

## **FOUR PROMINENT PERSONAGES**

Our reading this morning (Ezek. 17) brings before us four personages prominent and important in their day, from whom we may learn something of valuable application to ourselves. In the first place, they have long ceased out of the land of the living. This may seem too common a circumstance to be commented upon. Perhaps so, but it is a great fact, nevertheless, of immense assistance to those in the land of the living who may be wise enough to realise it. For, were not these men very real in their day? Was not Nebuchadnezzar a mighty ruler, as picturesquely and impressively surrounded with the accessories of authority as the Emperor of Germany or Queen Victoria? Did he not enjoy the sweets of gratified ambition and the satisfaction of unchallenged supremacy with all the zest of any modern incumbent of imperialism? Lived he not an active, intelligent, consequential life in the field and in the metropolis? Did he not command homage and deference as royalty now does? Was his name not a power in the land of the living? Yes, Nebuchadnezzar was just as human and practical, and to himself real and precious, as any living soul now enjoying the breath of life. And Pharaoh, was he a whit behind him? Was he not Nebuchadnezzar's compeer and rival, as fervently interested in all human things as any man alive? The king of Judah, also, was a man, and an interested, anxious, scheming man, like all the other wearers of crowns. And where are they and all their surroundings, so important in their day? Mouldered into nameless dust. They are gone as completely as if they had never been. They were probably interred with pomp. The coffins containing their remains or the urns their dust, were doubtless of the most precious material, and placed in the securest and most lasting place of sepulture to be found: but where now the kingly sarcophagus, the lordly mausoleum? The very trace of them has vanished as completely as the footprint in the sand washed out by the advancing tide.

The fourth was a prophet of the Lord, of whose end we have no record. He may have died in peace and come to his grave with honour: but it is more likely, a great deal, that he shared the fate of the company to which he belonged, of whom it is testified that—

*“They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.”*

Whether or no, they are all gone. We look back to the moment when the words were written which we have read in their English translation this morning. At that moment, these four men were living characters on the stage of action; now, they are not, except in the futurity written for them in the book of God by the parts they severally performed.

The lesson of this part of the case is obvious. We are assembled this morning in the apparent realities of present conscious and intelligent life; and it seems to our senses as if the scene would never change, as if the life we have would never vanish, as if we must remain for ever. The contemplation of the past will help to correct this hallucination of the senses. We shall realise, as we grope in the tenantless shadows of a perished past that was as real in its day as the imperious present, that we too are flitting across the scene; that upon us also the light of life will go out, and our names disappear in the same awful vortex of time that has already drawn into its bosom of everlasting oblivion, countless myriads of names and renowns and greatnesses.

The realisation of this fact—that our life is but as a vapour that appeareth for a little while and then vanisheth away—would be altogether a depressing fact if there were no other view to be taken. If we could only look back upon a dark devouring past—if we could not also look forward unto those “ages to come” of which the Spirit of God speaks by Paul, in which God will “show the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus”—ages of glory and light and joy and life everlasting, there would be no wisdom or advantage in reflecting on our situation. Rather would it be expedient to stifle thought and give strong drink to him that is ready to perish:

*“Let him drink, and forget his misery.”*

But the case stands not thus. Despair is not written on the face of the universe. Hope is the language of heaven and earth as we see them, even if we were unable in the absence of the Father's voice to interpret their speech. “Good hope through grace,” is the proclamation of the gospel. Eternal wisdom which brings this good tidings asks us to number and see the present days of our vanity that we may

rightly estimate and redeem them, and not waste and ruin them by walking as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their minds, having the understanding darkened. In this relation it is wise and wholesome to remember, as we contemplate the generations of the dead, that our days upon earth are as a shadow; that there is none abiding; that every man walketh in a vain show, and that every man at his best estate is altogether vanity.

It is well also to recollect that though in themselves of very little value, our mortal days are of immense consequence as determining the cast of the future. Ezekiel, who, buried with whatever dishonour, will stand in glorious acceptance among the chosen of the Lord in the day of Christ's manifestation upon earth, will occupy that position as the result of the mortal history enacted 2,400 years ago. But for Ezekiel in suffering there would be no Ezekiel in exaltation. Our present life is of unspeakable importance viewed in this light. The idea is brought home to us in the other part of our reading, where Jesus tells us that in the day of the kingdom, many will come "*from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God.*" These "*many*" coming there from all points of the compass, are comprehensive of the selection from among "*all nations,*" which it was divinely purposed to effect by the testimony apostolically delivered to them (Luke 24:47; Acts 15:14). They therefore comprehend any in Birmingham and elsewhere who may become fitted by the word of truth to be numbered among them. At the joyful time of their muster, there are others to whom a different portion is assigned; whom the Lord refuses to acknowledge, and who depart from his presence "*in weeping and gnashing of teeth when they see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and they themselves thrust out.*" Now, on what principle is it, that some are rejected while others are accepted? This is most important to realise, for it is the apprehension and effectuation of this principle now that lays the foundation for the "*exceeding joy*" that waits on the presence of our Lord Jesus at his coming. The principle is stated with a plainness and simplicity that come down to the understanding of the least capable. Jesus tells us that in that day he will say to the rejected,

*"I know you not whence ye are; depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity."*

Hence the ground of rejection is the pursuance of a certain line of action in the present time, while we are, so to speak, left to ourselves. A certain line of action the Lord considers iniquitous; of a certain other line of action he will say, "*Well done.*" How important to know the one and the other. There is forgiveness with God, but it is for those who "*confess their sins and forsake them*" (Prov. 28:13); who "*repent*" in this scriptural sense (Mark 6:12), who let the time past of their lives suffice to have wrought the will of the Gentiles (1 Pet. 4:3), and who now seek to be followers of God as dear children, walking in love (Eph. 5:1-2), and who thus doing His commandments, acquire a right to eat of the tree of life, and to enter through the gates into the city (Rev. 22:14). There is a poor prospect for those who cannot truthfully say more than the national liturgy makes the national sinners dolefully mumble every Sunday: "*We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.*" The people seem to think that a confession of this sort is the very pinnacle of piety. They justify it by reference to the publican of the parable who, standing afar off, looking toward the temple, besought mercy to himself as a sinner, and of whom Christ declared that he went down to his house justified rather than the complacent Pharisee who was able to recount his righteous deeds. But this is a misapplication of truth. It is quite true that the ground of the justification or forgiveness of a sinner to whom the gospel comes is the confession of his unworthy history, and the hearty recognition of the entire absence of any ground of recommendation to God; but the case is altered when in the waters of baptism, he becomes washed and sanctified and cleansed from all his past sins. He is no longer a sinner laden with his sins: he is a saint or consecrated one, who having become dead to sin, in his baptismal participation in the death of Christ, no longer continues therein. He no longer yields his members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin, but unto God, as a man alive from the dead, and his members as instruments of righteousness (Rom. 6:13). He no longer lives the rest of his time in the flesh to the lusts of men but to the will of God (1 Peter 4:2). He belongs to those who are sober, and hoping to the end for the salvation coming with Christ, as obedient children, not fashioning themselves according to the former lusts in their ignorance, but being holy in all manner of conversation, after the image of Him who hath called them (1:13-15). He is not without fault, but for this there is provision in the priesthood of Christ, who makes intercession for the saints, and obtains forgiveness for those who walk in the light (1 John 1:7; 2:1). A saint with forgiven faults and failings is a very different person from the incorrigible sinner of

the Prayer-book. Although he is commanded to say with his brethren, "*We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which it was our duty to do,*" still this speech is to come out of their mouth after he has "*done all those things that are commanded*" (Luke 17:10). Orthodox religion has enshrouded this feature in mist. It is most important to be emancipated from the misconception. The apostolic antidote is contained in the words,

*"If the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?"*  
(1 Pet. 4:18)

And again in such words as these:

*"Be not deceived: he that doeth righteousness is righteous"* (1 John 3:7).

*"Let no man deceive you with vain words; for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience. Be not ye therefore partakers with them"*

(Eph. 5:6).

These words point in the direction of a possible deception on the subject. It is a deception widely and perhaps unconsciously practised in the present day. The difference between righteousness and sin is either practically abolished by the vain thoughts and theories of men, or the necessity for righteousness is destroyed by false theologies which practically teach that salvation is independent of personal reformation, and more likely to be secured by remorseful guilt than a purified conscience. The truth is that—

*"Without faith it is impossible to please God"* (Heb. 11:6).

And it is another truth that Jesus is—

*"The author of eternal salvation to **them that obey him**"* (Heb. 5:9).

Consequently, those who are destitute of faith and obedience are without hope. Disobedience resulting from unbelief was the beginning of mischief with the Adamic race. Obedience resulting from faith is the road back to blessing opened through Christ. These declarations cannot be controverted however unpalatable they may be. They are the true sayings of God, as will be discovered in joy and anguish by different classes when the Lord stands in the earth to make visible the issues of the present probation.

If the salvation coming with Christ is for "*all them that obey him,*" it follows that he must have given them commandments to obey. It is so. In the last words of Christ to his apostles before his ascension, he said to them concerning the nations to whom their testimony was to be delivered,

*"Teach them to observe **all things whatsoever I have commanded you**"* (Matt. 28:20).

He emphatically predicates friendship on compliance with this, saying,

*"Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you"* (John 15:14).

John the beloved disciple speaks thus strongly on the point:

*"He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him"*

(1 John 2:4).

Here, then, is a rule by which we may try ourselves and judge ourselves; and by which also we may correctly estimate the pretensions of the great religious bodies of the world. They are loud, some of them, in their professions of his name; but where is the obedience? His institutions and precepts are disregarded, and the traditions of men, both in faith and practice, exalted to their place, as it was in Israel in the days of Jesus. Concerning ourselves, the rule is most important to apply; because obedience in many points is hard and bitter. Now is the day of our trial. When Christ arrives, the necessity for the commandments we now have will have passed for ever.

The advice most natural in the circumstances is the advice that Christ gives in connection with the very words that have engaged our thoughts:

*"Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many shall seek to enter in, and shall not be able."*

The original word is "agonise"—agonise to enter. This is stronger than strive. It expresses the highest degree of earnest endeavour. It is very different from Dr. Talmage's advice in a recent lecture, not to be in too great a hurry on the road to heaven for fear the boilers should burst. Dr. Talmage's doctrine is more agreeable to the natural man than Christ's: but Christ's is the true doctrine for all that: to seek FIRST the kingdom of God and His righteousness. After all the other things, he says, the Gentiles

seek. The brethren of Christ are not independent of the “*things*” the Gentiles seek; but their heavenly Father knows they have need of them, and will give them in needed measure. These are not the supreme object of their solicitude and endeavour, as it is with the Gentiles. The principles and the hope of their calling—worthless rubbish in the eyes of the unbelieving or the worldly—are with them of primary consequence, and will give shape and bent to their individual policy in all the paths of their meanwhile wandering feet.

God will help those whose affections are thus set on things above and not on things on the earth. That is, He will help them in attaining the object of their endeavour, as children of God. He may not help in the sense of prospering them in this present world: this might be help in the direction of destruction, though pleasant for the time being. He will help them in the sense of so manipulating the circumstances of their lives, that they will be guided and kept in the way that leads to life. This guidance may mean the actual permission of evil—nay the contrivance of affliction. This is taught in a variety of ways. The Psalmist teaches it in saying,

*“It is good for me that I have been afflicted . . . Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now I have kept thy word.”*

It is taught still more plainly in the words quoted by Paul:

*“Despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, neither be weary of his correction: for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth.”*

The lesson is taught in the parable of the fig tree, read this morning. “*Dung it and dress it, that it may bring forth fruit*” cannot mean anything else than that process of individual exercising in the ways of providence referred to by Jesus when he says:

*“Every branch in me that bringeth not forth good fruit, he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it that it may bring forth more fruit.”*

Let us take this consolation in all the dark and bitter hours of our present probation, that if we are intelligently exercised thereby, they are working out for us an eternal weight of joy unspeakable and full of glory.

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