

UNPLEASANT THINGS FOR THE WORLD

How important is the fact that God hath spoken, and that we have here in our hands the authentic and authorised record of what He has said. We believe the fact; are we always in the mental attitude of deferential attention to what we read in the Bible, which such a belief ought to inspire? It is to be feared, not. Our weak minds are so easily engrossed with the things of this life that we are often but indifferently affected by the great things presented to us in the Scriptures. So much the more need for that assembling of ourselves together which Paul enjoins, the very object of which is to refresh memory and strengthen faith in those things. Our system of progressive reading always brings some portion of the Word before us with that quality of profitableness which is necessarily the result of its being inspired.

This morning it is a chapter (Isaiah 17), which we may find not so barren as it looks. It is headed "*the burden of Damascus*," but there is much more in it than this. There is burden for other places and people as well, and some things that are not burdensome, but contrariwise, lightsome and gladsome. "*Burden*" is that which is heavy, and, applied to a message, means heavy tidings. There is much of heavy tidings in the prophets which is one result of their message being divine; reproof and condemnation for evil ways come from God. When it is left to man he speaks pleasant things. The prophets do not deal in pleasant things, but the reverse. "*Gladness is taken away*," says Isaiah in the chapter before the one we have read: "*and joy out of the plentiful field; in the vineyards there shall be no singing*." In the chapter before us Damascus is to "*become a ruinous heap: the cities of Aroer are to be forsaken: the fortress is to cease from Ephraim*." Even "*the glory of Jacob*" is to be "*made thin in that day, and the fatness of his flesh shall wax lean*." The harvest of the human activities then going on would not be such as they were aiming at and expecting, it would be "*a heap in the day of grief and of desperate sorrow*." In a word, as at verse 9, "***There shall be desolation***." Why all this terrible blackness in human prospects? The answer is in verse 10:

"Because thou hast forgotten the God of thy salvation, and hast not been mindful of the Rock of thy strength."

Here we have an important teaching of revelation—one that runs through every phase of that revelation namely, that forgetfulness of God is the ultimate cause of human ruin. The thing is true, both historically and in current experience, and whether affecting individual men or nations—although it apparently may not be so at any one particular moment. It is a point on which the sons of God should rouse themselves. The world at large are guilty of this forgetfulness, and we are liable to be tintured by the thoughts of the world at large. If we remember what Christ said that "*we are not of this world*," we also remember that this being not of the world, consists of being not of its mind—not of its forgetfulness—not of its way. Our affections are not set upon the things that engage their loves; our memories are open to those things that they have no inclination for:

"They say unto God, depart from us; we desire not the knowledge of Thy ways. What is the Almighty that we should serve Him; and what profit should we have if we pray unto Him?" (Job 21:14).

The sons of God say the very reverse:

"The desire of our soul is to the remembrance of Thy name and to the remembrance of Thee. With our soul have we desired Thee in the night: Yea, with our spirit within us will we seek Thee early . . . My soul thirsteth for

Thee: my flesh longeth for Thee in a dry and thirsty land where no water is”
(Isa. 26:9; Psa. 63:1).

In the day when Isaiah wrote the words we are considering, Aroer, Ephraim, and other places spoken of were in peace and prosperity. The message was,

“There shall be desolation.”

We look around today and we ask, “How is it now?” The answer is, “Exactly as it was foretold.”

“The glory of Jacob has become very thin; the fatness of his flesh has waxed very lean.”

“Gleaning grapes” are left, as the oracle foretold, “as the shaking of an olive tree; two or three berries on the top of the uppermost bough, four or five in the outmost fruitful branches.” The “strong cities” are “forsaken,” as foreshown—the land a desolate wilderness where all was smiling fertility and populous occupation. Israel’s state is exactly as foretold.

But there is a lifting of the veil towards the end of the chapter.

“Woe to the multitude of many people which make a noise like the noise of the seas, and to the rushing of nations that make a rushing like the rushing of mighty waters.”

In what way this is to be considered as a lifting of the veil will appear when we consider the part performed by the nations in the affliction of Israel. They have prevailed against Israel for ages by their rushing power; and here is a glimpse of a turn in the rushing tide (verse 13):

“The nations shall rush like the rushing of many waters: but God shall rebuke them, and they shall flee afar off, and shall be chased as the chaff of the mountains before the wind, and like a rolling thing before the whirlwind.”

The next verse justifies us in regarding this as the culminating crisis of Israel’s troubles, and the commencement of the day of their deliverance. The verse reads thus:

*“And, behold at eventide 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.**”*

Here is an evening and a morning in relation to Israel; an evening marked by trouble—trouble all round; and a morning when the trouble has rolled away like a spent thundercloud. We can have no difficulty in identifying both these. The “eventide” is the finishing season of the long day of evil that has prevailed upon the earth. It is revealed in many parts of the Scriptures that the ending of this long day will be marked by—

“A time of trouble such as never was since there was a nation upon the earth to that same time.”

Jesus speaks of it as a time when “distress of nations with perplexity and men’s hearts failing them for fear” will indicate that “the Kingdom of God is nigh at hand.” Israel were to be especial partakers of that trouble, after the analogy of the great trouble that befell them in Egypt just before their deliverance by Moses. This is plainly revealed by Jeremiah, who, contemplating the approach of the day when God would bring again the captivity of Israel and Judah exclaimed (30:6),

“Wherefore do I see every man with his hands on his loins as a woman in travail, and all faces are turned into paleness? Alas! For that day is great; it is even the time of Jacob’s trouble, but he shall be saved out of it.”

It is the saving of Israel out of his trouble that is plainly before us in Isaiah 17,

“God shall rebuke them (the rushing nations), and they shall flee far off . . . This is the portion of them that spoil us.” “At evening tide, trouble; and before the morning, he (the enemy) is not.”

This “*morning*” is one of the most beautiful of scripture pictures. David said,

“Joy cometh in the morning.”

No doubt he meant it in a general sense in contrast to the weeping that he says “*may endure for a night.*” But it is true in the more specific sense of the chapter before us. He said of the Son promised to him,

“He shall be like the light of the morning when the sun riseth.”

The arrival of Christ will inaugurate “*the day of salvation,*” whose morning must necessarily be glorious. The evening preceding this morning is an evening of blackness and darkness and trouble; but when the morning has come, the darkness has disappeared. The enemy “*is not.*” The spoiler has ceased.

“The multitude of all the nations that fight against Ariel (i.e. Jerusalem) . . . and that distress her shall be as a dream of a night vision” (Isa. 29:7).

The definite shape which the overthrow and dispersal of the enemy takes on this momentous occasion is revealed in Ezek. 38th and 39th chapters, as we all know. In the latter days, as the prophecy informs us, a stupendous military confederacy, under Russian headship, invades the land, and carries all before it. Jerusalem is taken; the inhabitants made captive, and the whole land put under bondage. It seems as if Israel’s prospects were shrouded in everlasting gloom. What arrests and turns back the flood is nothing less than the interposition of the glorious arm that broke the power of Egypt at the Red Sea:

“When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard against him. And the Redeemer shall come to Zion” (Isa. 59:19-20).

No wonder, the spirit of prophecy breaks out in the next chapter, into loud, cheering apostrophe:

“Arise, shine, for thy light is come; and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.”

For the enemy, it is a day of gloom:

“Surely in that day, there shall be a great shaking in the land of Israel so that the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of heaven, and the beasts of the field, and all creeping things that creep upon the earth, and all the men that are upon the face of the earth shall shake at My presence, and the mountains shall be thrown down, and the steep places shall fall, and every wall shall fall to the ground, and I will call for a sword against him throughout all My mountains, saith the Lord God: every man’s sword shall be against his brother. And I will plead against him with pestilence, and with blood and I will rain upon him and upon his band and upon the many people that are with him with an overflowing rain, and great hailstones, fire, and brimstone.”

The chapter we have been considering, which tells us of the disaster that befalls the rushing nations at even-tide when “*God shall rebuke them,*” is immediately followed by an address to “*a land shadowing with wings*” entrusted with a mission of mercy and aid to

Israel. It can scarcely be an accident that such an address should be inserted in such a situation. It seems to come right into its place at the overthrow of the Russian Gog and his multitude; for that overthrow is succeeded by the work of rebuilding the Tabernacle of David which the nations had thrown down. That in this work, the Lord proposes to make use of the leading maritime power in the earth at that time, is a matter of gracious revelation:

*“Who are these that fly as a cloud, and as the doves to their windows? Surely **The Isles** shall wait for Me, and the ships of Tarshish first to bring thy sons from far, their silver and their gold with them,” etc. (Isa. 60:8).*

The situation of this passage (right in the heart of the glowing description of Israel’s restoration in Isa. 60) narrows its application. The mention of “*the ships of Tarshish*” identifies it with the power spoken of by Ezekiel 38:13, as the antagonist of Gog in the land of Israel. The verse referred to informs us that in “*the latter days*” (see v. 16), on the occasion of Gog coming out of his place in the north parts “*descending upon the land of Israel as a cloud to cover the land,*” “*Sheba and Dedan and the merchants of Tarshish and all the young lions thereof shall say unto him, art thou come to take a spoil,*” etc. The two phrases “*Merchants of Tarshish,*” and “*the ships of Tarshish*” point to a power trading by the sea “*in the latter days*” a specified epoch that gives the argument its pith. The declaration of the prophecy is that the ships of this power will be foremost in the work of bringing Israel again to their land.

We have now reached the latter days. This does not admit of a doubt. We look around at the situation, political, military and geographic, and we see a state of things exactly corresponding with the prophecy. We see the powerful Russian Gog, at the head of many vassal nations, “*preparing*” as commanded in Ezek. 38:7, in his place in the north parts (v.15). And we see another power situate in “*the isles,*” whose ships cover the sea, and who is the natural rival and antagonist of the great Russian Bear. The conclusion that the ships of this British power are “*the ships of Tarshish*” becomes irresistible when we ascertain that Britain was the source of the tin supply furnished to the market of Tyre by Tarshish (Ezek. 27:12), and that the very name of Britain is traceable to a Phoenician (or Tyrian) word (Baratanac) signifying the tin islands. Britain is merely the Tarshish power pushed to her utmost western limits, yet exercising dominion in all the regions which formerly owned the name, east or west.

The proof is complete that this power addressed in Isa. 18, “*Woe (or Ho!) to the land shadowing with wings, which is beyond the rivers of Ethiopia*”—a land of extended empire, land of wide lying protectorates. This is exactly descriptive of the British power.

“That sendeth ambassadors by the sea.”

This can only apply to an island power as a characteristic description. Other powers might use the sea for ambassadors, but an island power must. Other powers on conterminous territories could, and in most cases would, and do, use the land, an island power cannot send their ambassadors by the land.

Well, here, the numerous, well-appointed, swift-sailing vessels of Britain’s naval and mercantile fleet are sent off to the work of bringing Israel from the ends of the earth when Christ arrives to “*build again the tabernacle of David that is fallen down.*” The divine mandate here recorded is:

“Go, ye swift messengers, to a nation scattered and peeled . . . in that time shall the present be brought in to the Lord of Hosts of a people scattered and peeled . . . to the place of the name of the Lord of Hosts, the Mount Zion.”

Such a work will be very humiliating to British pride; but the British pride will first be broken, as it is testified earlier in Isaiah:

“The day of the Lord of Hosts shall be . . . upon all the ships of Tarshish . . . when He arises to shake terribly the earth” (Isa. 2:12, 16, 19).

There is intimation of a disaster to the British fleet which will make Britain sensible of the divine character of the power at work (Psa. 48:7). After this, she will be the “*first*” to place her ships at the Lord’s service. All this is of unspeakable interest to us, placed as we are in the very heart of the power to be so divinely used. It is a pleasant thought, but let us not rest too much upon it. It will help us nothing in the great day drawing near, if it should be found that with all our knowledge, and all our satisfaction, we are lacking in that submission to God in His worship, love and obedience, of which Christ is the highest example, and by which all the true children of God are in some degree characterised.

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By Bro. Robert Roberts