

Living Messages of the Books of The Bible

GENESIS TO MALACHI

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

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B. THE LIVING MESSAGE

I. As to Human Government

If God be out of count, every Method ends in Disaster.

II. As to Divine Government

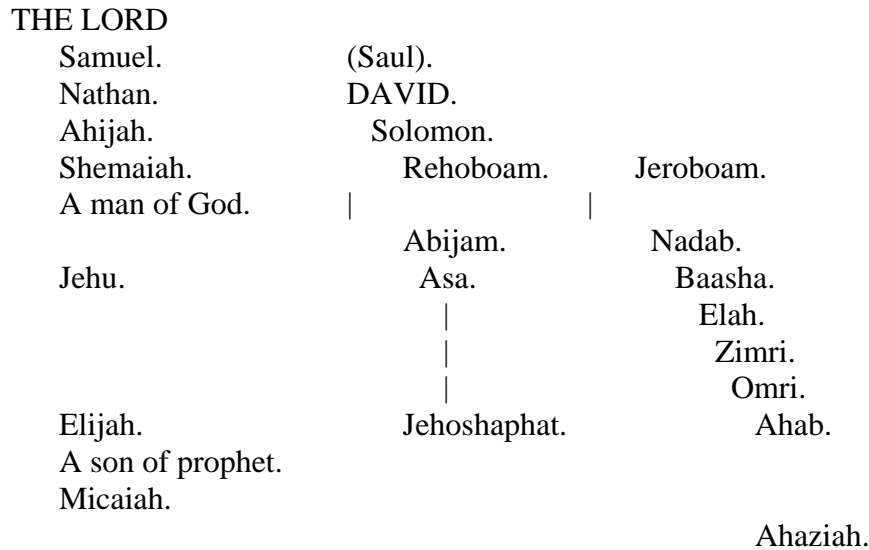
The abandonment of the Thrones of

The Witness of Truth.

Direct Interference.

THIS book is bounded by death. Opening with the death of David, and doing with the death of Ahab, it covers a period of a little more than a century and half. The story which it tells is that of a nation passing from affluence and influence to poverty and paralysis. In order to discover the permanent values of this book we must keep before the mind two thrones - that on earth with its succession of kings, and that in the heavens with one King. In looking at the former we see the failing government of men, and in looking at the latter we see the unfailing government of God.

In order that we may see the two thrones let us glance at a very simple chart:



There the Lord stands for the one Throne and the abiding King. Deflected from the Throne is the throne set up on earth, with the names of the succeeding kings as far as Ahab, where our present book ends. Beneath the name of the Lord are the names of the prophets through whom He delivered His messages, and maintained His connection with the people through this period in which, to use His own words, the nation had rejected Him from being King.

Turning our attention first to the throne on the earth, we observe the succession of kings. The Lord first gave them Saul, a king after their own heart. Then with David, the man after God's own heart, commenced the succession which reached the point of supreme darkness in Ahab. This is a story of disruption, disintegration, and disaster.

On the other hand, in fixing our attention upon the Throne in the heavens, we see the one King maintaining His rule; and, through the prophets, from Samuel to Elijah, declaring His message. This is a story of government, grace, and guidance.

In this order let us consider the teaching of the two thrones.

Looking first at the earthly throne, we notice the successive methods of government. In some senses there is only one, that of monarchy; but monarchs have different methods.

Our English government to-day is described as a monarchy; so also is the Russian; but no one will suggest that their methods are the same. As a matter of fact, the King of England has nothing like the executive power of the President of the United States of America. While in this book we have the story of kings, their methods are quite different. As we look at these methods we shall see a nation, having rejected the Lord from being King, attempting to govern itself. The people named the name of the Lord, built His temple, sang His songs, and offered His sacrifices; but men may do all these, and be infidel.

This nation still used the terminology, and observed the ceremonial of the worship of the Lord, but attempted to govern itself.

The story of David occupied our attention in our last lecture. In observing the successive methods, therefore, we commence with Solomon. His method was that of material magnificence. There may be some senses in which that description may seem incomplete, yet I think it includes the whole story.

Let the facts be recalled.

First there was the organization of the kingdom, and the building of the temple. Through both these processes there was the multiplication of riches, and the manifestation of display. The failure of Solomon began long before it became outward, patent, manifest. From the beginning there may be detected the activity of that sensual nature which issued in such inevitable and disastrous ruin.

He was called Solomon the Magnificent, the Wise, the Peaceful; but the true story of his reign is told in one brief, almost startling sentence, when **“all the congregation of Israel came, and spake unto Rehoboam, saying, Thy father made our yoke grievous.”**

For something like a parallel to the reign of Solomon, we may go to Italy and look at Florence under the sway of Lorenzo de Medici. Lorenzo was also a magnificent man, a philosopher and a scholar; but in cruel despotism he robbed the people of Florence of their liberty, silencing and solacing them with pageantry, shows, and pomp. Mrs. Oliphant describes the condition of affairs in graphic words when she writes, “Fair Florence lying in bonds or, rather, dancing in them, with smear of blood upon her garments and loathsome song upon her lips.” It was against that condition of affairs that Savonarola raised his voice in protest.

That is very largely the story also of Solomon’s reign. All that Samuel had told the people concerning the effect of kingship was fulfilled in even more marked degree under Solomon than under Saul. He attempted to govern the people by magnificent display and material grandeur; and failure is seen in the disruption of the kingdom, following upon long continued disaffection, immediately Solomon was removed. To Rehoboam the people gathered in discontent, saying, **“Thy father made our yoke grievous.”**

To their complaint he replied, **“My little finger is thicker than my father’s loins. And now whereas my father did lade you with a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke: my father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions.”**

Here a new method of government emerges, that of autocracy. Rehoboam's language was essentially that of the autocrat, and he was the almost necessary offspring of Solomon.

In Jeroboam another method is seen. Of course, it must be remembered that he was Divinely called. God distinctly announced to him by the prophet that He would rend the kingdom in twain, because of the corruption of the reign of Solomon; that He would leave one tribe for Rehoboam that a lamp might be maintained for the house of David; and that the rest of the people should gather to him, and he should reign over them. Nevertheless, he immediately turned aside from allegiance to the Lord, and attempted to govern on other lines.

His first act was that of political accommodation in the realm of religion.

“Whereupon the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold; and he said unto them, It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem: behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.”

This is a revelation of his constant method of appeal to democracy.

- Rehoboam was an autocrat, who believed that the people should trust in princes.
- Jeroboam was a democrat, who believed that princes should trust in the people.

Neither of them trusted in the Lord, and they failed equally.

The result of Rehoboam's autocracy was that the people said, **“What portion have we in David? . . . To your tents, O Israel.”**

The issue of Jeroboam's democracy was that the people had their religion made easy, were content with calves, and became corrupt.

As to the rest. In Judah, Abijam, Asa, and Jehoshaphat constituted a succession of kings reigning by policy, with God largely shut out of their thoughts.

Asa's reign was in many respects better than that of Abijam, yet there was manifest ultimately a fear and cowardice, which led him to a base act of compromise.

Jehoshaphat walked timidly in paths of right, failing to act with thoroughness, and finally entered into an unholy alliance with the king of Israel.

The story of those kings of Judah is that of government by policy.

Turning to Israel we find even more terrible failure in a succession of men who cared nothing for the welfare of the kingdom, and esteemed the throne only as a prize for personal possession. There was succession by intrigue and murder of men who absolutely ignored the Throne of the Lord, and led the people further and further into evil.

With Omri, a man elected by popular acclaim, there was a new beginning, but it was a new beginning of the old sin and folly. Then we come to Ahab and Jezebel, a marvellous combination of strength and wit; in both, tremendous force of character was prostituted to base purposes, and the whole nation groaned under the dominion, and was enslaved by it. At last Ahaziah succeeded, but the story of sin and folly, of idolatry and disaster ran on.

Government by man means disruption, disintegration, and disaster. He cannot govern himself. Whether by material magnificence, or by the assumption of autocratic power, or by appeal to democratic desire, or in any other way, all government of man by man is a disastrous failure. This is the story writ large upon the page of the first book of Kings.

Turning to the Throne in the heavens we observe the unfailing government of God.

This is manifest first in the voices of prophecy which break in upon the confused Babel with suddenness, in distinct proclamations.

- Ahijah declared that after the death of Solomon the kingdom would be rent in twain, and later foretold the death of the son of Jeroboam.
- Shemaiah warned Rehoboam not to fight against Jeroboam.
- A nameless man of God appeared suddenly to Jeroboam, and prophesied against the altar.
- Jehu pronounced the doom to fall upon Baasha.
- Elijah, in the hour when the darkness was deepest, appeared suddenly as a flash of lightning at midnight. He proclaimed the Lord in tones of thunder; and vindicated Him at Carmel, and in the matter of Naboth's vineyard.
- A son of the prophets rebuked Ahab for allowing Benhadad to escape.
- Micaiah, in spite of all that was done to prevent him, declared the coming scattering of Israel upon the mountains.

In these appearances of the prophets, and their testimony borne, I see the Lord governing independently of the throne of earth, when that throne was occupied by men who forgot Him.

The government of the Lord was more than that of testimony. It operated in direct interferences. He appeared to Solomon, and the building of the temple resulted therefrom.

The story of Solomon's punishment begins with the declaration, "**The Lord raised up an adversary unto Solomon.**"

In the withdrawal of rain and the consequent famine, and in the awe-inspiring scenes on Carmel, the Lord declared Himself by direct interference in the affairs of the sinning people.

Thus, high lifted above the forces of battle, pressing into His service spirits of evil as well as forces of good, bringing men from distant lands as adversaries, manipulating history even while men in history had rejected Him, is seen the One enthroned Lord. The throne on earth never rightly filled, occupied by a succession of men who attempted all methods of government, each in succession disastrously failing; the Throne in heaven filled, and never shaken. Over all the chaos God reigned towards order.

The living message of this book is not about the temple in its structure, interesting though that story is. It is not merely a history of the Hebrew nation. That also is interesting and important in some senses.

This book has something to say to us about human government and about Divine government, which it is well for us to hear and heed.

Concerning human government it declares one thing. If God be out of count, every method ends in disaster.

In the earlier part of Solomon's reign attention was given to religious forms and ceremonies, to internal development, to commercial treaties, to intellectual attainment. Yet all failed because God was out of count. Religious forms and ceremonies are grave-cloths if the spirit be not right with God. A nation cannot be governed by insisting that it shall adopt religious forms or ceremonies.

Neither can a nation be governed by internal development, or commercial treaties, or ships which ply to Tarshish bringing back apes and peacocks, and with them disaster and ruin. Government based upon human autocracy must end in revolution sooner or later, when the people, oppressed by one of their number who does not understand them, and cannot govern them in their own interests but only in his own, begin to straighten themselves in the power of an inherent relationship to Deity.

Shut God out of the question, and democracy will be the most awful tyranny the world has ever seen. We are to-day dealing with forces we hardly understand. Socialism that is godless will be a reign of terror indeed. Once teach men to consolidate and combine for their own interests, without reference to the Throne of God, and the result will be the utmost disaster. Man cannot govern himself, for he does not know himself. How then can he govern others of whom he knows so much less, or how can two govern a third, or a multitude govern itself? It cannot be. There are forces and facts in one human being that defy the government of all human beings.

If man put God out of count, I care not whether his method of government be autocracy or democracy, whether it be individualism or socialism, it will fail disastrously. On the other hand, the book of Kings has a living message concerning Divine government. Of course it cannot tell all the glorious issue of such government, because it is in itself a story of failure.

We have to come a good deal further on before we see the issue. The world has never yet seen it realized, but it will see it. It is because we believe that, some of us love to revel amid the mystic mysteries of the Apocalypse, even though we do not profess to understand all its suggestiveness. One man, the seer of the Galilean lake, on the lonely island of Patmos, its shores washed by waters, looked and saw the city of God coming down out of Heaven from God, and heard the greatest chorus that poets have ever sung, "**Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His peoples, and God Himself shall be with them, and be their God.**"

That day has not yet come. It is coming. God help us to share the travail which makes it come.

This book of Kings does not give us that vision of the ultimate, but it does reveal God's method in the midst of failure. It is first that of abandonment of the throne of earth. He acted in separation from it. This abandonment was not capricious. So long as the kings were in rebellion, so long as they forgot Him and His Throne, and sought to establish government without Him, He abandoned them in order that their evil choice might work itself out into manifestation.

This book, moreover, teaches us that God bears perpetual witness to truth in the midst of falsehood, and ever causes some measure of light to shine in the midst of darkness. He keeps alive in the consciousness of at least a remnant the fact of Himself and of His government.

Forgive me if I try to impress that final lesson upon your memory in the simplest way.

My story constitutes a small picture, but it is a microcosm of the problem. I knew a case of a woman bereaved of her husband in the midst of the battle of life. The outlook to her was that of utter and absolute disaster. Full of despair, she passed days in silence and in weeping, until her girlie about seven years old came one day to her side, and looking into the tear-dimmed eyes said, Mother, is God dead? Putting her arms about the child, the woman said, Darling, you are His messenger to me.

“The Lord reigneth.”

Do not let us forget, however dark the outlook may be, God is not dead. **“The Lord reigneth.”**

~ end of chapter 11 ~

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