

GOD REQUIRES THAT COVENANTS BE KEPT

We are here for purposes of memory, we know. How important is memory. Without memory no human being would be fit for the commonest relations to life. Suppose we were to forget who we are, where we belong to, what friends we have, what business we follow? There have been cases of that sort. They are not common, but they happen. I knew of a case when I was young, in which by some strange and sudden affliction of the brain, memory vanished in a night, and the person, otherwise apparently well, had to begin her lessons all over again. It is not memory of the common sort we are here to exercise, or at least not on common objects. It is memory concerning a long past, having a longer future which meet and blend in an invisible present, and all combined furnish strong and ennobling mental motive. Most men's minds and memories act on objects confined to the 70 years or so of natural life. They are indifferent to that which was before their day; doubtful of that which will come after; and insensible to present facts which they cannot see; such as the existence of God and Christ, and their views and purposes concerning human life and action. Mental action thus circumscribed is necessarily petty, and tends to check all noble development of the mind. The man whose eyes are open to the past, present and future, walks with a firmer and nobler tread, and is an unspeakably more precious person than those whose minds are walled in, as you might say, by the four walls of our three score and ten. Men whose discernments cannot go beyond the facts of the moment, and who have no faith, except in what they can handle, have hold of the short-lived and the transitory. You see how poor such a position is when it comes to an end; for come to an end it must. All must die in the ordinary course; and when a man is dead, how unimportant the affairs of his closed mortal life appear! They are important enough in their place, when subordinated to the views and demands of wisdom in other relations but how utterly worthless in the day of death if they have been lived for. This is the case with the majority, because their minds are not in touch with anything else. Their attention is confined to what they can see and hear and feel. If a man let nothing else into his mind than what he can see and hear and feel, he will necessarily be a fool, whatever his natural mental parts may be.

Our meeting this morning stands related to matters we can neither see, hear nor feel personally for the time being. Such is the fact with reference to what God has done and spoken in the past, and what He purposes to do in the future. We have not seen or heard for ourselves; but who will say we therefore place faith in a myth? Are things any the less real because they happened in time past? Shall we deny our own existence because the lives of our grandfathers, out of which our existence sprang, are closed and passed away? The fact of God having spoken and wrought in time past, is far more thoroughly authenticated to us than the fact that we have had ancestors; but the fact of God having spoken and wrought is evidenced by things visible before our very eyes, such as the existence and dispersion of the Jews, the ascendancy of Christ's name in the earth, and the currency and actual character of the Bible. No, we have not followed cunningly devised fables. We stand on demonstrable truth; and we are here for the purpose of refreshing memory concerning it. There is no better method of doing this than the plan we have of daily reading the Scriptures, and pondering the matters that may come before us in the use of this method in our public assemblies. Whatever is read is found on consideration to have a bearing in some way or other; for nothing was written by inspiration that had not some spiritual value.

"Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning."

There might not appear to be much for us in the chapter read for us this morning from Ezekiel 17—the political riddle of the two eagles. Let us see. The meaning of it is settled for us in verse 12. Babylon is the one eagle, Egypt the other. The vine, which was planted by the one

and which turned to the other, is the kingdom of Judah, which, after being overthrown by Babylon, was re-established by that power as a vassal kingdom in the hands of Zedekiah who took an oath of fealty to Nebuchadnezzar, and was, at the date of the prophecy, looking towards Egypt in hope of being able, with its help, to throw off the yoke of the king of Babylon. The point of the prophecy lies in the condemnation of the political perfidy of Zedekiah:

“Shall he prosper? Shall he escape that doeth such things? Shall he break the covenant and be delivered? As I live, saith the Lord God, surely in the place where the king (Nebuchadnezzar) dwelleth that made him king, whose oath he despised, and whose covenant he brake, even with him in the midst of Babylon, he shall die. Neither shall Pharaoh, with his mighty army and great company, make for him in the war—seeing he despised the oath by breaking the covenant, when lo! He had given his hand, and hath done all these things; he shall not escape.”

To see the precise bearing of this prophecy, we must have in mind the position of Ezekiel and his fellow captives in relation to Jerusalem, and the scornful men who supported Zedekiah in his breach of faith towards Nebuchadnezzar. Ezekiel and others had been removed from the Holy Land, and settled in the country of Babylon, “*by the river of Chebar*” at the time of the first deportation of captives by Nebuchadnezzar, years before the overthrow of the kingdom of Judah. Those who remained behind gloried against those who had been taken away, as if those who had been taken captive must have been “*sinnners above all men*,” and those who were left behind were favourites with God. The matter is referred to thus in Ezekiel 11:15,

“Son of man, thy brethren, even thy brethren, the men of thy kindred, and all the house of Israel wholly, are they unto whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said, Get you far from the Lord; unto us is this land given in possession.”

The appearance of things seemed to favour the complacent view entertained by the inhabitants of Jerusalem. The Eliphazes always go by appearances and shake their heads over the misfortunes of the Jobs. But the appearance is generally contrary to the fact. It was so in this case. God expressly informed Jeremiah (Ch. 24:5) that those who had been removed to Babylon were the good part of the community, and had been sent to Babylon “*for their good*,” while those who had been left behind, in apparent prosperity in Jerusalem, were only comparable to the refuse of fruit which had been picked, and that they were left there for calamity which would be “*for their hurt*.” They would, in fact, be given over to destruction, while those who were in Babylon, against whom they harboured jealous and spiteful thoughts, would be divinely visited after a while, and brought back in blessing (see Jer. 29:4-14; Ezek. 11:15-16). The riddle of the two eagles had a bearing on this situation. It was an intimation that the intrigues in which Jerusalem, under the leadership of Zedekiah, was engaged, would end in calamity for them all (Ezek. 11:20-21: 17), and that in fact, the scornful speeches in which that community were indulging would be silenced in desolation and death. But the noticeable feature in the prophecy is the side light it sheds upon all kinds of covenant obligations entered into by men as they are estimated from the divine point of view. Zedekiah had “*given his hand*” to be a faithful vassal to Babylon. Now, according to human principles it would be considered perfectly legitimate and even praiseworthy, to break away from a bargain of this sort. In this particular case, there would not be lacking apparently strong arguments in its favour. Here was Babylon, a pagan power, imposing its yoke on Judah, a divine people; could it possibly be wrong to throw it off by any means available? Nay, must it not necessarily be a righteous thing to regain independence for Jerusalem on the first opportunity? Such is the way human courtiers would have whitewashed Zedekiah’s procedure. But here is the divine view in a directly opposite direction.

“Shall he prosper? Shall he escape that doeth such things? Shall he break the covenant and be delivered?”

We must be blind if we do not see a lesson for ourselves here. It is the lesson of Psalm 15—

“Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? . . . He that sweareth to his own hurt and changeth not.”

Covenant keeping is one of the things God requires in us. He is a covenant-keeping God, and He expects all His children to be the same. They are not His children if they depart from their pledged word to escape an inconvenience. This is the way of the world; they tell the truth and stick to their promises as long as it is to their interest, but as soon as the current sets the other way, their words are flung to the wind. Their word is not their bond. This was Zedekiah’s case, and nothing but wrath and ruin came of it, and it will not end differently in any case, though for a while the way of the wicked may prosper. How detestable in this connection does the doctrine of the Jesuits appear which became almost a public law of Europe at one time, that promises made to heretics were not binding. Had there been any Jesuits in Jerusalem, no doubt they would have eased Zedekiah’s conscience about the treaty with Nebuchadnezzar. We see how contrary the divine law is to all human theories on this point; and the divine law will judge us at last, and not human traditions. It is worth noticing that submission to an enemy sometimes becomes a duty as in the case before us. Zedekiah had *“given his hand”*—had entered into a covenant. He was bound on that head to be faithful to Nebuchadnezzar though Nebuchadnezzar was an enemy. The stringency of the obligation as recognised from a divine point of view is seen from the fact of God calling the covenant in that case,

“His covenant”—“My covenant that he hath broken, Mine oath that he hath despised.”

Then Nebuchadnezzar’s getting the upper hand was God’s arrangement; though Nebuchadnezzar was unaware of it. Nebuchadnezzar was *“His servant”* (Jer. 25:9). He worked for God though he did not know it (Ezek. 29:20; Isa. 10:7, 12, 15), and it was the duty of Zedekiah to submit to the servant of God. From this we clearly get a principle of action of practical value to us now. God rules in the kingdoms of men for His own ultimate ends, and it is our duty to submit to the powers that be so long as He tolerates them. So Paul teaches (Rom. 13:1, 7; Titus 3:1). The doctrine requires but this qualification, that our submission to the powers that be respectfully ends when they require us to disobey God. This is exemplified in the case of the Apostles (Acts 4:19, 5:29), and it is according to reason. Therefore, when we are called upon by the institutions of our country to act as if we were *“of the world,”* which Jesus says we are not; when we are called upon to act as constables, to take part in politics, or to serve in the army, we are bound to fall back upon the commandments of Christ, and to say—

“We ought to obey God rather than men.”

In the parable of the two eagles, the tributary Kingdom of Judah is represented by a cedar of Lebanon, which the Babylonian eagle would pull up by the roots and leave to wither. There is a very interesting statement in the chapter concerning this plucked up cedar, in which we recognise the gospel of the Kingdom.

“I will take of the highest branch of the cedar, and will set it; I will crop off the top of his young twigs a tender one, and will plant it upon a high mountain and eminent. In the mountain of the height of Israel will I plant it, and it shall bring forth boughs and bear fruit, and be a goodly cedar; and under it shall all fowl of every wing; in the shadow of the branches thereof shall they dwell.”

The fulfilment on both points has been quite remarkable. The Israelitish tree was *“plucked up by the roots”* effectually, first by Nebuchadnezzar, and afterwards by Titus. But the stock has

not perished. Israel's race is extant in the earth, where the Babylonian tree has been extinct for ages. But it is more particularly in the case of the young twig cropped off, that the prophecy has received its most signal and most important fulfilment. It was taken off "*the highest branch*." The highest branch of a political tree is the royal family. From this highest branch, "*the house of David*" has the young twig been plucked, and the plucking has been God's own act.

"He hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David, as He spake by the mouth of His holy prophets which have been since the world began."

So spake Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist in view of the birth of Christ. In this birth and what it led to, we have the cropping of the young twig illustrated. It was due to the divine interference. It was due to the action of the Spirit of God on a virgin of the house and lineage of David. By this a young twig was cropped off, from which the Israelitish tree will again sprout at the right moment to the filling of the world. Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of David, "*the man whose name is the Branch—the Branch of David*," the "*Branch of Righteousness*," has been plucked off the Israelitish tree; he has now nothing in common with it except historic extraction. He was finally broken off in death, and glorified and exalted to the Father's right hand, reserved against the day of the planting upon the mountain of the height of Israel, when it will become a great tree affording refuge to all creatures—a figure of the Kingdom of God. By a happy coincidence we have this shown to us in the New Testament portion of our reading (Luke 13:18).

"Unto what is the Kingdom of God like? And whereunto shall I resemble it? It is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and cast into his garden; and it grew and waxed a great tree, and the fowls of the air lodged in the branches of it."

This is the day we are looking for. We look eastward to "*the mountain of the height of Israel*" and see little at present but emptiness and desolation. Those who judge by appearances would say there will never be anything else. Those who believe in "*the sure word of prophecy*" are certain of the reverse. The Word of God cannot fail. He who is "*the root and offspring (branch or twig) of David*" will certainly perform his word and "*come suddenly*" and show us the high cedar fair and flourishing to the ends of the earth. In that day, songs of joy will be sung in the land of Judah (Isa. 26:1). Happy will it be for us, if we are able to say:

"Lo, this is our God, we have waited for Him, we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation."

Taken from: - "Seasons of Comfort" Vol. 2

Pages 169-174

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