

SUNDAY MORNING NO. 149

THE EXAMPLE OF THE PROPHETS

You may remember that James has said,

“Take my brethren, the prophets, for an example of suffering affliction and of patience.”

Nothing will more thoroughly nerve us to sustain the position which the truth calls upon us to occupy than to look at the prophets and consider their case. Our position, we know, is one of isolation in society, and worse, —antagonism. The truth puts us at war with all the world. We are compelled to maintain that the world is away from God, both in its theological conceptions and its practical precepts and doings; and we are obliged to act out this conviction, in making no friendship with the world, and observing an attitude of separation which breeds enmity and leads to the “affliction” which calls greatly for patience.

Now, it is not in flesh and blood to maintain this attitude from year to year without some sustaining power. This sustaining power comes from various sources. One of its sources is the contemplation of the fact that the prophets in their day sustained a similar attitude. We may fail to get the full strength of this fact into our minds from a wrong impression concerning the prophets. We are liable to think of them as men who found their part very easy to perform: men who by reason of inspiration and divine help, had no heart-failings, no distress, no inclination to cease their testimony and fall in with what was going on around them.

James’ appeal to them strikes at the root of this fallacy. They were men who suffered “affliction”; men who had to exercise “patience.” They were men, as he said, concerning Elijah, “subject to like passions as we are”; men who, as in the case of Jeremiah, bemoaned the day of their birth as an evil day for them (Jer. 20:14-18); men whose days were days of “labour and sorrow,” and days “consumed with shame,” and who were tempted in consequence to suspend their testimony for Yahweh’s name (verses 8-9). These facts enable us the more easily to sustain a similar experience in our day and generation. Nothing is more trying than to sustain a single-handed conflict with the entire community; nothing more contrary to natural feelings, than to have to play the part of Jeremiah and Ezekiel: saying things are wrong: contending for the things that are right: and speaking of judgment to come. It was the part all the prophets had to take: it was this that made them so unpopular that almost without exception, their lives were taken away.

Look at the case of Ezekiel before us in today’s reading. He was not a resident in the Holy Land, but one of a band of captives removed from Jerusalem in the earliest visits of the Babylonian army, and settled “by the river of Chebar.” Now, we would have imagined that, if ever there were circumstances when Israel would be pliant and submissive and obedient, it would be when captivity had taken them away in fulfilment of the oft-repeated warnings of the prophets. Instead of that, here is Ezekiel informed that his dwelling was “in the midst of a rebellious house, who had eyes to see but saw not, and ears to hear but heard not.”

“All the house of Israel are impudent and hard-hearted.”

He was told to go to them nevertheless:

“Speak my words unto them . . . whether they will hear or whether they will forbear.”

More than this, he was told his labours would be useless:

“The house of Israel will not hearken unto thee: for they will not hearken unto me.”

Here was a very discouraging prospect—a very bootless work. But he was told to brace himself up to it:

“Be not afraid of them, neither be afraid of their words, though briars and thorns be with thee, and thou dost dwell among scorpions: be not afraid of their words, nor be dismayed at their looks, though they be a rebellious house. And thou shalt speak my words unto them, whether they will hear or whether they will forbear, for they are most rebellious.”

What was the nature of the “words” he was to speak to so little purpose among such impervious listeners? This is indicated in the command he immediately received:

“Be not thou rebellious . . . open thy mouth and eat that I give thee.”

And a roll, with certain contents, was given him to eat. The eating was, of course, a symbolical performance. It was one of “*the similitudes*” which God says by Hosea (12:10), He “*used by the ministry of the prophets.*” We all know what is the meaning of a man eating a book. It is a common figure even in our colourless days, for a man to “devour a book:” it is to take it in—to assimilate it, so that a man becomes a living transcript of its contents. This was the significance of the invitation to Ezekiel to eat the roll sent him:

“All my words that I shall speak unto thee, receive in thine heart, and hear with thine ears.”

What then were the contents of this roll?

“There was written therein lamentations and mourning and woe.” (2:10.)

What a lugubrious man must a man have been considered who became a walking volume of “*lamentations and mourning and woe!*”

We now come to the application. It may be said there is no prophet now; true: but there is the prophecy delivered by the prophets, and the testimony delivered by the apostles. These have been written and preserved and are extant. What have they been preserved for? Merely as a literary curiosity? We have learnt better than that. What was “*written aforetime*” has been written, that it may be read and known and believed, and testified by the believers thereof in all ages. The roll has been handed down the ages, to be eaten by the brethren of Ezekiel. There are no prophets now, but there are sons and daughters of God, who become the brethren of the prophets. If there are no sons and daughters of God now, then there are no men and women upon earth now that will be saved. How should you like to maintain that there are no heirs of salvation in our generation? If you are not prepared to maintain this, then open your eyes and hearts to what comes with the contrary proposition. If there are heirs of salvation now, there are sons and daughters now, and if sons and daughters, then brethren and sisters of the prophets, whose mission it is to continue the work of the prophets in re-echoing the Word delivered by their mouths.

This is high ground. It is Bible ground. It is ground not taken in the dead religious systems around us. According to these systems, we are so many immortal souls going down to perdition, to whose rescue the work of salvation is directed. Allow yourselves to be saved from hell, and you are supposed to have done all that the situation calls for. But this is not a Scriptural representation of matters at all. It is the representation we have all been acquainted with from the cradle. We are in danger of remaining infected with this beggarly conception. We may easily fail to rise to the standard of the high calling in Christ Jesus, proclaimed by the apostles. God called men by the apostles to be saints—(sanctified separated ones); lovers and servants of the Man of Nazareth (to the degree of hating their own lives and rating earthly ties at a low rate), to be brethren of Christ, sustaining the position he sustained, living for the objects he lived for, promoting with affectionate enthusiasm the interests that were dear to him; and we know his testimony that he was not of this world, and that his meat and his drink were to do the Father’s will in the midst of a world that knew the Father not. God called men and women in the first century to be His sons and daughters—a peculiar people, purified from all iniquity, **zealous of good works**, who should find delight in showing forth the praises of Him who had called them out of darkness into His marvellous light. What if the modern world shows no counterpart to this? What if the dead-weight of the natural mind, “soddened” and brutalised in the polluted waters of human life that surge in melancholy unrest over the face of the earth, oppose an impassive obstruction to the development of the New Man of the Spirit? Shall we abandon the apostolic ideal because the carnal mind is in the ascendant? Shall we shut our eyes to the glories of the Spirit’s teaching because man has everywhere shut the ear to the voice of God? Shall we turn away from Christ because all men forsake Him? Shall we refuse eternal life because there are few that be saved? Reason has but one answer:

“Lord we will go with thee to prison and to death.”

The voice that would prescribe a contrary course, —the friendly voice would lure us from the narrow way on grounds of self-interest, the voice that would say “Have pity on thyself, or have pity on wife and children” is the devil’s voice in whatever tones it may be uttered; whether it come from the mouth of a Peter or the throat of modern Gentile polish; and it is to be met inflexibly as Jesus met it.

“Get thee behind me, Satan; thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.”

If there are men in our generation that are to be saved, there are men in whom the apostolic ideal will be realised; for any other ideal is the invention of man, which God will not recognise. In this apostolic ideal, accepted believers are sons of God and brethren of the apostles and the prophets, whose brotherhood is seen here that they are **interested in the things that interested prophets and apostles, and in love with the things that engaged their affections.** What if modern believers have not received a revelation direct from God to them: do they not believe and rejoice in the revelation that has been made to apostles and prophets? If they had lived in the same age and in the same town with a prophet or apostle, would they not have stood by the prophet or apostle, and heartily repeated and re-echoed the message that had come from God to them? When God sent a message by a prophet or apostle, it was not for the private behoof of the prophet or apostle; it was sent to be testified to those for whose sake it had come: and it was as much the business of the prophet's believing neighbour to catch up and speak of the message that had come as the prophet's own business. Even of the false prophets, God himself said that although he had not sent them, they would have done well to Israel if they had caused them to hear the words that had actually come from him by the true prophets. (Jer. 23:21-22.)

Here we are, then, with a message from God in our hands. The message written in the Bible has got into our heads and hearts. What is the difference between us and the prophets but this, that they received the knowledge of the message direct by the Spirit, and we receive it indirectly from the words which the Spirit dictated to them as the form of its communication? What they said is just as true coming out of our lips as out of theirs. It is just as true today, and uttered in this hall, as it was when written by Moses on parchment over 3,300 years ago, that God will bless all families in Abraham and his seed. It is just as true declared by us as declared by David, that in death there is no remembrance: by Solomon, that the dead know not anything: by Isaiah, that Christ shall reign in righteousness, on the throne of David and his kingdom: by Jeremiah, that God who scattered Israel will gather them: by Ezekiel, that God will bring the nations against his land, execute His judgment upon them, and set His glory among the heathen in the midst of Israel established under one king, king to them all.

It is just as true declared by us, as when announced by Daniel in the court of Nebuchadnezzar, that the God of heaven shall set up a kingdom which shall never perish, and which shall break in pieces all other kingdoms; or as declared by Jesus, that—

“The Son of Man shall come in his glory and all the holy angels with him, and then shall he reward every man according to his works;”

Or as stated by Paul, that—

“The Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, taking vengeance on them that know not God, and obey not the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

What we have to do is to recognise the position, and to make use of the privilege that comes to us with a knowledge of the glorious truth that has been made known to the house of Israel. Let us not give in to the spirit that is all abroad. Let us not say, it is none of our business. Let us not say, *“We are our own: who is the lord over us?”* Let us not be like the Gentiles who are wholly absorbed in the questions, *“What shall we eat? What shall we drink? Wherewithal shall we be clothed?”* Let us not be like the foolish people who disregarded the warning voice of Noah, and gave themselves up to eating, and drinking, and marrying, and giving in marriage, heeding not till the flood came and took them all away. Let us accept our position as the brethren of the prophets: the brethren of Christ who was greater than all the prophets. Let us act the part of those who hope to sit down with all the prophets in the kingdom of God with Christ at their head. Jesus says that many from the east, the west, the north and south will do this. Why not we? If we suffer with them, we shall reign.

We suffer with them when we identify ourselves with their testimony in an active way. We are called doleful people. We cannot be more doleful in our matter than a prophet who has eaten a roll *“written within and without, with lamentation and mourning and woe.”* If we are doleful, it is because we, too, have eaten this roll in eating the words of the prophets, as saith Jeremiah.

“Thy words were found and I did eat them.” (Jer. 15:16.)

Not only Ezekiel, but John, who described himself as *“our brother and companion in tribulation”* (Rev. 1:9) was called upon to eat a roll. (Rev. 10:8-11.) This is the figure in which we are all

involved. We have eaten the roll of "*lamentation and mourning and woe*" in having received the testimony of God's coming judgments upon mankind because of their sin.

If we are doleful, the cause lies not with us, but with the world. The dolefulness arises from what the world is, and not from what we are, nor from the righteous judgments of Yahweh, which are a joy and rejoicing of the heart. We cannot be at home in a world where God is not owned: where His name is not honoured: where His word is despised: where His commandments are disregarded every day. We are commanded to keep ourselves unspotted from such a world; to love not such a world: to accept no friendship from such a world: to be not of this world. We are told plainly that if we do not obey these commands, that if, on the contrary, we cultivate and enjoy the friendship of the world, and walk as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, having their understanding darkened, it will be at the expense of God's friendship, who will withdraw His guidance now and His countenance in the day of recompense. We dare not, therefore, be otherwise than what the world calls doleful. But we are not doleful, nevertheless. We are cheerier than they are, really. We rejoice in God, which is a joy that lays hold of the eternal: though our flesh and our heart fail, God remains our coming strength and portion for ever. We have peace in Christ, which is a great and imperturbable peace that the world cannot give. We have the tranquil gladness of a hope that nothing can destroy, even though the earth be removed, and the mountains cast into the sea, as they have just been in Java. We have the sweetness of the answer of a good conscience, walking in wisdom's ways, whose ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. If we are troubled on every side, we are not in distress; if we are persecuted, we are not forsaken; if we are cast down, we are not destroyed. Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh out for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

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