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THE BRUISED REED AND THE SMOKING FLAX

by

Mr F L GOSDEN

SERMON

preached at Galeed Chapel, Brighton, on Wednesday evening, June 19th, 1946.

Text: Isaiah 42 v. 3-4

A bruised reed shall He not break, and the smoking flax shall He not quench: He shall bring forth judgment unto truth. He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till He have set judgment in the earth: and the isles shall wait for His law.

It is an infinite condescension in the great God to reveal Himself to men. That revelation we have in the Word of God, which makes the doctrine of the inspiration of the Scriptures to be not only a precious doctrine, but an all-important one. For what would be the value of such a declaration as is in the text and in the opening verses of this chapter¹ were it not the very word of the living God? God is pleased, by His blessed Spirit speaking through His word, to make known that there is a kingdom which is not of this world; that there are eternal realities which are unseen, different from anything material; and those things are viewed by faith as being essential to salvation.

My friends, we need something different from anything we can see, for our immortal souls. Whatever our natural eyes can look upon, whatever our hands can handle of a material kind, good as they are in that they show forth the glory of the Creator, yet we must know something, possess something, which we cannot see with our natural eye or hear with our natural ear. Have you ever been thankful that there is revealed in the infallible Word of God a kingdom, an inheritance, blessings which are conveyed to the new man of grace and received by faith, which constitute the kingdom of God?

And it is God the Father who speaks at the beginning of this chapter concerning His beloved Son: "Behold My Servant" (v. 1). Oh what grace is here! He invites poor, ruined, unworthy, perishing sinners to behold His Servant! The Lord Jesus could not be a Servant of the Father except as He became incarnate; and as you view by faith, at times, the Father's Servant carrying out the work which His Father gave Him to do, view Him doing that work as the Servant, not only of the Father, but of the Church, it will humble you. The Lord Himself said, "I am among you as He that serveth" (Luke 22 v. 27) - He who "thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a Servant" (Phil. 2 v. 6), to serve for His dear people, to finish the work that His Father gave Him to do. That work was for His bride, His Church.

¹ "Behold my Servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my spirit delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles. He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street" (v. 1, 2).

which he had deceived his old father, and he was bruised. He had been called by grace since then, and his heart made tender: "I will not let Thee go, except Thou bless me," he said (Gen. 32 v. 26). This bruising had a good effect, my friends. You will lie down upon your bed sometimes with a bruised, broken heart; and your affections will be drawn out to God so that you will say, 'There is no beauty in anything but Him.'

"And the smoking flax shall He not quench." I have felt lately that I wish I could aspire to the experience of 'smoking flax,' and have wished I had enough life in me to cause even smoke. Perhaps some of you have known what it is to feel in your experience to be more destitute in your soul, and in a weaker state, than smoking flax; for there must be fire there to cause smoke, if only a spark. What will make smoking flax? Why, when the enemy comes in "like a flood" (Isa. 59 v. 19) and threatens to quench the sacred flame of faith in the heart. The hymnwriter knew this experience when he prayed,

"Preserve the power of faith alive
In those who love Thy name;
For sin and Satan daily strive
To quench the sacred flame."

(Newton; Gadsby's 193)

It will never go out; the Lord will not quench the smoking flax, weak faith, little faith, feeble faith. It is *mighty* faith; even though it is only as a grain of mustard seed, it will remove mountains. A grain of faith will take us to heaven. A grain of faith will be permitted to overcome omnipotence. A grain of faith will overcome the world.

"The smoking flax shall He not quench." There is a word in Solomon's Song like this: "Who is this that cometh out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke?" (Song 3 v. 6) Whatever may be said of this smoking flax, smoke comes from fire; but there is so much soot of things that come up from the fire - things that have been consumed. So with the poor repenting sinner - oh, how he mourns before the Lord his unworthiness, his doubts, his fears; how he sighs and cries for the abominations done in the land. I believe these confessions of sin under the sanctifying influence of grace, giving one really to feel the defilement of this world and everything around to be death - these confessions and complaints ascending up to the Lord - are from the life of God in the soul. But it is like smoking flax: little else but complaints, mourning and sighing because of what you are and where you are in the wilderness. But, my friends, have you never discerned that there is a kind of 'coming up from the wilderness' condition even in your humble complaints to the Lord - complaints of what you feel in yourself and round about you? Isaiah speaks in the sixth chapter, "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips" (Isa 6 v. 5). It was the smoke coming from the fire of life in his soul. And see the smoke going up from Job: "Behold, I am vile" (Job 40 v. 4). Sanctifying grace does not make a man to be unconscious of sin, either in himself or in the world. I remember last year going toward Irthlingborough, and a chimney at one of the factories was emitting a dense black column of smoke; and this word came (and I felt it expressed my case); "I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions" (Isa. 44 v. 22); and I felt that if there was a chimney from the soul of man whose sins the Lord had blotted out, if their sins could be seen to be emitted, mine would be the blackest column of smoke from any chimney.

Just another figure about this smoking flax: we have it in the 68th Psalm: "Though ye have lien among the pots" - where they had their dirty little stick fires (and you may feel at times to be among the soot and dirt of your own nature and like the Church describes, "I am black" (Song 1 v. 5), and you feel to be little else), yet "though ye have lien among the pots, yet shall ye be as the wings of a dove covered with silver, and her feathers with yellow gold" (Ps. 68 v. 13).

"The smoking flax shall He not quench." It is His own life. Life will assert itself; and mysteriously enough, life is discovered in a lamentation of felt death. "A bruised reed shall

He not break, and the smoking flax shall He not quench; He shall bring forth judgment unto truth.” Notice in the first four verses of this chapter that the word judgment is used three times. In the first verse “He shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles;” in the third verse, “He shall bring forth judgment unto truth;” and in the fourth verse, “till He have set judgment in the earth,” or as it is in Matthew “till He send forth judgment unto victory” (Matt. 12 v. 20). To my mind this word ‘judgment’ expresses the gospel. The gospel is a law, and judgment comes forth from a law: “Out of Zion shall go forth the law” (Isa. 2 v. 3).

“He shall bring forth judgment unto truth.” This sets forth the work of Christ as the Mediator, the Substitute for His people. He said in His intercessory prayer to His Father, “I have finished the work which Thou gavest Me to do” (John 17 v. 4). This was the judgment; the law entered into the whole of the work of Christ; it scrutinised Him. If the holy just law of God, which was an expression of His divine character, His glory, His holiness, could have discovered in the work of Christ one fault, one “spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing” (Eph. 5 v. 27), then judgment would not have been brought forth unto truth, and for his dear people, judgment would not have been sent forth unto victory. Does that mean anything to us? How good of the Lord to give such a revelation of the work of His dear Servant, for poor unworthy bruised reeds and smoking flax!

“He shall bring forth judgment unto truth” - bring it forth: this is a prophecy concerning Christ, the perfection of His work. It is connected with the victorious thanksgiving of the church in the Corinthians: “Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15 v. 57). What victory? Why, the victory of His birth, the victory of His sufficiency, the adequacy of His sufferings. His sufferings were such that He was made perfect through suffering. This is the judgment; I have thought of it and expressed it at home sometimes, that the work of Christ was a specific work; it was commensurate with the need of the salvation of the Church. The Lord Jesus was made perfect as the Substitute for His people in His sufferings, in that He suffered to the extent that was commensurate with the punishment they deserved. Had He suffered one iota less, He would not have been perfect; and judgment would not have been brought forth unto truth. There would have been no victory. “Behold My Servant,” the suffering Servant. I wish I could express it; I wish the Holy Ghost would convey it to our hearts; that is where He will bring it forth, and at the last He will bring it forth in heaven, when He will say, “Behold I and the children whom the Lord hath given Me” (Isa. 8 v. 18). There shall not a hoof be left behind: there is a fulness of grace sufficient to save.

This judgment concerns the unsearchable riches of Christ which paid the debts of bankrupts: and this will be brought forth at the judgment; they will be cleared. This will be the language, the challenge: “Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God’s elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died” (Rom. 8 v. 33-4). Blessed challenge! “He shall bring forth judgment unto truth.” Oh that the Holy Ghost would bring it forth into some poor trembling sinner’s heart!

“A bruised reed shall He not break, and the smoking flax shall He not quench.” Instead, He shall bring forth a completed gospel. Oh, how judgment was brought forth unto truth when, upon the cross, the Saviour cried, “It is finished!” What would it be in one word if the Lord were to bring it into our experience, “Ye are complete in Him”? (Col. 2 v. 10)

“He shall not fail nor be discouraged.” Salvation is not a naked act of omnipotence. Omnipotence is in all that Christ did; but He does not save His people by an arbitrary act of omnipotence. Had it been so, there would have been no need for the incarnation of the Son of God, no need of His sufferings, no need of a Mediator, no need of a High Priest, no need of a Surety. But there *was* a need for those offices and relationships which the Lord Jesus condescended to assume, because of the holy character of God and the ruined state by sin in which the Church was.

"He shall not fail nor be discouraged." This expresses the immutability of the love of God. I think (if indeed I belong to the Lord) that if ever there was anything that could discourage Him or cause Him to fail, I have no need to look outside myself. But how beautifully it is expressed in Ezekiel, where the Church in her fallen filthy state is described under the type of a wretched infant cast out in its blood,³ He did not fail, and He was not discouraged. The apostle felt it; he said, "I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8 v. 38-9). I think that of all the different things enumerated by the apostle, the case of the angels has been so remarkable to me: *angels* shall not be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ. I think the apostle had the thought in his mind that such was the love of God that when He saw the ruined state of fallen rebellious people, He did not say, 'I will have nothing more to do with them; I will cast off the whole of the human race and will be satisfied with angels; I will have angels to dwell with Me in eternity.' No: "I am persuaded," says the apostle, "that angels ... shall not separate us." "He shall not fail."

And "He shall not fail" for this reason also, that "in Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2 v. 9). There is a fulness of grace, of power, of divine mercy, a fulness of infinite wisdom, of sanctification. Therefore "He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till He have set judgment in the earth." I believe, although at present there is not much sign of it, that this prophecy has yet to be fulfilled, that "the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2 v. 14). There is an amazing prophecy in Zechariah: it is made to the Church, of a gracious reviving which appeared impossible of fulfilment; but, says the Lord, "If it be marvellous in the eyes of ... this people in these days, should it also be marvellous in Mine eyes" (Zech. 8 v. 6)?

"The isles shall wait for His law." The 'isles' here perhaps primarily intended the Gentiles, but I believe the gospel will be extended, and the kingdom of God will be extended, to cover every part of the earth, every nation, every country, and every tongue. There is to be no exclusion with God with respect to salvation; there is to be "neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all" (Col. 3 v. 11).

"The isles shall wait for His law." I think I am warranted to say this, that an island is a desolate place surrounded by water, but off from the mainland as John was when he was in the isle of Patmos for the word of God. So it may be in your experience. You may be, as it were, cut off from the mainland, surrounded by the waters of affliction, feeling your hope cut off for the most part. You may be in an experience where you feel to be not like unto one of the Lord's handmaids;⁴ but these feelingly desolate ones shall wait for His law and "they shall not be ashamed that wait for Me" (Isa. 49 v. 23).

May the Holy Spirit show unto us this blessed Servant, and bring the things of Christ into our hearts, so that we may live upon Him.

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³ "None eye pitied thee, to do any of these unto thee, to have compassion upon thee; but thou wast cast out in the open field, to the lothing of thy person, in the day that thou wast born. And when I passed by thee, and saw thee polluted in thine own blood ..." (Ezek. 16 v. 5 - 6)

⁴ "I be not like unto one of thine handmaidens" (Ruth 2 v. 13).