

## The Word Enduring For Ever

WE have often read in the scriptures the assurance that "*the word of the Lord endureth for ever.*" There is a great deal of consolation in that assurance when we realize all that it involves. There are two phases in which we can consider it. There is, first, the one exhibited in the fact stated by David and repeated in the first chapter of John, that by "*the word of the Lord were the heavens made*"; and by Paul, that He "*upholdeth all things by the word of his power.*" In this aspect of it, we realize the stability of the universe. Some may think there is no particular need for realizing this. They will think otherwise if they call to mind the many theories, held some of them by the most scientific of men, to the effect that the universe is in a state of constant transmutation, and that there is no guarantee that the earth may not be blown to perdition by internal explosives or slowly disappear by disintegration, or that the sun itself may not go out from exhaustion. We are helpless in reference to such depressing and demoralizing thoughts if we rely merely upon our thoughts as natural men. We can show no reason in the nature of things why heaven and earth should endure. The fact that they have continued till now only establishes a reasonable presumption that they will still continue: it does not prove that they will. For all that we know about it, it may be as the speculators dimly forebode; it might be that the materials of the universe might lose their cohesion and shape, and relapse to chaos, involving us all in a general annihilation. But when we realize the truth of the Scriptures, and, therefore the truth of the statement that "*the word of the Lord endureth for ever,*" we have strong consolation. It is a great revelation that all things exist in the will of God; that all things are but the concretion of His invisible energy according to His intention. There is no room for accidental perdition or spontaneous dissolution here. Nothing can interfere with the foundation things have in the word of Jehovah [Yahweh]. It is no inflated figure of speech that describes God as the Rock. Its perfect appropriateness is evident when we think of His Spirit as the medium and formative executor of His purposes, radiated by His volition from the presence of His eternal power and glory. This is His word in its physical relations. There is rest for our feeble minds in the fact that His word is everlasting: that though the world passeth away, and human life as we know it at present is a fading flower, "*the purpose of the Lord standeth sure.*" We have His word for it that heaven and earth are for ever: therefore, we are unaffected by the theories and thoughts that would make all things uncertain, and our lives as the mere bubbles on a restless ocean of everlasting change. We rest in the Lord, and have the comfort of hope and the quietness of assurance for ever. We are tranquillized and made glad by the knowledge that the Eternal Father has a purpose involving the perpetual stability of the glorious place we inhabit, that in ages to come He will show us His kindness in Christ Jesus, when His Name shall have attained that exaltation among men which is the basis of all blessedness.

But there is another aspect of the subject. The word of the Lord stands related to us in what He has said by the holy men of God, who spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit; and this has a practical bearing upon our well-being as individuals. In a certain sense, this is the more important of the two aspects of the subject. The stability of heaven and earth is of no special value to those who stand unfavourably related to the word of the Lord in its individual application. It is no comfort to a man lying in prison under sentence of death, that heaven and earth are safe from cataclysm. On the contrary, he would be glad if all things went to ruin with him. It is to the durability of the word of the Lord in this sense that we now devote a few thoughts. Peter applies it directly in the following quotation from Isaiah: "*All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: but the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.*"

How entirely the truth of this is realized in the experience both of ourselves and others. Human power fails: we feel how feeble we are in many ways, but more particularly in the direction of things that are good. How destitute the natural man is of spiritual resources! The outward man perisheth, and how entirely the renewing of the inward man from day to day is dependent upon the daily feeding on this word, as the newborn babe upon milk. There is a certain consolation in these facts. The weakness of flesh and blood is a beneficial experience, in so far as it gives a right direction to our thoughts. We are brought to the point of abandoning confidence in ourselves, and leaning more

and more on the strength derivable from the Rock of our salvation. We recognize the inevitable, and give up the weary effort of trying to stand in the mire. We recognize that in ourselves there is no good thing, and that we must be content to hold on to the hope of the Gospel, and to rest in the Lord and wait patiently for the day of blessing. While the curse prevails we cannot be free. We are free in our legal relations to God, but we still await the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body. We carry the burden of a sin-cursed nature till we are released in the change to the incorruptible. When this is attained we shall know experimentally what is meant by the words, "*There shall be no more curse.*" Till then we must be content with our share of that "groaning within ourselves, being burdened," which is part of our appointed probation. Even Paul felt the weight of it. Those feel it heaviest, in a spiritual sense, who have the keenest appreciation of the things of the Spirit, and it is these who rejoice the most at the prospect of the deliverance which will be theirs at the appointed time. The hope of this deliverance stands on the same foundation as the stability of heaven and earth: "*The word of the Lord endureth for ever.*" On this foundation we can rest in peace, even amidst all the tribulation which is our inevitable portion in the present evil world.

In the chapter read this morning from Isaiah, we have another illustration of the fact that the word of the Lord endureth for ever. It is a prophecy concerning Damascus, which at the time the prophecy was written, about twenty-seven hundred years ago, was a flourishing state on the border of the kingdom of Israel. The prophecy is, that Damascus would be taken away from being a city and become a ruinous heap; that the fortress would also cease from Ephraim, and the kingdom from Damascus. At the time the prophecy was written, there was nothing to indicate that it would come to pass. Could we go back to that time, we should find every appearance of stability in Damascus and Ephraim—cities with high walls, rearing their towers to heaven, streets thronging with healthy, busy people, engrossed with the interests of the day as men now are, and pompous official men, swelling with the importance always associated with sense of power and possession. In these surroundings the words of the prophet would seem not only improbable, but insane. Yet those words, written in quietness at a long distance from Damascus, have prevailed, and are with us today, when the pomp and glory they denounced are a dream of the past. They were the word of the Lord which endureth for ever. The lesson is of great practical value to us, because of other prophecies that are as yet only matters of hope. Men around us condemn these prophecies; but where are their little heats when even a generation is past? Ask this of a hundred years ago. There were men of busy thought and brilliant diatribe among the adversaries of the Bible, and their words were powerful with many, both in exciting public meetings and in the eagerly scanned page of written declamation. Their thought was, they had quenched the Scriptures, and established the light of a dawning "age of reason." But time has rolled on, and they have passed into the grave, and their stout words are forgotten, while the word of the Lord, enduring for ever, has quietly and irresistibly, like the laws of the universe, accomplished itself in the history of mankind, tending by degrees toward the appointed consummation when the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever.

It might be rejoined by the caviller that the believer has fared no better than the unbeliever; that he also has been silenced in the relentless progress of decay. There would be force in this retort, if the purpose of God contemplated nothing further with those who are in obedient sympathy with it; but the contrary being the case, it is devoid of all reason. "*The righteous hath hope in his death,*" so it is written in the word of the Lord which endureth for ever. This hope is, that he shall awake from his sleep in the dust at the appointed crisis in the divine scheme, to participate in the reality and the interest and the joy and the glory of a renewed and higher life in this earthly scene of probation. So also it is written, as we know. It is in this relation of things that the difference between the believer and the unbeliever is manifest. The believer sleeps as well as the unbeliever; but he sleeps the briefest sleep he ever slept, to awake to the sweetness of the noblest aspirations realized—a sweetness all the sweeter for the weariness of the deferred hope of a life of faith now. The unbeliever goes to the grave with rebellion in his heart, and deprives himself of the blessing which the future holds. Even worse than this, he may find he has treasured for himself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God (Rom. 2:5). When this coming time is reached, the difference between the two classes will be palpable. The difference is not apparent now. The fool seems to walk in his folly

with impunity, and the righteous man seems to deny himself without result; but the day in question will manifest them both to the discernment of all, as it is written: "*Then shall ye return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not.*"

Returning to Isaiah (chapter 17), it is observable that the era of the desolation of Damascus was also to be one of leanness to Jacob (verse 4). "*In that day it shall come to pass that the glory of Jacob shall be made thin, and the fatness of his flesh shall wax lean.*" The following verses (from 5 to 11) are occupied with a description of the adversity thus alluded to. This description is briefly summarized in the statement in verse 9, "*There shall be desolation.*" A notable feature in the description is the reason given for the desolation that should befall the house of Israel. This reason deserves particular notice, as it affords us a lesson of true wisdom capable of individual application. The reason is, "*Because thou hast forgotten the God of thy salvation, and hast not been mindful of the Rock of thy strength.*" We are informed by Paul that these things were written for our instruction. The generation to whom they were actually addressed has long since passed into oblivion, but we live with the words in our hands: and is it not a lesson of instruction we need? What shall we be rejected for if we are rejected, but for this very offence of Israel? It is the glaring offence of all society around us. People are not mindful of the Rock of their strength. God is not in all their thoughts. They are taken up with what they have and what they are, to the exclusion of the Bestower of all. They take all the credit as if they were the creators of the things they boast in. The wise man claims and receives the credit of his wisdom; the strong man glories in his strength as though it were his own production; the rich man puts on high looks and arrogant airs, as though the permission to control a little more substance than his neighbour were a reasonable ground of lordship. In this lies the thorough ungodliness of the world, and the great barrier to friendship with it on the part of those who have been separated by the word to be the sons and daughters of the Lord God Almighty. The world robs God of the recognition and reverence and praise which are His. If they profess that they know God, in works they deny Him. What fellowship hath light with darkness? Only those who have a name to live and are dead could be found advocating a friendship which Jesus has forbidden and himself has set us the example of refusing. Shall we unite in bonds of friendship with those for whom Christ would not pray? "*I pray not for the world*" (John 17:9). Surely, no one could be guilty of it who believes in Christ and reverences him as our leader and teacher sent from God. We must be on our guard; the beginnings of things are insidious. Little slips lead to greater ones. Resist the devil and he will flee: give in to him a little, and he will soon push the door open and force himself into the house. Let us daily meet with God in the word, and we shall be strengthened to see and walk in the right way. If we neglect the reading of the word, under the idea that it is a formal and superfluous affair, we shall lose ground, and come to experience what Paul meant when he spoke of being "*hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.*" Against this he asks the brethren to be on their guard; and to help one another to be on guard. His words are, "***Exhort one another daily, while it is called Today, lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin***" (Heb. 3:13). Incessant exhortation of a reasonable sort is both healthful and necessary. It is apostolically enjoined and experimentally demonstrated to be necessary. This must be the explanation of these Sunday morning addresses. To some the voice may appear harsh and the standard high; but they will change their minds when the shadow of death comes over them, or the glory of the judgment-seat overwhelms them. They will see that this constant affirmation of the truth of God in its bearing on the house of God is the highest kindness, and perhaps may have conferred even on them at last, the highest benefit which it is possible for one man to receive at the hand of another. At all events, whether acceptable or otherwise, as long as God permits this voice to be heard in the land of the living it will be heard on behalf of the great and universally neglected fact that if men are unmindful of the Creator of heaven and earth, they forfeit the title to existence at His hand, and will at last experience that ruin that came upon His own nation Israel because of this offence.

There is a remarkable statement in the course of the prophecy we are considering. It is to the effect that when Israel's greatness shall have shrunk to the condition of a plucked vine, with only here and there a gleaned grape on the outmost branches, "*at that day shall a man look to his Maker, and his eyes shall have respect to the Holy One of Israel.*" It seems to me there is a considerable parallel between this statement and the statement made by Jesus to the woman at the well of Samaria. They

both refer at all events to the same period of Israel's experience (when there shall be desolation), and they seem to affirm the same thing: What I refer to will be found in John 4. You will recollect that the woman said, "*Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.*" And Jesus answered, "*Woman, believe me, the hour cometh when ye shall neither in this mountain nor yet at Jerusalem worship the Father ... But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.*" Now there is great point in both statements, when we recollect that up to that time there was a visible ritual of divine appointment by which God was worshipped in the place He chose to place His name there. It was a great luxury to take part in such a divinely-appointed service. But the time was at hand when this service was to be suppressed, and the divine system of Moses scattered to the wind. The question would naturally suggest itself, Would worship therefore cease? The statements of Isaiah and of Jesus both show that though there would be an interregnum in the national organization of worship, worship itself, during the period of Israel's downtreading, would continue, but in a simpler, even an individual form. It is here that we are interested. We have no temple to which we can repair. We have no priest to whom we can take the visible tokens of our submission and confession. We have no established and striking service of worship in which we can take part. We are inorganic units, sojourning among the Gentiles while chaos reigns in the land of promise. We can only worship as individuals. But there is consolation in the thought that our individual worship is acceptable, if offered in spirit and in truth. Nay, the Father seeketh such to worship Him. What a comfort here, that the Possessor of heaven and earth finds pleasure in the approaches of those who believe in Him, and who approach Him in truth and not in pretence: in spirit and not in form merely. To make this approach, we need not to go to a particular place. We require not to come together, though coming together is required of us under another head. God fills heaven and earth. He is not far from every one of us. He knoweth our thoughts afar off. We need but to turn our thoughts and words to Him. This seeks and needs solitude. The human mind is weak. We cannot attend to God and man at the same time. While in a sense we may set God always before our face, we must step aside from even the dearest friends when we mean to address ourselves to the Father in the particular manner implied in the word prayer. It is frequently recorded of Jesus that he withdrew from the multitude and spent even whole nights in prayer. And in this matter, the true heart instinctively shuns the situation of the hypocrite, who desires it to be known he is praying. Prayer in spirit and in truth seeks absolute privacy as Jesus enjoins. Of course, the public exercises of the brethren in the assemblies of the saints stand in a different category; but even in these, when the leader of our approaches is a true man and no mere performer, the words of the petition will be brief and modest and subdued—a result certain to accompany a consciousness of God. But the primary reference of the words under consideration is doubtless to those individual acts of worship which are a constant luxury and strength to such as worship God in spirit and in truth.

The chapter conducts the desolation of Israel to a certain tumult of nations described in verses 12-14. "*The nations shall rush like the rushing of many waters: but God shall rebuke them, and they shall flee far off, and shall be chased as the chaff of the mountains before the wind, and like a rolling thing before the whirlwind. Behold at eveningtide trouble; and before the morning he is not. This is the portion of them that spoil us, and the lot of them that rob us.*" A knowledge of the truth has enabled us to comprehend this. The long period of Israel's dispersion is to be terminated by a period of national convulsions among the Gentiles, marked by the advent, during their progress, of Israel's crucified deliverer, who breaks their power, and proceeds to the rebuilding of the fallen tabernacle of David. We are privileged to have seen the rushing of nations begin. We are in the eveningtide of Gentile prosperity. There is trouble brewing, even the time of trouble such as never was. Before the morning of the glorious day of salvation, the power of Israel's robbers will have ceased to exist. But the transition is a time of blood and turmoil—a time of upheaving the old foundations—a time of judgment which will teach the world righteousness. Knowing this before by the word of truth, we are able to endure with calmness a prospect which is filling the minds of other men with fear: and to use the time that yet remaineth in preparing for the long-promised redemption that draweth nigh.

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