

SUNDAY MORNING NO. 89

We have had a portion of the prophets read in our hearing this morning. It is written of Israel, after the flesh, that they knew not the voices of the prophets read in their synagogues every Sabbath day. This is the position of so-called religious society around us, with this difference, that the prophets are scarcely read at all in the churches and chapels, and are practically looked upon as an effete and useless portion of the Word of God. What little is read is understood even less than the much that was read among the Jews. Our position was the same before we were enlightened. We respected the prophets as the Jews did; believed them inspired of God as the Jews did; cherished their writings in a certain idolatrous fashion, as the oracles of God, as the Jews did. But as regards the understanding of what they contained, we were in the situation described by the words addressed to Israel by the Spirit through Isaiah:

“The vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, ‘Read this I pray thee;’ and he saith ‘I cannot, for it is sealed.’ And the book is delivered to him that is not learned, saying, ‘Read this I pray thee,’ and he saith ‘I am not learned.’”—
(18:11.)

We are here, this morning, in a different position. We are here to obey Peter’s exhortation, to—

“Be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets.”—
(2 Pet. 3:1.)

We are in a position to do this, because we have been “*caused to understand*,” as Daniel was. In this we boast not, but it is permitted to us to be thankful for it and to rejoice in it as a great privilege, in a day when, in a peculiar sense, men are running from north to south, seeking the word of the Lord and not knowing where to find it. We have been admitted to the privilege through the activity of faithful men, providentially brought to bear upon us; and it is our duty to imitate their activity that others also may be admitted to the same great privilege, should God please to make use of us; or at all events that our duty may be done, “*whether they will hear or whether they will forbear*,” as in the case of Ezekiel.

However, the privilege of understanding what has been written for our instruction has its drawbacks, as most privileges have in this mixed state of good and evil. It opens our eyes to the embarrassing fact proclaimed to Ezekiel in the chapter read (12)—

“Son of man, thou dwellest in the midst of a rebellious house, which have eyes to see and see not: they have ears to hear and hear not, for they are a rebellious house.”

Before we knew the truth we thought we were living in a Christian community—a community substantially subject to the law of Christ—a community whose ways we could safely follow, and in whose wake we might hope to sail with the throng into blessedness hereafter. A knowledge of the truth has shown us the opposite of all this. One of the principal difficulties some of us had to get over was the fact that the whole community should be wrong. We have got over it by the help of the overwhelming evidence in proof that it is so.

It helps us to hold on to the conviction wrought by evidence to see that Ezekiel was so situated. He dwelt in the midst of a rebellious people. He was told so on the authority of God Himself. The Jews themselves were not aware of it. Perhaps Ezekiel was not aware of it to the full extent. The Jews thought themselves the accepted people of the Lord: so we are given to understand in many parts of the prophets. And, perhaps, Ezekiel, as a natural man, might have been disposed to entertain a similarly good opinion of them. But the Lord seeth not as man seeth. As man seeth, the Jews were obedient. They practised circumcision, observed the

feasts and, in most external matters, were submissive to the law given them by Moses. By the appearance of things they were the Lord's people; but as God seeth, who looketh not on the outward appearance, they were rebellious. God required the heart. He required a sincere worship, a modest attitude and a merciful consideration of the poor. In these they were lacking. They drew nigh to him with their mouths, but their heart was far from him. —(Isaiah 29:13.) They were haughty because of their privileges, the glory of which they took to themselves (Zeph. 3:11); and they regarded not the old and the afflicted, but set light by father and mother and sold the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes. —(Ezek. 22:7, 12; Amos 2:6; 8:6.) From the least of them to the greatest of them, everyone was given to covetousness (Jer. 6:13), and took great interest in things in which Yahweh did not delight. —(Isa. 66:4.)

Ezekiel had therefore to recognise the fact that he dwelt in the midst of a rebellious house. How stands the case with us? Are we not as badly situated? If the people of God's own choice, whose institutions and laws were of His own devising, and to whom He had often sent messengers to bring them to His ways, were a rebellious house, is it likely that a community, whom He has not chosen, whose laws He has not devised and to whom He has sent no messengers, are better than they? If Jewish society was rebellious in the divine estimation, is it not a hundred times more likely that British society is so?

This helps us to get over the great objection people are continually making against the truth: "Is it possible that all these people can be wrong and only a few can be right?" But it has a bearing in another direction much more practically important to us as saints. We live in the midst of people, not only whose ideas are wrong, but whose actions and courses and sentiments are wrong. It is easy to see that resurrection and not death is the crisis of scriptural hope. It is easy to see that immortality is a coming gift and not a natural possession. It is easy to see that the earth and not the sky is the sphere of human salvation; that the kingdom of God is an actual institution of power on earth in the age to come, and not a submissive state of the heart. But is it as easy to see that people's ways in the common actions of life are as thoroughly unscriptural as their common theological opinions? Experience speaks with no uncertain voice here. It is not easy to realise that in all their ways, "*the world lieth in wickedness.*"

It is the most natural thing in the world to hold on to the practical ways of the world, even long after we have given up their theological views. We are naturally influenced by the maxims and habits of those among whom we live. We easily tire of holding out against the multitude. What everybody does, we easily argue, is not wrong to be done by us. Where nobody is strict, we are apt to feel we need not be particular. All seek their own: why not we do the same? Nobody thinks of reading the Bible every day: why should we put ourselves to such a trouble? It is the rule to make money and get on, and to make this the object, and put all the labour possible into it: why should we hamper ourselves with a commandment which tells us to labour not to be rich, and to lay not up for ourselves treasures upon earth? When a man either makes or inherits a fortune, it is the universal practice to retire into a corner and consume it in the comfort and glory and security of dear self. No one dreams of using it as an extra means of diffusing blessing among men in these evil days, and glory to God in the day of his dishonour: why should we embarrass ourselves with doctrines of stewardship and self-denial? Everybody smokes, drinks, reads novels, goes to theatres, and, in general, lays hold of all the pleasure he can for the seeking; why should we pass the time of our sojourning here in fear? Why should we deny all ungodliness and worldly lusts? Why should we follow after holiness? Why should we deprive ourselves of the numerous gratifications associated with the lust of the eye, the lust of the flesh and the pride of life? Why should we mope away our time in living soberly, righteously and godly, as strangers and pilgrims, having here no continuing city, looking for the blessed hope of the Lord's appearing?

These questions hint at the many dangers by which we are surrounded. It will help us in the right way to have before our minds the words addressed to Ezekiel:

“Son of man, thou dwellest in the midst of a rebellious house.”

The Gentiles are certainly not less rebellious than were Israel. They are altogether gone astray; they are become unprofitable. It is because of this that judgment comes upon the nations of the earth at the coming of Christ. The harvest of the earth's wickedness is at this time declared to be *“ripe.”* When the supreme moment arrives for the indignation to be poured forth, the generation of the righteous who fear the Lord, who think upon His name, who rest on His promises, who trust in His care and obey His commandments, are thus addressed:

“Come, my people, enter thou into thy chambers, and shut thy doors about thee; hide thyself, as it were, for a little moment until the indignation be overpast; for behold the Lord cometh forth from His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity, and the earth shall no more cover her slain.”—(Isaiah 26:20-21.)

Would it not be madness to risk our place in this favoured company? Everyone will realise the full force of this when the time arrives, but it will be too late to range ourselves on the Lord's side then. We must take up the cross now. We must choose the things in which Yahweh delights now. We cannot do this if we conform to the ways of the godless generation in which we live. It will help us to refuse this conformity if we remember that they are rebellious. If, as we look on them and feel their enticements, we say to ourselves, *“Son of man, thou dwellest in the midst of a rebellious house,”* it will help us to stand in the evil day. It will nerve us to refuse complicity with the rebelliousness—to have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them.

This effect will be greatly strengthened if we listen to the exhortation which Ezekiel received:

“Son of man, be not thou rebellious like that rebellious house: open thy mouth and eat that I give thee.”

What was it that was given to him?—a roll of a book, written within and without, with lamentations and mourning and woe.—(Ezek. 3:8, 10.)

“Son of man, eat this roll and go speak unto the house of Israel.”

Here was a figure in which the mission of the sons of God, in the present evil world, is represented. The prophets received a direct mission, but that mission is propagated with their word to all who hear it. Everyone who receives the Word becomes a minister of it to the extent of ability and opportunity possessed. Everyone hearing is to say Come. Every candle lighted by the Spirit of God, is lit to shine as a light in the world and not to be put under a bed. The believers of the truth are God's witnesses. They testify for God in whom they believe. The Word becomes vocal in them; so that whatever is testified in the Word is in place when it comes from their mouths. The Word not only proclaims glad tidings, but it heralds lamentation and mourning and woe. It not only says of the righteous it shall be well with him, but—

“Woe unto the wicked, it shall be ill with him.”

Now it is our place, as the children of the prophets, yea, their brethren, who look forward with hope of sitting down with them in the kingdom of God (Luke 18:28) to declare the same things. But how shall the voice of the Word become audible in us unless that voice is first implanted? How shall the Word come richly from our lips unless we obey the exhortation of Paul?

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom.”

We must first eat the book, like Ezekiel, and then go speak, whether they will hear or whether they will forbear. On this point let the words continually ring in our ears:

“Son of man, be not thou rebellious as this rebellious house; open thy mouth and eat that I give thee.”

“Give attention to reading,” as saith Paul to Timothy.

—(1 Tim. 4:13.)

“Desire the sincere milk of the Word,” as saith Peter—

(1 Pet. 2:2.)

“Hear Moses and the prophets,” as saith Jesus. —

(Luke 16:29.)

In this matter, society around us is rebellious. Let us put their rebellion far from us, and give ourselves to the daily reading of the Word and prayer. Be on your guard against those who teach otherwise. Do not let the name “brother” beguile you into the endorsement of unscriptural sentiments. There are those who have a name to live and are dead. Don’t judge by the name but the fact, and discern the fact by the evidence. If a man is alive to God he will re-echo the sentiments of the law and the testimony, for these are the very life-blood of sonship to God. If he oppose these and preach the sentiments of the carnal man, he is dead, even if he bear the name of brother: and, in that case, he is opposed in the good fight which ends in eternal life.

The fight is hard, but the victory will be overwhelming. We have every inducement to endure to the end. God doth not willingly afflict the children of men. It is not without a reason that He asks His sons to accept the position of strangers and sojourners in the present evil world. It is not that He delights in our deprivation that he calls upon us to deny ourselves and to stand apart from the world in its vain chase after happiness and pleasure. It is only for a season that He asks us to fellowship the sufferings of Christ and the dishonour of his name. When God is no longer a stranger in the earth; when the glory and the honour of this glorious place in which we dwell are no longer misappropriated by earthborns, whom He has made; when His will is done in all the earth and righteousness prevails everywhere; when every knee bows to Him and every tongue confesses the truth that all things are His and to His Honour and pleasure and glory, then shall He open His hand with boundless liberality in blessing upon the heads of those who have waited for Him in the day of his reproach. No good thing will He withhold from them. It hath not entered into the heart of man to conceive the goodness in store against that day for the obedient who are being prepared for it by a course of present self-denial. Life immortal, health unfailing, strength inexhaustible, beauty unfading, riches inestimable, honour overwhelming, glory incorruptible, delight ineffable, society most glorious, and joy everlasting, are but items in the eternal weight of glory being worked out for us by our light affliction, which is but for a moment.

Taken from: - “The Christadelphian” of 1877

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