

GOD “WILL AVENGE” GENTILE DISOBEDIENCE

At the beginning of Ezekiel's ministry, he was called on to eat a symbolic roll, representative of the message to Israel with which he was entrusted. The contents of this roll you may remember were described as “*lamentation and mourning and woe.*” The sequel of Ezekiel's prophecy is in complete accord with this description of its character. It is, with slight intermissions here and there, a continual exhibition of coming calamity because of iniquity. In this, Ezekiel is no exception to the other prophets. They are all of them deeply tinged and charged with this element which is so repugnant to human feeling. They are all of them burdened with wrath and evil—all of them full of deprecation and condemnation of Israel to whom they were addressed. This is a fact worth pondering. How comes this to be the case? Why should the Bible differ from all other books in this? The public writers of other nations—of whatever age or country—indulge in terms of patriotic complacency and congratulation. They praise the race and the land to which they belong, whether it be Greek or Roman, British or French, German or American. You do not find a Frenchman running down the French, nor a Briton disparaging the English; nor do you even find a Jew lowering the race of Israel. The Jews are like man universally. They boast of their stock, and will even give an egotistic interpretation to their dispersion. They will tell you that God scattered them that they might be made a blessing to the world—that the excellence of Israel might not be confined to a narrow country like Palestine!

Why do the prophets differ from the Jews and universal man in this one? One reason we know: that, in writing these Scriptures, they wrote not according to their own, but according to divine impulse. As Peter says:

“Prophecy came not in old time by the will of man, but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.”

This is a great difference, and a sufficient explanation of the literary and moral difference between the Scriptures of the prophets and the writings of merely natural writers of all ages. But why should the fact of the Spirit of God being in a man give a morose turn to his communications? Why should not the Spirit of God express itself in lightsome, good-natured, amiable terms? There is a reason. The messages of the prophets came in the main because Israel, to whom they were delivered, had set God aside.

“They have estranged themselves from Me: they have not hearkened to My commandments.”

This is God's own explanation. But, again a question: why should this be a reason? Why should not man be at liberty to choose his own way, and follow his own bent? Why should his doing so be a cause of divine anger? The answer is at once of a boundless depth and of Sunday school simplicity. God has made all things for Himself, and especially man. The earth is not for man, except man fulfil the end for which God placed him on it, which was that he might glorify God and taste the true sweetness of his own nature in rendering to Him the submission of a loving obedience and the homage of a sincere worship. If we ask why should God make His glory the governing consideration in the regulation of human destiny, even to this, reason has a clear answer. God is the essence of all things: He is the fountain of life, the beginning of being, the means of universal subsistence. Any life we now have is His and by His permission. Any life we hope to have in the resurrection state is His and by His permission. Without Him, there can be no life and no anything. God only has life and wisdom and power in Himself. All substance, all organization, all beauty, all excellence of adaption, whether in the constitution of small objects like plants and animals, or in the arrangement of the gigantic bodies and movements of the universe, are due to Him, and of Him, and in Him. It is, therefore, most reasonable that His will should be law. What man who had laid out a fine estate and built a palace on it and filled it with adjacent houses for dependents to live near by his favour, would not desire his will to be the law of the place? What reasonable tenant would demur? And if it would be considered reasonable that a man's will should be law in such a case, though the man made not the ground, nor the stone, nor the people invited to live near him, how much more reasonable is it that God's will should be law, who has made heaven and earth, and sustains all things and creatures in being by His power?

This being so, look at the circumstances evoking the condemnation of the prophets. Israel had set aside His Law. They had done so from the beginning. It was of the Lord's mercy they were allowed to live at all. God Himself sets the case before them in yesterday's reading. He presents to them their history as it appeared to Him, which is a Jewish history of a very different complexion from that written by Jew or Gentile in our days. He told them that from the beginning they had gone astray.

"This city hath been to me a provocation of Mine anger from the day that they built it."

Even before Jerusalem's history began, they angered Him by their continual non-compliance with His revealed requirements. *"While ye were yet in Egypt,"* he says, in effect, in the chapter we had yesterday (20), *"I was minded to destroy you for your stubborn rejection of My ways: but I refrained for My name's sake"* (not for your righteousness), as even Moses told them (Deut. 9:5). *"After you came out of Egypt,"* God proceeds to say, *"I would have destroyed you in the wilderness for your perpetual refusal to walk in My law. I did destroy a generation of you when ye refused to go up into the land, and after 40 years your children went in. And I said to the children, Be not like your fathers, but hearken to My law and walk in My commandments. But the children were no better than the fathers, and turned aside to the ways and the gods of the heathen round about them. And thus it has been with you time after time till the present day. And now you wish to enquire of me? I will not be enquired of by you. I will number you to the slaughter, and give you over to the sword. The land shall be cleared of its inhabitants and shall lie desolate."* And so it came to pass.

There is an application of all this which is not apparent at first, but becomes very apparent on second thoughts, and is not far-fetched at all, but the manifest truth. All these things, Paul says, happened to Israel *"for ensample,"* and were *"written for our admonition."* Israel for a time is cast off, and now the Gentiles have their turn. They have diverged as constantly from the divine law as Israel did. Yet, like Israel, they are on very good terms with themselves, and if we were to judge by appearances, we should think as they think. But if we could hear their history portrayed by a divine hand, as Israel's was, we should see a very different picture from that exhibited in the thousand-voiced histories that pout from the press at the present time. Nay, we do not need to wait for such a portrayal: we have it in the precepts of what they ought to be. God had patience a long time with Israel, so much so that they misunderstood it, and concluded that God took no notice, and was unconcerned at what was passing in their midst (Ezek. 8:12). And so it is with the Gentiles. They have been so long left to themselves that God has become mythical with them; His deeds in past times a legend: His judicial ways a smile. They practically say, and often say it in very words, *"God is very negligent of us if there be a God."* The appearance of things seems to confirm their view. Day slips away after day without any visible indication that God takes any notice, or regards with any displeasure the universal dishonour of His name, and setting at naught of His commandments. Let us not be misled by appearances. It is only a repetition of what happened in Israel's days. God's own history of their course shows that His anger was burning slowly against them all the thousand years they were in the land, notwithstanding that He allowed them to enjoy His bounty, and loaded them with His goodness. He was not inattentive, but He was long suffering. He keeps not His anger for ever, yet after so much forbearance, the suppressed flame bursts forth and devours all before it. Read the history of the last Jewish war—the war of Rome against Jerusalem—the invasion of the Holy Land in the first century under Vespasian and Titus. Get a full view of the devastations, and the horrors, and the slaughters, and the ruin that overwhelmed the land. God in His providence has given us the opportunity in the narrative of an eye-witness and performer—Josephus. We ought to read this once a year. It enables us to see and to feel what the outburst of a long restrained divine anger means. And it qualifies us to read aright our own times. On the surface *"all things continue as they were from the beginning."* Men with impunity follow their own God-disregarding ways, think their own proud thoughts, and speak their own masterful and irreverent words. It seems not to matter whether a man pray or blaspheme. Let us not be misled by appearances. We have God's own Word about this as well as about Israel.

"The indignation of the Lord is upon all nations, and His fury upon all their armies."

"The world lieth in wickedness."

"He is angry with the wicked every day."

His anger is destined to come to a terrible head in the last days of the Gentile dispensation. In a figurative sense, we may say the storm is on its way. Thus it is written,

"The whirlwind of the Lord goeth forth with fury—a continuing whirlwind; it shall fall with pain upon the head of the wicked. The fierce anger of the Lord shall not return until He have done it, and until He have performed the intents of His heart: in the latter days, Ye shall consider it!" —

In the latter days, Ye shall consider it!! It will be considered in the latter days, because in these days it will be manifest, as it is written,

"At that time (in "the time of the end," when the northern hosts overrun the Holy Land and encounter an unexpected and unknown antagonist in the Prince that standeth for the children of Daniel's people, Dan. 11:40; 12:1) . . . there shall be a time of trouble such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time."

Or as it is in the symbolic language of the Apocalypse.

"Voices and thunders and lightnings, and a great earthquake such as was not since men were upon the earth, so mighty an earthquake and so great" (16:18)—"the nations angry, Thy wrath come, and the time of the dead" (11:18).

Consequently, we walk not wisely unless we walk in full view of what is impending. We are walking on the crust of a slumbering volcano. The world is on the verge of a time of devastating judgment. Look abroad and see the tokens of its approach. See the tempestuous aspect of human affairs everywhere. The Irish question presses on English people as a nightmare, but this is nothing compared with the stormy blackness gathering on the continent. What is the meaning of all the nations of civilisation straining their utmost resources to get into fighting readiness and staggering under the weight of their preparations? Is it not exactly what was spoken of long ago:

"Prepare war: wake up the mighty men . . . gather the kings of the earth and the whole world to the war of the great day of God Almighty?" (Behold I come as a thief).

Men of a certain kind of education laugh it all off. But the gathering elements of calamity will not be laughed away, but go on gathering from year to year. They will at last reach the bursting point, and then what desolations will be wrought in all the earth, as saith David by the Spirit in Psalm 46.

"Be wise now therefore, O ye kings," saith the same Spirit in another Psalm. If kings in general are so exhorted, how much more is the exhortation addressed to God's own kings and priests who are destined to be manifested in the heart of the coming storm, and to reign in peace when its fury has wrecked all human thrones and caused the glory of the world to pass away. *"Be wise."* Walk in patience, in faithfulness, in obedience, in fear. Be sober. Refuse the moral inebriation which fills all hearts with frivolity and heedlessness. Let the time past of our lives suffice to have wrought the will of the Gentiles. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. What says he by our reading this morning?

"Men ought always to pray and not to faint."

Prayer and frivolity are mutually exclusive conditions. Trouble is good in helping us to take refuge in the one and abandon the other. It is as an antidote to fainting—mental fainting—that Jesus prescribes it. What he means he exactly illustrates. He speaks of a widow woman who wearied out an unjust judge by her importunity and got him to attend to her to get rid of her. Jesus does not suggest that such a principle is at work with regard to God, but rather argues that if a human judge can be moved by importunity, how much more the unerring judge of heaven and earth?

"Shall not God avenge His own elect that cry day and night unto Him, though He bear long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily."

Cry unto God in your trouble *"day and night."* It is what Jesus recommends. God will at last avenge—though he bear long and appears to take no notice of your words.

"He will avenge."

Mark the words. He does not propose the everlasting triumph of injustice. Are you defrauded, injured, defamed? Bear it. God bears.

"He will avenge."

"Avenge not yourselves."

If you avenge yourselves, you leave Him nothing to do. If you leave it to Him, He will do it thoroughly and sweetly. Christ's promise to the Philadelphian brethren is an indication.

“I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie—behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee.”

This was written for all who have ears to hear, as the postscript to the message shows.

“He that hath ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the Ecclesias.”

Therefore, it is an assurance to every man that if he will only wait God’s time, he will not be put to shame at last, but will be vindicated in the most glorious style. Only we must wait. We must take it patiently, if we do well and suffer for it. We must not render evil for evil, and railing for railing, but contrariwise, blessing, doing good to them that hate us, as opportunity may serve, praying for them that despitefully use and afflict us. All this is commanded; and it is only the obedient that will be divinely befriended in the day of recompense, whose shadow is already over the world, and whose advent will shortly be the sudden fact of the hour.

There is a world of meaning in James’ words,

“Be patient, brethren; for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh.”

The kind of patience that is meant is not the mere sluggish passivity of a creature of dull feeling. Such was not the patience of Jesus and the prophets. They were all men of the keenest feeling. The patience that is acceptable is defined as a *“patient continuance in well-doing;”* a quiet, persistent, inextinguishable industry in the keeping of the commandments of God (for this, and this only, is the standard of acceptable well-doing). It may be hard work for flesh and blood for the time being; but the hardest of work can be done when there is a good reason. We have the best of all reasons in this case. The present will certainly pass away; the future of God’s purpose will certainly come. His judgment will be poured out; His Kingdom will be established; His chosen, though dissolved in dust for ages, like Abraham, will stand before Him *“with exceeding joy”* as if at the end of a single night’s refreshing sleep. Then shall the righteous be glad and all the upright in heart shall glory. They will no longer be checked and restrained and mortified by the unreflecting, unrighteous deeds of a godless generation; and no longer burdened to the earth by the weakness of a sin-clogged and mortal nature. On the contrary, they will be refreshed and gladdened by wisdom and righteousness and praise on the right hand and on the left. They will be joyfully established in the presence of the righteous everywhere in the strength and freedom of the Spirit-nature. *“Children of the day,”* to them the day will have come at last, when the Sun from the unclouded azure of the dawn will pour his bountiful and healing beams over the land and ocean, filling the earth with life and praise. In the prospect of this, may we not say with Paul,

“The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”

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Pages 306-312

By Bro. Robert Roberts