

WHY GOD SENDS TROUBLE

The system of truth exhibited in the Scriptures differs from all other systems in vogue among men. It differs from them in many things, but especially in this, that it presents extreme adversity and extreme well-being as the assured experience of all who bring themselves into subjection to it—the extreme of sorrow now; the extreme of joy hereafter. No other system proposes suffering, and no other system guarantees the perfection of happiness. In this way we may see an evidence that the Bible system is not of man. That, however, is not our point this morning. The thing we look at this morning is the relation of the two things to the house of God, to which we are striving to finally belong.

The two sides are represented by the two chapters read this morning. We will take the suffering first, as it is first in our experience. We have it in these prophetic chapters of the Apocalypse. You have the woman who is alleged to represent those “*who keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.*” She is persecuted by the dragon; she flees into the wilderness, she is nourished there from his face. She exists as a testifying community, but by another figure, in chapter 11. “*It is in sackcloth*” that her testimony is given. In chapter 13, her papal persecutor receives power for 1260 years—“*Power to continue,*” our translation says; but the verb in the original means “to do;” to do what? Verse 7 answers:

“It was given unto him to make war with the saints and to overcome them.”

Here is a remarkable thing, that a revelation given to John for the information of believers in Christ concerning their experience during the centuries of Christ’s absence should foretell power and prosperity and success for their enemies, and misfortune and reverses and death for themselves. It is not usual for a party to indulge in prophecies of its own defeat. The reverse is the rule, they anticipate and foretell success; but here is a prophecy of woe and disaster and downtreading for the friends of Christ for many centuries. How has the prophecy been fulfilled? They say in our day that it is dangerous to prophesy unless you know—a true saying, certainly. This prophecy of the Apocalypse has been fulfilled to the letter. Read ecclesiastical history. It is drenched and dripping with blood—the blood of saints. John truly said: “*I saw the woman*” (the other woman; not the chaste woman that fled into the wilderness, but the harlot woman that was mounted on the back of the scarlet-coloured beast—the false church upheld by the European State)—

“I saw the woman drunken with the blood of saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.”

This has been the spectacle presented by European history for many centuries until quite a recent date. It has ceased to be so almost within the lifetime of the present generation. There is no shedding of the blood of saints by the ecclesiastical power seated at Rome now. The power to continue the enormity came to an end exactly 1260 years from the final legalisation of the papal claims and pretensions in AD 606-608. How is it that a prophecy so unlikely for John to indulge in as a national partisan has been so signally fulfilled both as regards the occurrence and the duration of Rome’s persecuting ascendancy? The answer is, because it was not John’s prophecy, but the “*revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to him, to show unto His servants the things which must shortly come to pass.*” This invests both the suffering and the deliverance with the indescribable zest of faith. The suffering must have an object required by perfect wisdom, seeing it is appointed. It is no accident.

“Yourselves know,” said Paul to the Thessalonians, “*that we are appointed thereunto; for verily when we were with you, we told you before that we should suffer tribulation, even as it came to pass and ye know.*”

It is something for the sufferers to know this, for the suffering is not yet over, though the special form connected with Rome’s legalised ascendancy is at an end. The Lord himself was before us in the matter.

“It pleased the Father to bruise him.”

“The cup which my Father hath given me to drink shall I not drink it?”

"He was made perfect through suffering."

If God has appointed suffering, we may be sure it is necessary.

"He doth not willingly afflict."

He has no pleasure in trouble for its own sake. It is because of what it accomplishes. We may not like it, and we may not always see what it does for us, but it seems impossible to shut our eyes to the need for it, and to the beauty of the results that spring from it where it is effectual. We have all heard of the people born with silver spoons in their mouths. We all know that prosperity does not conduce to wisdom. Wisdom is an affair of mental discernment in the highest directions. Men who are enjoying themselves don't care to ask what God made them for. They do not care to take into account what may please God. The idea of man living not for himself is distasteful to them. Duty, obedience, sympathy, worship, affection and reverential subordination to God as a continual attitude, are all outside their purview and foreign to their inclinations. How is a rational frame of mind on these points to be induced? Obviously, by trouble. The trouble has to be severe sometimes before we are able to realise our true place in creation as the mere products of divine power. Some could not be made to realise this by any amount of trouble, and so they are let alone, but neither could the best endowed know it otherwise. It is truly said that we are creatures of circumstances; those who know nothing but pleasure, can never know their own insignificance and the fleeting nature of present life, God's terrible greatness, and the reality of His claims and His purpose with man. God requires us to have open eyes on these things before He can have pleasure in us. Jesus counselled the lukewarms of Laodicea to *"anoint their eyes with eyesalve that they might see."* What is this, but taking pains to understand the will of the Lord in these things? The human side of a man's case and the divine are two different things. It is the divine side that will ultimately govern all. A man may be satisfied with himself, but what does God think? This is the important question to which a man is now indifferent. God will think well if the man think wisely, but to think wisely is to think in harmony with God's wishes and intentions. These are revealed, and wise men will seek to know them and to conform to them, and God will help them by sending trouble.

"As many as I love I rebuke and chasten."

Therefore, *"despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of Him."*

There is a loving aim in it all. Israel as a nation was subjected to trouble in the wilderness on this very principle. Supplies were shortened; diet was reduced to the lowest point compatible with life; the comforts of settled life were denied them expressly that they might learn the wisdom of subjection to Him. Moses told them this:

"Yahweh thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness . . . humbled thee and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with the manna which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know, that He might make thee know that man does not live by bread only, etc."

The same rule has been uniformly observed in the development of the whole earth at the last. Their case is typified by Joseph in affliction in an Egyptian prison, and David chased like a wild rabbit on the mountains before exaltation. It is expressly testified of the saints of the Maccabean era that their *"fall by the sword and by flame and by captivity and by spoil many days"* was that they might be *"tried and purged and made white for the time of the end"* (Dan. 11:33, 35). Of the saints historically viewed, it was said to Daniel that in preparation for the finish of God's purpose on earth—

"Many should be purified and made white and tried"
(Dan. 12:10).

"Blessed," says James, *"is the man that endureth temptation, for when he is tried he shall receive the crown of life."*

Now, it is tribulation that tries a man, and not prosperity. Hence, when John sees the accepted in their glorified totality, their description is,

“These are they that have come out of great tribulation.”

As Paul told the brethren,

“We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.”

Now, brethren and sisters, many of you are in trouble—trouble so deep and terrible, in some cases, that you are beyond the help or even sympathy of man. Is it not some consolation to know that it is a matter of appointment and that it is intended to work a result in you that cannot be accomplished without just the terrible suffering you are going through? It will all end shortly.

“Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.”

This is the fact exhibited in the other chapter, which presents to us the extreme joy that this is the appointed sequel of the hour of sorrow. The chapter is the 51st of Isaiah, which is addressed by God Himself to a particular class. The description of the class deserves attention as the only class to whom its consolation is applicable:

*“Hearken to me, ye that follow after righteousness **Ye that seeketh Yahweh,**” and again, in verse 7,
“Ye that know righteousness, the people in whose heart is My law.”*

The first anxiety is, do we answer to this description? There are millions upon millions of human beings upon the earth. The tendency among men nowadays is more and more to think that all are more or less eligible for the divine favour. If we are guided by the Scriptures, we shall certainly not entertain this thought. They both declare to us expressly and illustrate to us dramatically the low estimate in which the mass of mankind are divinely held. The dramatic illustration is such as a child can understand. It involves the whole population of the earth at the time. *“The flood,”* says Jesus, *“took them all away.”* The declaration is in various shapes identical with John:

*“The whole world lieth in wickedness.”
“Yahweh looked down from heaven to see if there were any that did seek after God.”*

We shall do unwisely, brethren and sisters, if we rest on any human thought on these subjects. Let us try ourselves by God’s own Word. The Word in this case is explicit: the people that follow after righteousness—that seek God—that know righteousness—that have the Law of God in their hearts. How many among the people around us have any taste for righteousness or any care for God? I ask the question for the sake of fortifying ourselves against their influence. We are liable to be impressed by their number. If we are rationally exercised, we shall resist their influence. They do not follow after righteousness—they do not seek God. He requires of us that we think not our own thoughts and speak not our own words, but *“choose the things that please Him;”* whereas there is nothing that the common run of people care less for than the thoughts and words of God; and nothing that they delight in so much as their own unenlightened thoughts of every complexion. Such of them as are feebly religious may care to hear of God’s love for them: but how many of them can speak like David of their love for God?

Love towards God and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ is the first qualification of those who find favour with God. If we are of those who follow after righteousness and seek God, it is because we have *“come out from among”* those who do not; and ourselves *“follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart,”* as Paul commanded Timothy. It is because we give ourselves to reading, as he further commanded, meditating on these things, and giving ourselves wholly to them—which can be done in connection with the ways of

common life, though in all cases, it is more or less of a conflict. If such is our case, the chapter is for us. God does not say "Hearken to me, ye who are indifferent to righteousness, who have no thought of God, the people in whose heart is their own law." He addresses Himself to those who are in reverse condition on all those points. What He has to say to them is most cheering. They are usually hated and spoken against. He says,

"Fear ye not the reproach of men, neither be afraid of their revilings, for the moth shall eat them up like a garment and the worm shall eat them like wool."

Are they often depressed and distressed and melancholy at the utterly insane and ungodly state of things around them? He says:

"I am He that comforteth you; who art thou, that thou shouldest be afraid of a man that shall die, and of the son of man who shall be made as grass and forgettest Yahweh thy maker that hath stretched forth the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth."

Are they sorely tried in patience while human folly stumbles on in the perpetually futile effort to make human life what it ought to be or might be, while they wait amid scoffing for God's promised management? He says:

"A law shall proceed from me and I will make my judgment to rest for a light of the people. My righteousness is near; My salvation is gone forth; Mine arms shall judge the people. The isles shall wait upon Me, and on Mine arm shall they trust."

Are they sick at the desolations, moral and physical, that prevail upon the earth? Are they parched and pining and downcast and often broken-hearted at the wide desert waste through which they find themselves trudging with footsore and weary footsteps towards the goal of divine promise and purpose? His words of comfort are these:

"Yahweh shall comfort Zion. He shall comfort all her waste places, and He will make her wilderness like Eden and her desert like the garden of Yahweh. Joy and gladness shall be found therein: thanksgiving and the voice of melody . . . The redeemed of Yahweh shall return and shall come with singing unto Zion: and everlasting joy shall be upon their head. They shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and mourning shall flee away."

These are the beautiful things representing more beautiful realities than tongue can tell, which God says in this chapter to the people who follow after righteousness, who seek God, and the people in whose heart is His law. They are such as our suffering case requires. They are such as meet all our needs. They inspire the heart with a renewal of courage and resolution; they strengthen the faltering steps of weary pilgrims. For the joy set before us, we can endure the cross and despise the shame, and even glory in a tribulation that is humbling in preparation for that unspeakable exaltation that awaits all the accepted children of God.

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