

THE TRUTH

It may have happened in your experience as it has happened in the experience of others, that you have been asked what you mean by “*the truth*.” “Why do you talk so much about ‘*the truth*’? Why do you call your religious views ‘*the truth*’?” Our answer is furnished by the letters of the apostle John read this morning (2 and 3 John). In these brief epistles, John has much to say about “*the truth*.” The first of the two is addressed to those—

*“Whom I love in **the truth**; and not I only, but also all they that have known **the truth**.”*

He alludes to “*the truth*” several times in the body of the epistle. The second of the two epistles is addressed to Gaius, “*whom I love in **the truth**,*” and to him he says,

*“We ought to be fellow-helpers to **the truth**.”*

He further alludes to the truth several times in the course of the epistle.

You are of course well aware that John is not the only apostle who refers to “*the truth*.” All the apostles use that form of speech, and Jesus declares himself to be “*the truth*.” It is, therefore, speaking as the apostles speak, to speak of “*the truth*,” and we desire to speak as the apostles speak rather than as religious society around us speaks. You hear little of “*the truth*” among the denominations; and you seem to them to speak a barbarous language to speak of “*the truth*.” Yet we will speak of “*the truth*,” not only because we have the primitive and best example for this mode of expression, but also because of the immense significance involved in the phrase. There are various kinds of truth. It is true that the sun shines; it is true that we require air and food in order to live; it is true that man cannot live in water, and that fish cannot live out of water. There are thousands of forms of truth, but it is not any truth that formed the uniting bond among the brethren of the apostolic age. The truth that bound them was a particular sort of truth laying hold of particular acts involving particular significances. When John spoke of loving Gaius “*in the truth*,” he did not mean the truth in the abstract sense in which a man speaks of it when he says, “We must always speak the truth”; he meant that certain definite particular truth which Paul defines as “*the truth of the gospel*” (Gal. 2:14). When we trace the meaning of this phrase, we shall find a connection, not at first visible, between the brief epistles of John and that other portion of the Scriptures which we have read from Isaiah. Let us build a bridge from one to the other. It is one of the beauties of the truth that so enables us to connect all parts of the Bible together, and to perceive unity throughout. We begin the bridge in John. We have the phrase “*the truth*.” This is the first pier of the bridge, so to speak. We ask what truth? Paul tells us:

*“The word of the **truth of the gospel**” (Col. 1:5).*

This is the first span of the bridge. We ask, what is the topic, or theme or subject of this “*truth of the gospel*”? He answers,

*“The hope set before us” (Heb. 6:18), “the hope of the gospel,” “**whereof ye heard before** IN THE WORD OF THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL” (Col. 1:23, 5).*

This is our second span—**the hope**, by which Paul says we are saved (Rom. 8:24). We ask, what hope is this? In answer to which he first says it is “*one*”—“*the one hope of our calling*” (Eph. 4:4), from which he warns us not to be moved away. He shows us the importance of the warning by telling us that our final acceptance can only be realised—

“If we hold fast the confidence and rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end” (Heb. 3:6).

This but strengthens the anxiety of every reasonable mind to know and to be assured of the nature of the hope, and so we ask, what is this hope which is placed before us in the word of the truth of the gospel? He gives us the answer in his statement at Rome:

“FOR THE HOPE OF ISRAEL I am bound with this chain” (Acts 28:20)—the hope of Israel!

We say, “What Israel do you mean, Paul?” He answers,

“My kinsmen according to the flesh: who are Israelites: to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises” (Rom. 9:3-4).

We ask, “Have they—your kinsmen, the twelve tribes of the house of Israel—to do with the hope exhibited in your apostolic labours?” He answers,

“Unto which promise our twelve tribes, instantly serving God day and night, hope to come” (Acts 26:7).

Ah, then, we may understand, Paul, why it was that when you arrived in Rome, you called **the chief of the Jews** together (Acts 28:17), and said unto **them**,

“For this cause I have called for you, to see you, and to speak with you: because that for the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain” (verse 20).

Thus “the truth” mentioned in John’s epistles becomes convertible with the hope of Israel. The one is the other, as we know when the nature of the one and the other is understood. Now, who are addressed in the chapter read from Isaiah? (43).

“Thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel: Fear not.”

Here, we reach the other end of the bridge—Israel. We build our bridge thus: the truth—the truth of the gospel—the hope exhibited in the word of the truth gospel—the hope of the gospel—the hope of Israel. And thus we walk from John to Isaiah in a perfectly natural manner.

Now we listen to what Isaiah has to say from the Lord, to Israel with whom we have become incorporate by the gospel.

“When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.”

This is a very glorious assurance. Let us be quite clear as to its application. We shall find in it some consolation for every saint of God. But let us find it legitimately that we may find it surely. There is a way of applying Scripture, in which the application is not obvious; that is, the application is made without an evident reason justifying it. This does not ultimately yield satisfaction. That only which is demonstrably truthful gives a rock to the feet.

It is evident that the application of the divine declaration in question is first to the nation of Israel as a whole. The context shows it. We read thus a verse or so before:

“Who gave Jacob for a spoil, and Israel to the robbers? Did not the Lord, he against whom we have sinned? For they would not walk in his ways, neither were they obedient to his law. Therefore he hath poured upon him the fury of his anger, and the strength of battle.”

There will be no question as to who is the Jacob that has been given to the spoil, and Israel to the robbers. It is this Israel dispersed and afflicted, that is addressed in what comes after, thus:

“But now thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel: Fear not; for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When THOU passest through the waters . . .”

How comes the disobedient, reprobate Jewish nation to be thus addressed? The answer is—because nationally, it is the fact that God created and formed them. There would have been no nation of Israel if God had not called Abraham, and given him Isaac by a miracle—(Sarah being both barren and past age—Heb. 11:11). There would have been no Israel if God had not further guided Isaac’s son, Jacob

(Called Israel), multiplied his seed, delivered them by miracle from Egypt, and organised them as a nation by the hand of Moses. The nation of Israel was divinely created and formed as no other nation on earth ever was. It was redeemed as no nation has been. It is the only nation divinely surnamed and divinely owned.

"You only," says God himself, *"have I known of all the families of the earth"* (Amos 3:2).

This divine nation has been disobedient to the divine law; and upon this divine nation has the divine anger been poured out as upon no other nation. And concerning this nation, as a nation, it is true that the judgment inflicted will never destroy them.

"When thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned: neither shall the flame kindle upon thee."

We are the living witnesses today of the truth of this declaration. Here we are more than two thousand years after the record of these words, and we point to the scattered nation of Israel and say, "There they are, unburnt up by the fire of affliction which for many centuries has burnt around them; undevoured by the stormy waters which they have passed through. It is an indestructible nation; it is an immortal nation, because God has so decreed:

"Though I make a full end of all the nations whither I have scattered thee, yet will I not make a full end of thee: but I will correct thee in measure" (Jer. 30:11).

When we think of this, we are not to think of the individual Jews who may be presented to our notice in any generation. We are to think of the nation as a whole with a past and a future. Multitudes will have belonged to this nation in the course of its history who are no part of it in the ultimate and perfect and abiding form to which God is guiding it. The whole generation that came out of Egypt are examples. With them God was not well pleased, and they fell in the wilderness because of their unbelief (Heb. 3:17-18; 1 Cor. 10:5). There have been millions upon millions of the same sort ever since. It has always been true what Paul says—

"They are not all Israel that are of Israel."

It will not always be so; for we read in the prophets of a time of which it is said—

"Thy people shall be all righteous" (Isa. 60:21).

"They shall all know the Lord, from the least of them unto the greatest of them" (Jer. 31:34).

But while all have not been Israel that have been *"of Israel,"* there has always been an element of the right sort. Even at the worst stage of their history, when the ten tribes wholly followed Baal, as appeared, under the leadership of Ahab, and Elijah was under the impression that he alone was left faithful, God told him that there were thousands who had not bowed the knee in idolatry (Rom. 11:2-4). This faithful element beginning with Abraham, and coming down the ages to the last adopted son at the coming of Christ, is the backbone of the house of Israel, for whose sake—for their development and trial, all the others and all the evil circumstances connected with their history exist; and of this element, raised from the dead and perfected at the return of Christ, the house of Israel, in its official and influential class, will exclusively consist. The others are dross and ephemera. The earth will be finally and exclusively occupied in glory by this class of Israel in all their generations, reinforced by the great harvest of Messiah's millennial reign. Having our eye on this class, or element, we can understand the emphasis of the assurance of indestructibility which while covering the nation as a whole, more particularly applies to the ultimately permanent ingredient in the nation.

Now this ingredient in our day comprehends adopted Gentiles—Gentiles who receive and become obedient to the hope of Israel—who, as the word of the apostles has enlightened us, become fellow heirs with Israel of the glorious things promised to the fathers from the beginning. It is under this head that we find the individual consolation referred to in the beginning of these remarks. What brings us together this morning? It is our standing in the hope of Israel. Apart from this standing, we should never have known one another, let alone our assembly. It is a standing obtained purely through

the mercy of Israel's God—the creator and sustainer of heaven and earth, who sent the invitation by Paul, which we have heard. It is a standing greatly to rejoice in. True, Paul makes it a subject of warning, saying,

“Thou standest by faith: be not high-minded, but fear. If God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee.”

Still, he enjoins us also to be glad, saying,

“Rejoice in the Lord always,”

“Hold fast the confidence and rejoicing of the hope.”

This is a joy and a fear that mix very well together. A man who fears to displease God is the only man that can truly rejoice in hope of the promises he has made. Now supposing such to be our case (and surely it is so with some of us—shall we say with most of us? God knoweth), see the consolation we may take from the scripture in Isaiah concerning the Israel of whom in that case we form a part.

“When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee. When thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.”

Our present experience is an experience of evil—a going through fire and water, as it were. Oftentimes, we are filled with fear lest after all, the evil be too much for us, and calamity overwhelm; lest the fire kindle and the water overflow, and we perish. Here is a word of almighty comfort. It is the voice of God—the voice of Him who holds the stars in His hand—of whom are all things and without whom, a sparrow cannot fall. It is the voice of Him whose words alone can give abiding comfort; for if God be for us, who can be against us? Mark the nature of the comfort. It is not an assurance that Israel shall be free from trouble. It is not an assurance that there will be no towering billows or leaping flames of fire. It is a distinct intimation to the contrary, that we may expect both, but that in the midst of all evil, God will be with His people, and guide them safely through the great and terrible wilderness in which they are threading their way to the promised land. If we are tempted to ask why there should be evil—why the fire and flood—why the wasting and terrifying affliction, we have the answer,

*“Behold, I have **refined thee**, but not with silver: I have chosen thee in **the furnace of affliction**”* (48:10).

This suggests the purifying of good metal by the removal of dross. It is what Paul tells us in another form when he says that the Father chastens us *“for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness”* (Heb. 12:10). Now, is it not a matter of common experience that human nature in prosperity does not tend towards God, but away from him? And is it not a matter of common experience that adversity brings wisdom and godliness? There is but one answer, and that answer brings with it the assurance that it is true kindness that leads the children of God into trouble. It is hard to bear. It would not be affliction if it were otherwise. It would not do its work if it were pleasant.

*“No chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless, afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness to them that are exercised thereby. **Wherefore lift up the hands that hang down, and the feeble knees**”* (Heb. 12:11-12).

There is this further assurance that God does not, in the case of those who fear, trust, obey, and serve Him, allow trouble to press to the point of destruction. There is a moderating of the rigours of suffering as wisdom may call. Peter expresses the idea when praying for the brethren that, after they have suffered a while, God might *“stablish, strengthen, settle them.”* God, who can control all circumstances, knows when to remove the pressure, and to fill the hearts of His children with joy, and their mouths with praise. Let the reading of the Psalms of David illustrate this for the comfort of every grieving heart knowing its own bitterness.

God will finally deliver Israel out of all his troubles. The object of them is not destruction, but purification and preparation for the day of unmingled blessing that God has purposed from the

beginning, and which will surely come at the appointed time, but in which we should not be fitted to participate without our measure of that chastisement whereof all are partakers—a chastisement which helps us to lower ourselves in our own eyes, as it is meet, and to give God that pure glory and exaltation which are His alone, but to which by nature we are blind, and in the recognition and ascription of which alone can we realise the highest joy.

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