

THEMES OF BIBLE PROVE GOD-INSPIRED

We all know what Paul says, that the Scriptures are contrived and intended to “*thoroughly furnish*” the man of God “*to every good work.*” Thoroughly furnishing means furnishing on every point. A man might be furnished on some points and not in all. Wisdom requires a place, for every truth and every duty. Now, there is a place for the advice of Solomon:

“Be not righteous overmuch.”

It is not a large place but still it is there. Where we are earnestly exhorted hundreds of times to follow after righteousness, we are only once told to “*be not righteous overmuch.*” This shows the danger of being righteous overmuch is not great, while the danger of neglecting righteousness is very great. Still, the danger of being righteous overmuch does exist for some, and, therefore, there is a time to look at it.

I have known cases—not many—where this danger has shown itself. I have known of too much reading and not enough walking; too much praying and not enough living; too much faith and not enough of the other works of God; too much mortifying of the flesh and not enough personal cleanliness, and personal health and personal joy and thanksgiving to Him who has made all things “*to be received with thankfulness of them that believe and know the Truth.*” The liability to these extremes is distinctly due to the necessity that exists for pushing hard in right directions; but wisdom will enable us to do this hard pushing without carrying things right over the top of the hill. There is an equilibrium with all things that is beautiful. It is hard to get at, but it is possible. Extremes are to be avoided in everything. They tend to destruction. All giving and no getting, all waking and no sleeping; all working and no resting. All study and no eating; all talk and no doing; will tend to emptiness and death, though all of them are right and healthful in their own place. Wisdom is a nice balance of many things; and children of wisdom will aim at this balance. The world is all out of balance one way, there is a possibility of being out of balance in the other. If we obey all the commandments God has given us, we will never be out of balance, but for everything find a time and a place—except for disobedience of God. There is never a time for this. The disobedience of God is wickedness.

Some people think that when Solomon said, “*Be not overmuch wicked,*” he implied that the children of God might be wicked a little. Never. He is not speaking to the righteous in that saying, but to the wicked. You will see that, if you turn to the verse before. He introduces the case of the righteous and the wicked, and he has a word of advice to each. His advice to the righteous is not to carry it too far, because even righteousness carried too far will tend to destruction. His advice to the wicked is a little the same but in a different line of things. The wicked have to die, but Solomon says they may die “*before their time*” if they don’t take things in moderation. If it be asked, what had he to do in giving advice to the wicked, we have to remember that he was “*King in Jerusalem,*” and wrote for the instruction of the whole nation, of whom the greater part were wicked. That there should be a word for them as an actual element in the situation was according to wisdom.

Paul foretold that “*perilous times should come.*” They have come. They have been with the world for many centuries. It may be said that times have always been perilous. So they have, but they were not so perilous when the voice of divine authority was in the earth and the hand of divine power was visible. There was then an obvious standard of appeal which made the children of God at least feel strong, and enable them to speak strongly on behalf of righteousness. But in our day, there is no such standard of appeal. There is the Bible, but the power of this is weakened in a hundred ways. Enmity has undermined it; professed friendship has betrayed it; man-deferring learning, has thrown clouds of elegant sophistry over it, and the shallow public mind has eagerly endorsed the fictions that have liberated it from the irksome restraints of divine command.

“*Perilous times*” implies a something put in danger by them. What is it that is endangered? When we read the Bible we see. God’s favours now and salvation at last are predicated upon our conformity to the will of God therein revealed. The foremost feature of which is belief in His Son and submission to His commandments. Now, whatever tends to obscure that will or weaken the authority of its revelation interferes with our fitness to yield the submission required, and, therefore, imperils

the results associated with it. This is the nature of the present situation pre-eminently. The world is nearly unanimous in its rejection of the “way” revealed in the Bible, and in the adoption of another way of its own invention or guess or imagination. It discards the way of life that has come direct from the throne of light, and sets up a way of its own choosing, which can only end in death. Because nearly all are agreed on the subject, they all feel very strong, and this strength is the peril of the times. It acts as a powerful barrier in the way of those who are disposed to seek and to follow the right way. They look up and see the great and the learned in favour, a “broad” and “liberal” feeling to the effect that it is quite immaterial whether a man obey the commandments of God or not, provided he have a “sincere” religion of some kind. They look down and see the swinish masses wallowing in a moral corruption and in an intellectual benightedness, compared to which indifference is respectable; countless millions of them in all countries, yet all reckoned by the popular teachers to have a hope of landing on some “other shore” in a fabled “sweet by and by” (if there be such, say they, under their breath), and they look around among their friends, amiable and well-to-do it may be; nice, sociable, and well-meaning people, but utterly indifferent to the way of God, or to the question whether there is such a way or not. What is the combined effect of such a situation but to dishearten and paralyse and deter all individual enterprise, and, therefore, to imperil the eternal life which was offered by the apostles in the name of Christ, and which is not to be had in any other line of things?

“*Perilous times*” are indeed come, and lie with a great and heavy shadow over all the world—a shadow that amounts almost to the darkness of impenetrable night. Prophecy is true and prophecy has been fulfilled.

“Darkness shall cover the earth.”

Shall we lie down in despair, then; supine, lethargic, and hopeless? If God had not spoken there would be nothing else to be done. But He has spoken; and He has preserved and circulated His Word and we have it; and the words of direction we read in this chapter that foretells the perilous times (2 Tim.3) are no vain words.

“Continue thou in the things which thou hast learnt and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learnt them.”

It is a matter of knowledge and historic fact. It is not an affair of speculation or myth.

“We have not followed cunningly devised fables.”

The bridge of our hope is hung on the solid buttresses of authentic fact that cannot be got rid of however much it may be scorned.

It rests not on the apostles alone, though that is a strong foundation, considering that they tendered themselves as “*eye witnesses*” of the things they testified, and guaranteed their integrity to all succeeding generations by spoliation, imprisonment, and death, on account of the testimony they gave; it rests on Christ, like whom none ever appeared on earth for character, deportment, teaching, or achievements; who foretold division and war on earth as the result of his appearance, though he was only a private mechanic; his crucifixion, though he went about doing good; his resurrection, though no power existed among men to bring such a thing about. And it rests not on Christ alone, though he is a great rock-mountain, around whom the waves of captious criticism surge and break from age to age in vain. It rests on the prophets who flourished century after century before his appearing. I mean to maintain that the mere existence of their writings, as a piece of literature, is a monument to the fact of God having spoken. It must needs so appear in the eyes of reason when these writings are thoroughly known, and judicially estimated with reference to human nature and other books. Consider them. The popular impression is that the prophets are foretellers of the future, and that prophecy consists mainly of glowing pictures of good times to come. The prophets truly foretell the future, and there are glorious visions of the age to come; but this is not the essential character of their writings. Their essential characteristic is to be found in their expostulations with Israel on account of their departures from the divine Law. The prophets were the messengers of God to bring Israel back to obedience. They are so styled by the writer of the chronicles (2 Chron. 36:15-16), and by Jesus in his lamentation over Jerusalem (Matt. 21:36; Luke 13:34). God Himself defined the work of the prophets thus:

“I have sent unto you all My servants the prophets, saying, Return ye now every man from his evil way and amend your doings and go not after other gods.”

This was their true errand; the foretelling of the future was accessory to it. Now, consider the significance of that errand. Their words are all impeaching words, condemning words, denouncing words. Even Isaiah, who foretells so much of glory and comforts opens in this strain. Here are his very first words:

“Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for Yahweh hath spoken. I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me. The ox knoweth his owner, the ass his master’s crib, but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider. Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evil doers, children that are corrupters. They have forsaken Yahweh: they have provoked the Holy One of Israel to anger, they are gone away backwards.”

This is the strain all the way through the prophets right to the end of Malachi—fault-finding, —reproof, —condemnation. What is the explanation of this quality of the Jewish national writings? In all other nations and literatures and ages it is otherwise, the leaders of the people compliment and flatter, and speak at all times in a conciliatory strain. Even the Pope whitewashes the rascally minions of power when he has occasion to address them or refer to them. Men would have no chance of being popular and influential if they did not speak to please. Here are men who did the reverse, and who were not popular, but so unpopular as to be objects of popular vengeance. As Stephen said in his speech before the Sanhedrin:

“Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted”? (Acts 7:52), or, as Jesus exclaimed,

“O, Jerusalem, which killest the prophets and stonest them that are sent unto thee.”

What is the explanation of it? It cannot be attributed to the proneness of the priests to maintain their influence over the people as some would fain suggest: for the priests were as much the object of reproof as the people. Take for example, our reading a day or two ago (Mal. 2:1).

“And now, O ye priests, this commandment is for you: if ye will not hear and if ye will not lay it to heart; to give glory unto My name, saith Yahweh of Hosts, I will even send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings.”

If you will think it out, the more this is pondered, the more it will be perceived that the mere existence of the prophetic writings is a proof of God having spoken, quite apart from the stupendous and convincing theme of fulfilled prophecy. It is not according to human nature at all to write as the prophets wrote. Therefore, an impulse outside human nature had to do with it. This would stand as the unassailable conclusion of reason even if it were not formulated for us by inspiration in the apostles.

“Prophecy came not in old time by the will of man, but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.”

On this, then, after Christ and the apostles, we rest as a strong foundation of faith; but the foundation does not end here. There remains Moses, whose history in its details, and whose sublime writings in their spirit and construction cannot be pondered without yielding up to docile reason the powerful conviction that God was with him, laying the foundation of a work on earth, of which Christ is the topstone. And, even then, the topic is not exhausted, for there is such a perfect adaptation between the bible plan of things and the need of man, as well as between the Bible and the conclusion proclaimed by the whole universe, that the intellect is overborne by the conviction that the Bible is only the complement of nature in revealing God and opening before us the prospect of everlasting good.

Strong in this conviction we draw continual comfort from the study of the Scriptures, and continual profit. They are no words of empty sentiment that say,

“Thy word is a light unto my feet and a lamp unto my path.”

It is so in many, many ways—sometimes in very unexpected ways. Before concluding, let us glance at one of the many ways that at first is by no means obvious. In our young days, we see no particular use

in the mournful psalms from which a selection has been read. In older days, when trouble and suffering fall to our lot, we begin to feel very differently. We see a value in the Psalms we never saw before; which way will presently appear. The effect of trouble of any kind by itself is depressing. It seems for the time being to cut us off from the divine relations. There is a kind of logic in the mind that seems to say that we are out of joint with the divine plan of things to be in such distress. It is here where the Psalms come in with such reassuring effect. There are bright and joyful psalms. But they are not all bright and joyful. Look at the one we heard read this morning (6:2-7):

“Have mercy upon me, O Lord: for I am weak. O, Lord, heal me, for my bones are vexed. My soul is also sore vexed . . . I am weary with my groaning: all the night make I my bed to swim. I water my couch with my tears. Mine eye is consumed because of grief; it waxeth old because of all mine enemies.”

Now, it matters not how we estimate the speakership of this psalm, whether we take it as David’s which it undoubtedly was in the first case; or Christ’s, which the Spirit by the apostles instructs us it was: or the collective Christ’s of which Jesus is the head—it brings before us this fact, that the friends of God are permitted to come into deep trouble as part of their experience. The same thing is apparent in another way in the discourse of Christ’s, which we have read from Matthew 5. He pronounces certain classes of Israel *“blessed.”* Note who they are: the poor in spirit, they that mourn, the meek, they that hunger and thirst after righteousness, the persecuted, the reviled, etc. Here is a recognition of afflictedness appertaining to the friends of God in the present state. There is instant comfort here for us, quite apart from the reason of it. Companionship always brings solace, even to misfortune. If there are others in it, you bear it more easily. To consider that the loved of God in past ages have been sufferers, if only by permission, reconciles you to your own part of the common lot. But we go a step further, and see that it is not only by permission but by arrangement. *“Yourselves know,”* says 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 as ye know.”

Peter speaks to the same effect:

“Think it not strange concerning the fiery trial that is to try you as though some strange thing happened unto you.”

And now, there is a purpose in it, which completes our reconciliation to what would otherwise be a hurtful experience. The cloud shines with the light of heaven. Some have expressed the idea that is it very extraordinary there should be this necessity for tribulation. They have asked why God could not get at His ends with man by a straighter and a simpler road. Surely, if nothing is impossible with God, He could usher His children into perfect being without all this stew and trouble. So they reason. But they reason not well. If there were no answer, it would be sufficient to say that the mode in the case being God’s mode, it must be the best, since with perfect power there is also perfect wisdom and goodness with Him. But there is a closer answer than this. Any course adopted appears wise or foolish, according as we apprehend the object aimed at. What is the object aimed at in this case? It is the solution of the very delicate problem of how to bring man into the etiquette of heaven without interfering with the perfect liberty which is the glory of rational existence. We know the etiquette of the earth where majesty is concerned. How much obeisant ceremonial—how much deferring; how much humble compliance, and personal abasement on the part of those approaching royalty. All this is very beautiful in a certain way; but there is little true reason in it, because king or queen is a fellow-mortal and as dependent on air and food and sleep as the meanest subject. But consider God, out of whom are all things—*“in Whose hands our breath is, and Whose are all our ways.”* How great and terrible the Being in whose hands centre the lines of universal power and wisdom and presence. How greatly to be revered; how worthy to be served and adored. Now He exacts this service and love and adoration, and He purposes to permanently people the earth with those only who accord to Him this reasonable exaction. That we may learn to render it is the object of tribulation. The lesson cannot be learnt in prosperity though it may be retained there after it has been previously learnt. We are brought into trouble that we may thoroughly realise what it is not enough to know as a theory, and that is, that in ourselves, we are nothing, and that the only true wisdom of a created being is to lay his

free will and all his powers on the altar of divine service as a voluntary and reasonable sacrifice. The angels thus fear and serve, and mortals who are to become their equals in nature, must become their equals in reverence. This is where trouble—regulated trouble—helps. It extinguishes the mere sense of natural sufficiency and self-dependence, and forces on us the recognition of the evident fact that man neither made nor sustains himself and has no part in the control of this splendid universe, which exists by almighty power. With lessons like these, we learn patience, and patience waits the slow evolution of mortal experience in the certain confidence that they will have their issue at last in the day of everlasting sufficiency and life and glory.

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