and my statutes: they have not walked in them”

(5:6).

AND SO ALL THE PROPHETS MORE OR LESS. Lastly the Lord HIMSELF bewailed the folly of Jerusalem, weeping over her as he looked upon her beauty from the Mount of Olives, foreseeing the terrible things that should come upon her:

“If thou hadst known, even thou at least in this thy day, the things that belong unto thy peace, but now they are hid from thine eyes. For the days shall come upon thee when thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee and compass thee round and keep thee on every side; and shall lay thee even with the ground and thy children within thee: and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another, because thou knowest not the time of thy visitation” (Luke 19:42).

And again on another well known occasion,

“Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled.”

With these sayings ringing in our ears, we are enabled to take the right view of the desolate city. We look at her in her degradation, as she sits on the ground as captive under the Turkish yoke, all dishevelled, unattractive, and forlorn. Write over the picture “*FORSAKEN OF GOD*,” and you give the true interpretation of all that offends the eye or depresses the heart in her present condition. You

withdraw from the scene satisfied, if saddened, with this Bible explanation of a thing now to be a witnessed on earth, but comforted also concerning a future not yet reached, of which we have some foreshadowing in the present chapter, presently to be looked at. Retracing our steps, we betake ourselves again to Jaffa, board the coasting steamer to Alexandria, and there, at Alexandria, embark in the packet for Brindisi, on the eastern Italian coast, and thence travel by the railway to Rome. Here we find ourselves in the other city which our reading in Revelation has brought before us, and of which by that reading we obtain the divine view, not at all visible to the eye of the mere traveller who goes for what he can see and hear.

Looking at it with the traveller's eyes, we should say, well here is a contrast to Jerusalem at all events. Here are public life and stir: here are importance and prosperity: here are architectural picturesqueness, social activity, political importance, —the wide open streets flanked by noble buildings, filled with busy people, enlivened by occasional processions of a military or ecclesiastical aspect. But the traveller's eye is not far-reaching enough. More important and more evil than she seems is this same city when seen with the divine eye of revelation. In John's day she "*reigned over the Kings of the earth*" (Rev. 17:18). We see her as she is in fact and as she appears in God's eye, when we look at her as symbolised under the figure of a whore—

"Sitting upon many waters with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth have been made drunk with the wine of her fornication" (Rev. 17:1-2).

These waters, on which John saw her enthroned on the back of a sea-monster, are interpreted (verse 15) to mean "*peoples and multitudes, and nations and tongues.*" The picture was a prophetic one—prophecy in symbol. Consequently, as we stand surveying the picturesque aspect of the ancient city, we say to ourselves, under Apocalyptic inspiration, "Here is the centre of a system which has affected all the European nations: by influences emanating from this seven-hilled spot has the world become religiously inebriated. Kings and governments in fellowship with this place and system are in divine detestation as religious fornicators." This was the picture prophetically exhibited by the Spirit of God at the end of the first century: has the history of the period since verified and established the prophecy? Nothing is more palpable than the answer. The foremost fact in European history for 1800 years past, has been the controlling and influential position of Rome, in a religious even more than a political sense. She has given law and religion to the European system, first as a Pagan, then as a Papal Queen of nations. At the shrine of her greatness and influence have the princes of the earth done homage in all the centuries. Submission to Rome has been the bond of political connection. The nations have been affected by her influence more than by any other that can be mentioned. The history of the Christian era, so called, has been a history of Rome's prestige and ascendancy as the seat of a central authority claiming to be of divine origin and nature. This position of things continues to be the fact down to the present hour, though we are getting towards the end of matters.

So much for the two cities as they exist upon the face of the earth at the present moment. Their respective positions are such as the Scriptures of truth require. Their past has been all that was foretold. But we turn now to the future. Of this, the mere tourist can know nothing. As he looks upon the desolation of Jerusalem, he is liable to think it will always continue; as he does when he dwells upon the greatness of historic Rome. But appearances are very untrustworthy. The declarations of the word of God are not so. They have proved true in all generations, even when the things declared were contrary to all appearances. Jerusalem's desolation was foretold whilst she was yet established in glory, and prosperity; and the desolation came in spite of the prosperity. Let us see what is written in these two chapters concerning the future yet awaiting both cities.

We turn to the chapter in Isaiah (54). We are sure we are right in applying this to Jerusalem, because Paul has done so in Galatians 3:25-27: and because the prophecy itself compels such an application. Paul speaks of—

"Jerusalem that now is and is in bondage with her children," and of "Jerusalem which is above and is free, which is the mother of us all;"

And he refers us to this chapter as illustrating both these phases of the subject. It is customary to understand “*Jerusalem which is above*” as meaning a city that is actually in heaven, to which believers ascend when they die. We will not stay to combat this, beyond pointing out that Paul’s contrast is a contrast of time and condition, and not of locality. “*Jerusalem that now is,*” is contrasted with Jerusalem as she will be in the day of her exaltation, and said to be “*above*” at present because all the elements of that future glorious condition are now germinally in Christ, who is above, with whom, when he comes, the kingdom comes, and (new) Jerusalem also “*comes down from God out of heaven.*”

Jerusalem in the two states is the subject of this 54th chapter of Isaiah. They appear at one view in the very first verse of the chapter.

*“Sing, O **barren**, thou that didst not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, thou that didst not travail with child: for more are the children of **the desolate** than the children of **the married wife**, saith the Lord.”*

The figure is that of a woman—a very common mode of personating a city with its people. God calls Himself her husband: verse 5,

“Thy maker is thine husband; the Lord of Hosts is his name.”

He speaks of her as in two states. A married state and a put-away state, to be succeeded by a restored state, thus:

*“Thou shalt forget the shame of thy youth; and shalt not remember the reproach of **thy widowhood** any more. . . . The Lord hath called thee as **a woman forsaken and grieved in spirit**, and a wife of youth **when thou wast refused**, saith thy God. For a small moment have I **forsaken** thee; but with great mercies will I **gather thee**. In a little wrath I **hid my face from thee** for a moment; but with everlasting kindness will I **have mercy on thee**, saith the Lord, thy Redeemer.”*

Here is a widow who had been married (of course), but in the course of her lifetime had been divorced, “refused,” but who is promised a return to greater favour than she had ever enjoyed before. The application of this to Jerusalem (as representing Israel) it is easy to see. Under the Law of Moses, they were married.

“I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord” (Jer. 31:32).

This was “*the married wife*” state, but because of their unfaithfulness to the marriage vow, they were divorced. Jerusalem was cast off with her children, and for many centuries have remained in that state—the desolate—the widowed state.

Now, says this prophecy,

“More are the children of the desolate than the children of the married wife, saith the Lord.”

This is an enigma which the apostolic phase of God’s work upon the earth enables us to understand. This phase began when Jerusalem had entered upon the desolate state; it will not be complete till that desolate state end at the coming of Christ; and when it is finished, it will be manifest, in the composition of the multitude that no man can number redeemed from among men—(all of them children of Jerusalem)—that Jerusalem in her desolation has begotten many more children than she did in her married days. The multitude of the saints will be found to be more largely composed of those who have been developed by the labours of the apostles, during all the centuries of the Gentile domination, than of the children of faith begotten under the Law of Moses. And of this the largest part of her family (to be manifested in the day of glory) Jerusalem the forsaken knows nothing. Nationally speaking, Jerusalem does not recognise them—does not know of them—during these the days of her widowhood. When they are introduced to her in the day of restoration, she opens her eyes in wonder. She is represented in another part of Isaiah’s prophecy as expressing surprise at the unexpected apparition of a multitude of children of whom she had no knowledge:

*“The children which thou shalt have after thou hast lost the other, shall say again in thine ears, The place is too strait for me: give place to me that I may dwell. Then shalt thou say in thine heart, **who hath begotten me these**, seeing I have lost my children and am desolate, a captive, and removing to and fro? **Who hath brought up these? Behold I was left alone: these, where had they been?**” (Isa. 49:20-21).*

We can understand why Jerusalem, the long barren and desolate, should be called upon to rejoice in prospect of such a glorious reversal of her experience:

“Sing, O barren, thou that didst not bear . . . thou shalt break forth on the right hand and on the left: and thy seed shall inherit the Gentiles, and make the desolate cities to be inhabited. Fear not, for thou shalt forget the shame of thy youth, and shalt not remember the reproach of thy widowhood any more.”

Very emphatic is Yahweh’s pledge of the stability of this restoration of Jerusalem’s glory,

“This is as the waters of Noah unto me: for as I have sworn that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth, so have I sworn that . . . my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee.”

And how very impressive is the imagery employed to depict the glory of the state to which Jerusalem, now afflicted, shall then be exalted:

“O thou afflicted, tossed with tempest and not comforted, behold I will lay thy stones with fair colours, and lay thy foundations with sapphires. And I will make thy windows of agates, and thy gates of carbuncles, and all thy borders of pleasant stones. And all thy children shall be taught of the Lord, and great shall be the peace of thy children.”

This is neither more nor less than a promise of the Kingdom of God. The hope of Israel and the hope of the gospel are one: and they both centre topographically in Jerusalem—now desolate, but to be glorified. Such is the future of the first of the two cities before us this morning.

A very few words suffice to depict the future of the second. We have it in a very few words in a sentence from the 18th chapter:

“A mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone, and cast it into the sea, saying, Thus, with violence shall that great city Babylon be thrown down, and shall be found no more at all.”

This requires no comment. It is the graphic and unmistakeable illustration of the divine purpose concerning the glory of the Gentiles which for ages centred in Rome, where the ecclesiastical light of the world (which is darkness) still shines.

The practical bearing of the matter is sufficiently manifest. We are the children of Jerusalem in the day of her obscurity. It is our part, figuratively speaking, to weep and lament with her while the world rejoices; but it is a blessed part all things considered. It remains true what Jesus said.

“Blessed are ye that mourn; for ye shall be comforted.”

The mourning of such will be turned into joy, when “*lamentation and mourning and woe*” will be the experience of the children of wickedness; and it will be a joy which Jerusalem will see and share; for thus hath God said:

“Rejoice ye with Jerusalem, and be glad with her all ye that love her. Rejoice for joy with her, all ye that mourn for her. . . . Behold I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the Gentiles like a flowing stream. Then shall ye suck; ye shall be borne upon her sides, ye shall be dandled upon her knees. As one whom his mother his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you; and ye shall be comforted in Jerusalem. And when ye see this, your heart shall rejoice, and your bones shall flourish like an

herb: and the hand of the Lord shall be known towards his servants and his indignation towards his enemies.”

Taken from “The Christadelphian” of 1884

Sunday Morning No. 159 Pages 349-354 By Bro. Robert Roberts