

Living Messages of the Books of The Bible

GENESIS TO MALACHI

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE MESSAGE OF ISAIAH

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THE section of the Divine library containing the prophetic writings speaks with no uncertain sound to our own age. We begin with the prophecy of Isaiah. Its message concerns the Throne, and was spoken to the nation.

Isaiah, in common with all the prophets, had practically nothing to say to men about individual relationship to God. Of course he never lost sight of the importance of individual life in order to the strength of national life; but he was preeminently dealing with the nation as a nation.

The content of the first section of the book reveals the fact that, in the economy of God, judgment ever proceeds to peace. It is important to recognize that judgment beyond this life is not in view. The prophet deals with judgment here and now. Let no one misunderstand this statement. I am not denying the fact of judgment beyond this life, but only pointing out that such judgment is not that to which the prophet refers in this book. It is rather the judgment of God in this world proceeding to the establishment of peace in this world.

So also in the final section of the book, which teaches that peace is ever based on righteousness, the application of the teaching is to a peace experienced in this world, upon the basis of righteousness established in this world. The prophet's outlook is never upon the life that lies beyond.

The permanent value of the book then is that it reveals the abiding Throne of God; and the principles of its activity in the affairs of men. The living message of the book is immediately dependent upon this revelation. As we stand in the light of the unveiled Throne, we are brought to an understanding of man's relation to that Throne; not merely a revelation of what his relation ought to be, but a revelation of what it is, for no man can escape the government of God either in this life or in that which is to come.

If I were asked to choose from this prophecy the two chapters which are supreme, because they fling their light upon all the rest, I should choose the sixth and the fifty-third, which respectively bring us into the presence of the Throne; and reveal to us the suffering of the Servant of God in Whom the authority of the Throne is vested.

The vision of the Throne was given to Isaiah in the year in which King Uzziah died. He had lived in the consciousness of that Throne before, but when the earthly throne became vacant, there came to him a new unveiling of the Throne which is never vacant. All the life of Isaiah had been lived in the reign of Uzziah. He had never known another king. Those of us who lived all the first part of our lives in the reign of Victoria can a little understand the prophet's experience.

I well remember that there came a strange and almost weird sense of emptiness into my life when I saw on the placards that Victoria had passed away. I had never known any other sovereign on the throne, and it was with a strange sense of loss that I thought of the nation bereft of its queen. So Isaiah must have felt at the death of Uzziah. Then God gave him a special vision of the Throne that is always filled. That vision lifted his ministry on to a higher plane, and its central note and perpetual message became that of the unveiled Throne.

Concerning that Throne there are two great facts which this prophecy presents to us:

- First, that of government, and
- Secondly, that of grace.

These are evident, and the statement savors of the commonplace; but Isaiah was preeminently the prophet of the commonplace. That was the complaint which the men of his day made against him. In words full of contempt they enquired, **“Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts. For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little.”**

All this was the language of satirical contempt. The prophet’s answer was, in effect, a declaration of the fact that they needed this very teaching and this method, and their failure resulted from their forgetfulness of the simplest first facts of their national existence.

This in itself creates the pertinence of the message of this book to our own age. There is nothing we need more than a restatement of the first principles of life; and these are those of the Throne of God in its government and grace.

The study of the book reveals the principles, methods, and characteristics of government; and the principle, method, and character of grace.

This phrasing in itself suggests that while the supreme teaching is that of the government of God, the profoundest revelation is that such government is inspired and unified by His grace. From first to last we hear from the Throne the thunderings of authority, and also the tender dominant note of love.

If I were asked to select from the New Testament some one passage which would give expression to the inclusive revelation of the prophecy of Isaiah, I should quote from the revelation of John, **“A throne and . . . in the midst of the throne, a Lamb.”**

In the sixth chapter of the prophecy we see the throne; in the fifty-third, the Lamb.

First, then, as to government. The first reading of the book of Isaiah would inevitably leave upon the mind the impression of government rather than that of grace. By that I do not intend to suggest that grace is a secondary matter. It will certainly be admitted that the deepest meaning of any book which is really worth reading is not discovered at the first. It is equally true that that profounder meaning can only be reached by the reception of the first impression, and the investigation which such an impression compels. I repeat then, that the stately imagery, the finished rhetoric, and the overwhelming splendor of this prophecy must necessarily impress the mind in the first place with the fact of government.

As we have indicated, a consideration of the teaching of this book concerning the Divine government reveals its principles, its methods, its characteristics.

As to the principles, three words will cover the ground:

- Holiness, the inspiration.
- Righteousness, the activity.
- Justice; the result.

It may be objected that we have omitted mercy. As a matter of fact, in the economy of God, justice and mercy are synonymous terms. Their separation is a violation of the true moral order. When justice and mercy meet together, and righteousness and peace kiss each other, it may be a surprising thing to those who have had long acquaintance with injustice, but the meeting in each case is really the restoration of a lost harmony. In the midst of the chaos of social conditions today, absolute justice is the mercy for which the world waits. All who know what it is to rejoice in the mercy of God which has brought salvation, know also that their rejoicing is based upon the fact that mercy acts in justice. God is **“just, and the Justifier of him that hath faith in Jesus.”**

The revelation of holiness in the book of Isaiah is fundamental. The expression, **“The Holy One of Israel”** is almost peculiar to this book. The song of the seraphim as they worshipped in the presence of the King Who occupied the uplifted Throne celebrated the profoundest fact of His being, **“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts.”** That holiness is the ceaseless inspiration of His government. The word holiness was not peculiar to the Hebrew people. It obtained in the language of all forms of idolatry, but it did not suggest in them what it does in Isaiah’s use of it. Its root significance is that of *separation, distance*. Isaiah’s conception of God was one which revealed the deepest significance of this fact of separation, that, namely, of the essential, unquestioned purity of God. This is proved by the effect the consciousness produced in the mind of the prophet which drew from him the cry, **“I am a man of unclean lips.”** Holiness then, as purity, is the inspiration of the Divine government.

Therefore the activity of that government is always that of righteousness. All conduct is the outcome of character, and where the character is holy, the conduct is righteous. Because God is holy, He does righteously. The inevitable result is that of justice. In all the dealings of God, both with His own people and with the surrounding nations there is clearly manifest a fine and poetic justice.

In the great impeachment of the nation contained in the first chapter this fact is really involved in words which do not at first seem to suggest it. The Lord appealed to His people, **“Come now, and let us reason together,”** and thereby claimed that His dealing with them was that of justice. The prophet described the people as bruised and broken from the crown of the head to the sole of the foot by the chastisements of the Lord, and cried to them, **“Why will ye be still stricken, ye will revolt more and more?”**

The reason of their chastisement was their revolt, and therefore their chastisement resulted not from arbitrary, capricious punishment, but from the necessity of eternal justice. If they could but have been brought to such consciousness of this fact as would have resulted in the ending of their revolt, the chastisement would have been removed, and healing would have followed. That was the significance of the Divine call, **“Come now, and let us reason together.”**

Thus the principles of government are seen to be those of holiness as inspiration, righteousness as activity, and justice as result.

Turning to the consideration of the methods of the Divine government, we find them to be those of revelation, explanation, and application.

The complaint of the prophet against the chosen people was, as we have seen, that they had been disobedient. Disobedience is only possible where there is knowledge of law, *and knowledge of law involves revelation*. The nation had been created by revelation. God had unveiled Himself to them through all their history, and made known His will by words and by messengers. Throughout the whole of his ministry Isaiah kept this fact of the Divine method before the mind of those to whom he spoke. The study of this book has, as one of its supreme values, the presentation of the Servant of God, first in dim, shadowy, mysterious outline; finally in dear and accurate manifestation.

So remarkably is this true that if we study the portraiture of the Servant of the Lord as we have it in the prophecy of Isaiah, and then that which we find in the Gospel stories, we find they coincide line for line, glory for glory, beauty for beauty. God's first method of government is that of revealing Himself to men by voices, by visions; and ultimately in the one inclusive manifestation of that Servant Who is the final Speech of God.

His method is not only that of revelation, it is also that of explanation. It is impossible to study the messages of this book without being impressed with the fact that God is ever at infinite pains to explain to men what He is doing with them either in punishment or in healing. He comes to the level of man in order that there may be no misconception of His purpose. It is quite conceivable that it may be declared that this is exactly what God does not do to-day. He seems strangely silent, and there is no immediate explanation of His meaning or of His method. As a matter of fact, He is working and explaining, but men are neither looking for Him nor listening to Him.

Perhaps an illustration from another of the prophets may help us at this point.

When Habakkuk was filled with trouble because it seemed to him that God was silent and inactive, God said to him in effect, I am at work, but if I told you what I am doing you would not believe it. When God declared that He was girding Cyrus, and using him for the accomplishment of His purpose, the prophet was more than ever astonished. All of which suggests that God is always at work, and; moreover, makes known His ways to such as listen. As well as by His acts, God is directly speaking to men and explaining to them His purposes in the daily newspapers, but they do not dream of seeking His messages therein. We do not read our newspapers from that high standpoint. We read them rather from the midst of dust, and the dust gets in our eyes and on their pages. Thus, all the while we do not see the flaming letters of God's revelation for looking at the lying letters of men's printing. In those days Isaiah was explaining the method of God, and yet men declared that he had nothing to teach them.

The final fact in the method of God is that of application. He is seen as actively interfering.

One illustration of this will suffice.

It is that of the word spoken to Cyrus, a man outside the covenant, “**I have called thee . . . I have surnamed thee, though thou hast not known Me.**”

This is a clear instance of this supreme truth that God has in no sense abandoned the world; but that for the fulfillment of His purpose, He takes hold of men and makes them all, if unconsciously, yet definitely, contribute to its carrying out. He makes the wrath of men to praise Him, and the remainder He restrains.

Finally, we come to the characteristics of the Divine government as revealed in this prophecy.

- The first is that of patience. God ever gives His people opportunity to return to loyalty.
- The second is that of persistence. He never makes terms with sin by condoning it, excusing it, or signing a truce with it.
- The third is that of power. He is forevermore revealed as irresistibly moving forward towards the accomplishment of His will.

All these characteristics are revealed most forcefully in the description involved in the great passage, “**Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?**”

A study of these enquiries in the light of their context will show that to the mind of the prophet, God, full of patience, was persistent and powerful; and he saw the cities of sin, and the foes of right, and the enemies of God, being consumed in the fire of His presence, even in the hour when they imagined they were strong. To the clear vision of this man, God was everywhere as a fire, irresistible, searching, burning, destroying, even though men were unconscious of the fact.

Turning from this consideration of the revelation of government, to seek for that of grace, we find it everywhere. It is the principle of the principles, the method of the methods, the character of the characteristics. All the principles with which we have dealt in the consideration of the government of God are but the manifestations of this one inclusive principle.

- The supreme reason of the Divine holiness is the Divine love.
- The supreme inspiration of the Divine righteousness is the Divine love.
- The supreme certainty of the Divine justice is the Divine love.

As we carefully study the prophecy and listen to the complaints of the Lord, while they reverberate in thunder, they thrill with the tenderness of tears.

In the first impeachment we find the words, “**I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me.**” “**They have rebelled against Me,**” that is the word of thunder. “**I have nourished and brought up children.**” In that there is the tenderness of tears. It is the wail of the heart of the Father. It is the revelation of the Cross in the experience of God, the language of unutterable sorrow.

May I dare to illustrate by quotation of a word from literature on an infinitely lower level?

“How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is
To have a thankless child.”

God’s use of the word “children” is eloquent of the deepest fact in all the processes of His government.

As I behold the activity of the Throne, whether in its inspiration of holiness, its activity of righteousness, or its result of justice, I discover that which lies deeper and makes necessary all this, the grace of God, the love of God. It is when this is most clearly seen that sin is known to be most damnable, because in the light of this revelation we understand that sin causes sorrow to the heart of God.

That declaration cannot be contradicted in the light of New Testament teaching. One of the supreme injunctions to the saints is “**Grieve not the Holy Spirit,**” and it is well that we remind ourselves of that which has been so often pointed out, that the literal and more expressive translation of that passage is cause not sorrow to the Spirit of God. Thus, at the very beginning, before the awful thunder of the Throne is heard, or at least with its first reverberation, we hear the tone of infinite grace and infinite love.

Not only is grace the principle of the principles, it is also the method of the methods. Grace is the cause of revelation, the reason of explanation, and the perpetual motive of application. On the uplifted Throne is the One Whose worship in the songs of the seraphim causes the very foundations of the temple to shake; but He is One Who hears the sigh of the sinning soul above the music of the seraphim, and the knowledge of the deepest fact of His being causes one of the flaming ones to cease his singing that he may catch the live coal from the altar, and swiftly pass with it to touch the lips of the sinning man in order to their cleaning. Thus, all the methods of His government are the result of the method of His grace.

Finally, grace is the character of the characteristics. The characteristics of government are those of patience, persistence, and power; and these result from the essential character of love. Grace is the reason of patience, the inspiration of persistence, and the passion of power. Human salvation must result from response to that love which first expresses itself in a veritable sob of anguish in the presence of sin, and then through suffering which cannot be measured makes possible the return and renewal of the sinner. If one is tempted to suggest that I am reading into this prophecy of Isaiah the revelation of the New Testament, I would reply, I am but retaining in the prophecy its own fifty-third chapter. In the New Testament itself there is no passage more full of flashing and revealing light concerning the grace of God than that wonderful chapter.

In this book, then, I see the Throne high lifted, and know that it is the Throne of active and determined government; but I also know that the inspiration of its government is love. The living message of this book to our own age is that submission to the government of God is the one sufficient condition for the fulfillment of all human life, whether it be; social, national or racial. It declares, moreover, that the only hope of the restoration of man, bruised and broken by sin, is centered in the grace of God.

The message of the book, therefore, is finally that of the revelation of the interrelation between government and grace.

It makes it impossible for us to separate these, or to consider them as though they were opposed to each other. In order to reap the benefits of the grace of God, it is necessary to submit to His government. In order to submit to the government of God, we must be prepared to receive the benefits of His grace. Grace is not an activity of God whereby He vacates His Throne. All the riches of grace are at our disposal as we kiss the scepter and bow to the Throne.

Having been brought by grace into right relationship to government, through submission to government in order to the reception of the gifts of grace, we live henceforth within that government in the power of that grace. We submit to His government and enter into His grace. We stand in His grace in order to obey His government.

The revelation of this book is that of the Throne of God. It matters not where we open it, whether we read the message of fiery denunciation, or the song of the coming deliverance; whether we hear the chariot wheels of swift and awful judgment, or listen to the song that heralds the dawning of the day of restoration; in every case, message or song comes from the Throne. The Presence occupying the Throne cannot be defined, but in the midst is a Lamb as it had been slain.

“He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him.”

~ end of chapter 23 ~

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