

The Way of Peace They Know Not

"In the day when I cried, Thou answeredst me, and strengthened me with strength in my soul"—Ps.

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THERE are many sordid and unlovely chapters of Israel's history recorded for our guidance, and as illustrations of the depths of which unlicensed human nature is capable, but there are few more miserable and uselessly evil than the career of Jehoram recorded in 2 Chron. 21.

His first act was the murder of his own brothers in order to remove any possible rivals for his throne. He then set himself purposely to work evil, after the example of Ahab whose daughter he had married.

Soon Edom revolted against him and broke away, and then Libnah. He compelled Judah to practice the abominations of idolatry, and brought thereby a great plague upon the people. The Philistines and Arabians broke in upon him and took away his wives and his sons and all his treasures.

Before he was 40, God smote him with a loathsome and incurable disease which 2 years later brought him to a miserable death. The customary memorial rites of respect were pointedly omitted in his burial, and the final words recorded of him are that he "departed without being desired."

An eloquent commentary upon the hopelessness and purposelessness of fighting against God and of laying out a course in opposition to Him.

Such a career can lead to nothing but final unhappiness and frustration. This is so well illustrated by this short life-sketch of Jehoram. A picture without a single bright or wholesome ray. A dismal, meaningless life, and nothing to mark his departure but relief.

Much of his wickedness is attributed to the influence of his wife. This woman, Athaliah, was the daughter of Jezebel, who exercised such malignant control over the weak Ahab—Jezebel, the symbol of wickedness and ungodliness. v. 6—

"And he walked in the way of the kings of Israel, like as did the house of Ahab: for he had Ahab's daughter to wife."

The influence of a woman over a man may be tremendous, either for good or evil. It is a power that is unique. Applied in the right direction it can work wonders of transformation, and the quiet, patient operation of this power for good may be many a woman's crown of salvation. But it is a 2-edged, sword, and Athaliah portrays the other edge. How important, then, is marriage "in the Lord"!

They were a well-matched pair—miserable, vicious and inhuman. Athaliah comes into unsavory prominence after her husband Jehoram's death—

"42 years old was Ahaziah when he began to reign, and he reigned 1 yr. in Jerusalem.

"His mother's name also was Athaliah the daughter (granddaughter) of Omri.

"He also walked in the ways of the house of Ahab: for his mother was his counselor to do wickedly"

(2 Chron. 22:2-3).

The miserable and untimely end of Jehoram had no sobering effect upon Athaliah. She had gone too far.

Again she appears in the story when Ahaziah is slain by Jehu, whom God raised up to execute judgment upon the wicked rulers of both Israel and Judah. Ahab, her father, has already been slain in battle at Ramoth-gilead, but the avenging hand of Jehu falls upon her son Ahaziah, her brother Jehoram the king of Israel, and her mother Jezebel. Then (22:10)—

"When Athaliah saw that her son was dead, she arose and destroyed all the seed royal of the house of Judah."

These would be her own children and grandchildren. There are no limits to a course of evil, once the restraints of justice and wisdom have been cast away.

For 6 years she ruled alone over the house of Judah, the sole survivor, with one exception, of her house and family. Then she comes before us for the last time.

One infant son of Ahaziah had been hidden from her murderous designs by Jehoiada the high priest. Feeling that the time is ripe to end Athaliah's wicked usurpation of David's throne, Jehoiada brings the child Joash out of concealment and crowns him king.

Athaliah, taken by surprise, rends her clothes and cries, "Treason!" But the uprising had been well-planned, and she finds herself betrayed. "Then":

"Jehoiada the priest brought out the captains that were set over the host, and said,

"Have her forth of the ranges: and whoso followeth her, let him be slain.

"So they laid hands on her, and when she was come to the entering of the horse gate by the king's house, they slew her there" (2 Chron. 23:14).

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Jehoram and Athaliah—unhappy, lamentable failures, and tragic ends. What would lead them to such a course of life, bringing neither happiness nor peace to themselves or others? Isaiah says (59:7-8)—

"Their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed innocent blood:

"Their thoughts are iniquity; wasting and destruction are in their paths. The way of peace **they know not.**"

The answer lies in the last phrase, "The way of peace they know not." Apart from the knowledge and application of the way of peace, such is all human kind. These extreme examples of viciousness and depravity confront us vividly with the statement of the Spirit through Jeremiah (17:9)—

"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?"

This pronouncement may seem rather harsh as we casually view the life of an orderly, "civilized" community. But in such a community there are many restraints that preserve a misleading surface appearance of tranquility.

Remove the artificial restraints of law, custom and the fear of consequences, and irritate the passions a little, and the animal that is in all human beings is immediately apparent, and once it has tasted blood it will go on to incredible excesses of violence and viciousness.

Human nature is basically selfish and vile: until this is realized and confessed, it cannot be combated or controlled. As long as it is glorified, defended or excused, or its evil effects minimized, there's little hope.

Paul fully realized the vital importance of an unreserved acceptance of this basic truth, and the first 3 chapters of his principal epistle, Romans, are devoted to relentlessly driving this point home, both to Jew and Gentile. His analysis of the flesh is piercing and unvarnished (Rom. 7:18)—

"For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing."

This is the Deceiver of whom he constantly warns us to beware. Of himself he said (1 Cor. 9:27)—

"I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest I should be a castaway."

If he hadn't kept it under, he would have been a castaway. The promise is always "To him that overcometh," and **him only**.

Paul did not plead weakness as an excuse for failure. He knew he was weak, and could of himself do nothing, but he knew too that adequate strength had been promised if his faith would reach out and take hold of it (Phil. 4:14)—

"I can do ALL things through Christ which strengthened me."

That was his secret, and that has always been the secret. The faithful men whom Paul lists in his epistle to the Hebrews were not supermen, but they knew the secret of POWER THROUGH FAITH. And so—

"Out of weakness they were made strong" (Heb. 11:34).

Isaiah records (40:29)—

"He giveth power to the faint; to them that have no might He increaseth strength."

David says (Psa. 105:4)—

"Seek the Lord and HIS strength."

"Blessed is the man whose strength is in Thee" (84:5).

"The God of Israel is He that giveth strength unto His people" (Psa. 68:35).

"In the day when I cried Thou answeredst me, and strengthened me with strength in my soul" (Psa. 138:3).

This task of subduing the flesh by the power of God is the principal task of life.

Preaching to others must rest upon the foundation of evidence within ourselves. Our primary witness for God is action, not proclamation. It is notable that Jesus chose a light rather than a trumpet as the symbol of our witnessing to the world—

"Ye are the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14).

"Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father in heaven"

(v. 16).

He is concerned, we notice, that men should see our good works, rather than that they should **hear** our good words. The latter is necessary, but its whole power for good depends upon the former.

These characters, Jehoram and Athaliah, are not recorded because they are exceptional, but because they are typical. They are ordinary human nature operating without restraint and in positions of power. They illustrate the results of the reactions of the flesh if allowed to dominate the life.

Little sins logically demand bigger ones. If the course of life is in the direction of the flesh, then the degree of evil is but a matter of opportunity and circumstance. If we deceive, we might just as well murder, and we would if we were not afraid of the consequences.

Unkindness, selfishness, inconsiderateness, ill-temper, irritableness are merely undeveloped buds on the selfsame tree that brings forth murders and adulteries and all manner of violence. The one points logically to the other, and only fear draws the line. Paul says:

"Look diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled; lest there be any fornicator or profane person as Esau who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright.

"For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears" (Heb. 12:15-17).

That is the point. If any "root of bitterness" be permitted to spring up and grow unchecked, we may, like Esau, come to a time when it is found to be too late to change, though we seek it carefully with tears.

We have several examples of God stepping in at a certain point and hardening a man's heart in a course of evil so that he can no longer return, and chastening him with a whip fabricated out of his own sins. Very often it is those forbidden morsels of meat which men toy with which are found, strangely but quite logically, to be made the very means of punishment.

Israel tempted God and murmured for meat, and they were surfeited with meat until it nauseated them and created a plague that slew them. And the name of the place was called, The Graves of Lust.

In all this, 2 lessons are clear. The 1st, that we are free agents, and masters of our own destiny—**up to a point**. And it is God Who determines that point. He sets the time when it is decreed: Too Late.

And the 2nd lesson: Sin is not a matter of degree but of principle. That is why God demands all or nothing. Not of course that He requires perfection, but He requires an uncompromising hostility and distrust of the flesh throughout.

If the principle is sacrificed in even the smallest matters, the whole position is given away. As James reminds us, He that gave the commandment against murder gave also the commandment against respect of persons. To condone any offense is to condone all.

Absolute perfection can never be humanly attained, but must always be aimed at. To make the standard any less is to destroy the standard altogether. To plead weakness is to give the lie to God, Who said, through Christ—

"MY STRENGTH IS SUFFICIENT FOR THEE."
—G.V.G.
