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The Link

NORTH ROAD CHAPEL

BIDEFORD

THE BOOK OF JONAH

Part 9

“Then said the Lord, Doest thou well to be angry? So Jonah went out of the city, and sat on the east side of the city, and there made him a booth, and sat under it in the shadow, till he might see what would become of the city. And the Lord God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd. But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered. And it came to pass, when the sun did arise, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and wished in himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live. And God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? And he said, I do well to be angry, even unto death. Then said the Lord, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: and should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?”

(Jonah 4:4-11)

Here the story of Jonah abruptly ends. The son of Amittai leaves us in suspense, telling us no more about himself or Nineveh. However, that which he was inspired to record in these four short chapters continues to be of relevance and help to us in the 21st Century.

To resume the narrative at verse 4: *“Then said the Lord, Doest thou well to be angry?”* There is such a thing as righteous indignation and holy anger — as is recorded in cases like that of Moses: *“And it came to pass, as soon as he came nigh unto the camp, that he saw the calf, and the dancing: and Moses’ anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and brake them beneath the mount”* (Exodus 32:19); and manifested also when the Lord made a whip and drove out merchants and money-changers who

were actually using the Temple courts as a venue to ply their dubious business. Contrariwise, there can be an anger that appears pious, but is not in accord with the Word of God. For example, there were certain Samaritans who would not receive the Lord Jesus, on account of whom, James and John desired to command fire from heaven to come down and destroy them (cf Luke 9:54). For this intolerant spirit the Lord rebuked them. There is an anger that can be right; there is an anger that can be wrong. Thus the Lord poses this question to Jonah: “*Doest thou well to be angry?*” Jonah was not angry and upset at the sin and idolatry of Nineveh by which the Lord was dishonoured – no – he was angry because they repented, and therefore God was going to spare them! When Jonah had so spoken to the Lord by saying: “*it is better for me to die than to live*” (v. 3), it would have been perfectly understandable if God had said: ‘yes – for one who is My prophet to act in the way in which you do, it is better that I remove you’. Instead, the Lord gently says to him, “*Doest thou well to be angry?*” ‘Is this a becoming attitude for you to adopt, Jonah? Think of your sin, your disobedience, your complete disregard of My Word. Did not I deal with you in grace? I delivered you in a miraculous manner from a well-deserved death, yet you are angry because this same grace is now extended to others’. ‘Jonah, you have a secret notion that no blessing is ever to come upon Gentiles – are you right in your beliefs?’ ‘Is it right for you to react in this way – doest thou, of all people, right to be angry?’

For a moment, this pulled the son of Amittai up short; he was non-plussed; at this stage, he gave no answer. Regrettably, the searching nature of the question did not affect him, as he continued in the same frame of mind, brooding over the matter, and later retorting “*I do well to be angry*” (v. 9) – but for now at least, he never spoke, he was sullen; and in this sulky mood, we are brought to v.5: “*So Jonah went out of the city, and sat on the east side of the city, and there made him a booth, and sat under it in the shadow, till he might see what would become of the city*”. Peeved and disgruntled, he walked out of Nineveh, going eastward

(which apparently was higher ground, providing a vantage point), and there he made a booth. Why not get back to your own country now Jonah, and return to your native Galilee? Surely there is no point in remaining in Assyria? But no – he makes his way out to the east of the city to a point from which he could survey the great capital, and there assembled a rough kind of shelter – and from that shelter, he sat looking out over the city to see what would become of it. Secretly, he must have been thinking that the repentance of these people was not genuine; it would not last; it would be ‘as the goodness of Ephraim’, as the morning cloud and early dew it would quickly pass away (cf Hosea 6:4). In that event, the judgment would come after all. He could not, or perhaps more correct to say, he would not, bring himself to believe that Divine favour could ever be shown to Gentiles; the very thought of it filled him with anger. ‘It will never happen’, he told himself; and having no intention of returning to his homeland, he settles down in his booth to see the outcome of it all. A very strange character was Jonah – and it is difficult to follow his reasoning, especially when considering he was a prophet.

“And the Lord God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd” (v. 6). This episode is somewhat baffling and difficult to explain. Martin Luther, who was frequently unconventional in his exposition, suggests that God was ‘playing’ with Jonah, as a parent will play with a peevish or upset child. Not perhaps the best description, but containing a grain of truth, as will become apparent later. First, however, note the use of the word ‘prepared’. It occurs here in verse 6, and also in verses 7 and 8, in relation to a plant, then a worm, and then the wind and sun – all confirming that the controlling hand of Almighty God is upon all creatures. Then let a picture of Jonah’s situation be obtained: here is this man, now outside of the city, living in a makeshift shelter, exceedingly displeased (as verse 1 states); he is sulking and most unhappy. Well he might be – having little if any comfort, and his coarse accommodation providing neither shade,

nor real protection. He was in genuine grief, as verse 6 describes. Of course! And he had only himself to blame for it.

Yet the Lord's eye was upon Jonah. He knew the circumstances in which he was now living; what is more, He knew exactly what was in that man's heart: it was anger – anger at God's grace to the Ninevites. When asked by God if he thought it was right to be acting as he did, he gave no reply. Then one hot night in his misery, a gourd miraculously sprang up. This was a very leafy plant that grew to a height of about eight feet. Its leaves spread out over Jonah's booth. In the morning when he awoke, to his amazement and joy, a dense green plant covered his hut. This would give great protection from the fierce rays of the sun when it was at its height throughout the day. For a while, Jonah is smiling; he confesses himself that he was exceedingly glad of the gourd. How pathetic this is! Is it not just as a spoilt child might act – temporarily pacified with a new toy? So Jonah's mind went no further than to enjoy the gourd. Although God had prepared the gourd to deliver him from his embittered state of heart, Jonah seemed insensible of God, and the fact of Nineveh's preservation remained rankling in his breast.

“But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered” (v.7). Awaking the next morning, still in the same sullen frame of mind concerning God and Nineveh, but childishly glad of the gourd, Jonah looks, and to his dismay the leafy foliage is wilting, and as quickly as that plant had sprung up, it was dying; indeed, it completely shrivelled up into nothing, so that no shade whatsoever was afforded by it. God had likewise prepared the worm to attack the plant – yes, God was in it all.

“And it came to pass, when the sun did arise, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and wished in himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live” (v.8). No sooner had the gourd withered than the sun arose, and with it, a vehement, scorching wind. Though Jonah had been in Assyria for quite

a while by now, he had never experienced weather like this! But it was God who prepared that vehement wind, and caused the sun to beat upon Jonah's head. This man had been in a storm, he had been in the sea, he had been inside a fish's belly – and now this! He is stretched out prostrate and faint in this blasting heat, alone, with no-one at hand to help or give any assistance. Oh – the lesson shines forth bright and clear from this scene – it never pays to go against the Word of God, or to oppose His Divine purposes. Though a man may not always understand God's ways, he must still always accept and concur. It was in this matter that Jonah failed so badly. Look at him again in this verse, 'wishing in himself to die'. What a spirit would this have been, in which to leave the world and meet his Maker! For he was a prophet, remember; anointed by God to that high and holy office; yet he says 'I wish I were dead', 'it were better for me to die than to live'.

"And God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? And he said, I do well to be angry, even unto death" (v.9). Upon hearing such words escape the prophet's lips, God again speaks to him, *"Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd?"* 'Jonah – are you so childish and small-minded as to get into this state over such a little thing as a gourd?' Being a prophet, he of all people should have realised that the Almighty was behind this sequence of events: the miraculous growth of the plant, its sudden disappearance, followed by phenomenal climatic conditions. But no enquiry was made on his part, as to what lesson God would have him learn. 'Yes', he impertinently replies to His Lord, 'I do well to be angry'.

Jonah had not been prepared to answer God's question in verse 4, but now seems to be in an even worse spiritual state, defiantly speaking to the Almighty in this manner: 'I do well to be angry, even unto death'. There is perhaps nothing in all of Holy Scripture to compare with this. The second asking of the question appears to infuriate Jonah even more, like the pouring of oil on his burning anger, causing a flare-up.

How does God deal with him? Does he hold him to his rash words, and consign him to death, with the ensuing judgment that must follow? *“Then said the Lord, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night”* (v. 10). This is certainly a sharp rebuke. The Lord said, ‘thou hast had pity on the gourd’ – where was Jonah’s sense of balance? Taking pity on a mere shrub. In any case, Jonah had not planted it. A person might choose to buy an ornamental bush for the garden, pay a considerable price for it, plant it with care, and after a few months, observe it to die. It would be a pity – but it was only a plant after all. Jonah had made no such investment of money or time, but was now ‘vexed unto death’ by the fate of a wild-growing gourd. This is the argument that the Lord is using: ‘Jonah – you have pity for the gourd, which came up in a night, and perished in a night; that plant was transient; it had no soul; here you are, showing such distress over something belonging to the vegetable kingdom!’

“Should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?” (v.11). ‘Jonah – how unbalanced is your thinking; how distorted your reasoning – you take pity on a shrub; should not I the rather spare and take pity on Nineveh, that great city, wherein are 120,000 who cannot yet distinguish between left and right (that is – little children too young to have reached an age of discretion), besides hundred of thousands of grown adults?’ ‘They are all human beings; they have not only bodies, they have souls and they must live forever.’ ‘The blessing though the Seed of Abraham is to Ninevites as well as Israelites; should I, the Sovereign God, not spare and save them, if I so purpose?’

With this question, the Book of Jonah closes. The human author abruptly draws a curtain over the remainder of his life and experiences. It would be interesting to know how much longer he continued in that booth, before the lesson was finally learned. When did he leave Assyria?

Did he come back to Galilee? Did he resume his prophetic duties there? This is an autobiography, and the man himself has decided to tell us no more. There is one over-riding question though, which is answered by his silence. The question is: did Jonah ever repent of his stubborn opposition to the Gentiles, and the reality of God's grace towards them? Although he never tells us directly, yet does not the whole tenor of his book give the answer? There was no need for him to say more. He had written in such a frank manner on these many experiences of disobedience, and the price that he had to pay; disclosing his bigotry and national prejudice which was basically the cause of his trouble all along. At length Jonah is silenced.

Of Job, these words are recorded: "*Then Job answered the Lord, and said, Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer Thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth*" (Job 40:3-4). Does it not appear that this was the case with Jonah? He laid his hand upon his mouth. Bowing before the God of all grace, he was willing at length to say, 'Thy will be done on earth'. The book commenced in chapter 1: "*the word of the Lord came unto Jonah*" – God speaking. It closes in chapter 4: "*Then said the Lord*" – God speaking. The son of Amittai recorded it all, but in the ultimate, he himself is silent. Dr John Gill, in his commentary upon this portion says:

"No answer being returned, it must be reasonably supposed that Jonah was convinced of his sin and folly; and to show his repentance for it, penned this narrative which records his infirmities and weaknesses, for the good of the church, and the instruction of saints of succeeding ages."

This quote, I believe, fittingly concludes this series of articles. May it be used in blessing unto all, for God's glory.

W. H. Molland (1920 – 2012)

THE RIGHT USE OF THE SCRIPTURES

In the last end of all, thou hast yet a goodly example of learning, to see how earthly Jonas is still, for all his trying in the whale's belly. He was so sore displeased because the Ninevites perished not, that he was weary of his life and wished for death, for very sorrow and pain that he had lost the glory of his prophesying, in that his prophecy came not to pass. But God rebuked him with a likeness, saying: 'it grieveth thine heart for the loss of a vile shrub or spray, whereon thou bestowedst no labour or cost, neither was it thine handwork.' 'How much more then should grieve mine heart, the loss of so great a multitude of innocents as are in Nineveh, which are all mine hands' work?' 'Nay Jonas, I am God over all, and father as well unto the heathen as unto the Jews, and merciful to all, and warn 'ere I smite: neither threaten I so cruelly by any prophet, but that I will forgive if they repent and ask mercy: neither on the other side, whatsoever I promise will I fulfil it, save for their sakes only which trust in Me and submit themselves to keep My laws of very love, as natural children.'

To read the Scripture in this manner is the right use thereof, and why the Holy Ghost caused it to be written: that is, that thou first seek out the law what God will have thee to do, interpreting it spiritually, without gloss or covering the brightness of Moses' face; so that thou feel in thine heart how that it is damnable sin before God, not to love thy neighbour that is thine enemy, as purely as Christ loved thee; and that not to love thy neighbour in thine heart, is to have committed already all sin against him. And therefore, until that love be come, thou must acknowledge unfeignedly that there is sin in the best deed thou doest. And it must earnestly grieve thine heart, and thou must wash all thy good deeds in Christ's blood, 'ere they can be pure and an acceptable sacrifice unto God, and must desire God the Father for His sake, to take thy deeds and pardon the imperfectness of them, and to give thee power to do them better, and with more fervent love. And on the other side, thou must search diligently for the promises of mercy which God hath promised thee again.

Which two points, that is to say, the law spiritually interpreted, (how that all is sin that is not unfeigned love out of the ground and bottom of the heart, after the example of Christ's love to us, because we be all equally created and formed of one God our Father, and impartially bought and redeemed with one blood of our Saviour Jesus Christ): and that the promises be given unto a repenting soul that thirsteth and longeth after them, (of the pure and fatherly mercy of God, through our faith only, without all deserving of our deeds or merits of our works, but for Christ's sake alone, and for the merits and deservings of His works, death, and passions that He suffered altogether for us, and not for Himself); which two points I say, if they be written in thine heart, are the keys which so open all the Scripture unto thee, that no creature can lock thee out; and with which thou shalt go in and out, and find pasture and food everywhere. And if these lessons be not written in thine heart, then is all the Scripture shut up, as a kernel in the shell, so that thou mayest read it, and commune of it, and rehearse all the stories of it, and dispute subtly and be a profound sophister, and yet understand not one jot thereof.

And thirdly, that thou take the stories and lives which are contained in the Bible for sure and undoubted examples, that likewise God will deal with us also, unto the world's end.

Herewith reader farewell, and be commended unto God, and unto the grace of His Spirit.

And first see that thou stop not thine ears unto the calling of God, and that thou harden not thine heart (beguiled with fleshly interpreting of the law and false imagined and hypocritical righteousness), and so the Ninevites rise with thee at the day of judgment and condemn thee.

And secondarily, if thou find ought amiss when thou seest thyself in the glass of God's word, think it necessary wisdom to amend the same betimes, admonished and warned by the examples of other men, rather than to tarry until thou be chastened also.

And thirdly, if it shall so chance that the wild lusts of thy flesh shall blind thee and carry thee clean away with them for a time: yet at the latter end, when the God of all mercy shall have compassed thee in on every side with temptations, tribulation, adversities and cumbrance, to bring thee home again unto thine own heart, and to set thy sins which thou wouldest so fain cover and put out of mind with delectation of voluptuous pastimes, before the eyes of thy conscience: then call the faithful example of Jonas and all like stories unto thy remembrance, and with Jonas turn unto thy Father that smote thee: not to cast thee away, but to put a corrosive and a fretting plaster unto the pock that lay hid and fret inward, to draw the disease out, and to make it appear, that thou mightest feel thy sickness and the danger thereof, and come and receive the healing plaster of mercy.

And forget not, that whatsoever example of mercy God hath shewed since the beginning of the world, the same is promised thee, if thou wilt in like manner turn again, and receive it as they did. And with Jonas be cognisant of thy sin, and confess it and acknowledge it unto thy Father. And as the law which fretteth thy conscience is in thine heart, and is none outward thing, even so seek within thy heart the plaster of mercy, the promises of forgiveness in our Saviour Jesus Christ, according unto all the examples of mercy that are gone before. For in thine heart is the word of the law, and in thine heart is the word of faith, in the promises of mercy in Jesus Christ. So that if thou confess with a repenting heart and acknowledge and surely believe that Jesus is Lord over all sin – thou art safe.

And finally, when the rage of thy conscience is ceased and quieted with fast faith in the promises of mercy, then offer with Jonas the offering of praise and thanksgiving, that God only saveth of His own mercy and goodness: that is, believe steadfastly and preach constantly, that it is God only that smiteth, and God only that healeth: ascribing the cause of thy tribulation unto thine own sin, and the cause of thy deliverance unto the mercy of God.

William Tyndale (c.1494 – 1536)
Prologues to the Scriptures, 1530

LONG SHADOWS

5. Forms of Worship

This series of articles examines the pernicious influence that Judaism has had upon true Biblical Christianity, and which it continues to exert to the present day – whether regarding the aberrations of Covenant Theology, and infant sprinkling; or those of nationalism and territorial ambition in connection with ‘Israel’, and other earthly countries. There is another broad area of Christian practice that is similarly darkened by falsehood stemming from the Jewish era, namely, **forms of worship and order within the church**. When viewed objectively, it will become rapidly apparent to an impartial observer that many of the accepted practices of Christendom find no mandate whatsoever in the New Testament, and are in fact, an erroneous continuation of those Levitical systems that should have been forever consigned to history. These matters demand our closer attention.

The New Testament Pattern

A relatively brief portion of the Holy Scriptures deals with the pattern and order for the New Testament church; but therein is “*given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness*” (2 Peter 1:3), and sufficient detail that the churches of God ‘may be perfect and thoroughly furnished’. The very brevity of the instruction is in itself significant, demonstrating the profound simplicity that ought to characterise the present worship of God, in contrast to the complicated systems that were appointed under the Old Covenant era.

It is evident that, in obedience to the Lord’s commands and example, (cf Matthew 18:20, Acts 1:4) the early disciples began at once to assemble together on a regular basis (cf John 20:19, 26; Acts 1:14, 2:1). How different must these meetings have seemed, from those with which the native-born Jews had been familiar. Instead of a thrice-yearly attendance of males at the temple (cf Exodus 23:14, 17), here was a mixed company

of men and women, young and old, Jews and Gentiles of various nationalities, in company together, united not by ethnicity or genealogy, but by a common faith and salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ. The practice of weekly corporate gathering for worship was a central tenet of the early church (cf Acts 12:12, 14:27, 15:30, 20:7-8), prompting the cautionary word in Hebrews 10:25: *“Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.”*

That these meetings occurred in venues assigned for the purpose is also clear, though the nature of the places varied according to circumstances. In cities where oppression was rife and public assembly dangerous, an outdoor location might have to suffice (cf Acts 16:13); or the private homes of individual believers (cf Romans 16:5, Colossians 4:15, etc.) In other cities, it was possible for Christians to engage meeting rooms (cf Acts 1:13, 19:9-10); while later, certain buildings became recognised as their ‘churches’, as distinct from private homes (cf 1 Corinthians 11:18, 22). The relative poverty and persecution to which they were subject, dictated that these buildings were necessarily modest.

Within the local bodies of believers, two offices were recognised, as defined by the Holy Spirit-inspired apostles of Christ. The first of these is variously called ‘elder’ or ‘overseer’, the terms being used interchangeably.* In the original church at Jerusalem, this role was first supplied by the disciples themselves (cf 1 Peter 5:1-2), and as the church grew and spread, it became a matter of importance that fit persons were appointed to this office in each assembly (cf Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5). The office was principally spiritual in its nature, being concerned with the governance and nourishment of the flock of God, by labouring in the

* = the occasional and inconsistent use of the English word ‘bishop’ in the Authorised Version is much to be regretted, for its marring the sense of the original word ‘overseer’, and for having been unilaterally inserted into later drafts of the translation by Archbishop Richard Bancroft, to ulterior political ends.

Word and doctrine (cf 1 Peter 5:1-3, 1 Timothy 5:17). It is also evident that amongst such elders it was common for one man to have primary responsibility for the regular preaching of the Word, as the Letters to the Seven Churches make plain, being addressed by the Lord Himself to ‘the angel’ – better understood as ‘messenger’ or ‘herald’ – in each congregation, and being expressed to those men in singular pronouns.

The second office named in the New Testament is that of ‘deacon’, being first instituted in the Jerusalem church (cf Acts 6:1-7), and distinguished (cf Philippians 1:1) and described (cf 1 Timothy 3:8-13) in the Epistles. Though the duties of such men were of a more practical nature, yet these were to be discharged with spiritual grace. That these individuals were men of calibre and also capable preachers is shown in the case of two named examples: Stephen (cf Acts 6:8 – 7:60) and Philip (cf Acts 8:5-40). Such were the officer-bearers that ministered to the needs of the Lord’s people, whether in soul or body.

The functions of the New Testament church are well comprehended in two verses: the Saviour’s ‘great commission’, “*Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you*” (Matthew 28:19-20) in combination with the description given in Acts 2:42: “*And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers*”. Herein are also highlighted the only two ‘rites’, or physical ordinances, that were prescribed for the church: Believers’ Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper. These are integral to the life of the church. The former is the outward testimony to inward faith, and thereby a token of admission into the church; while the latter accompanies it as the privilege and duty of those who thus belong. The Divine order is shown distinctly: “*they that gladly received [the] Word were baptized: and ... were added unto them ... And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread...*” (Acts 2:41-42). Only those baptised who first believed the Word; only those ‘added unto them’ who first submitted to

the ordinance of baptism; only those permitted to the Lord's Table who were 'added' **and** 'continued steadfastly' – alluding also to the needful principle of church discipline in local congregations (cf Matthew 18:6-20; 1 Corinthians 5). “*These things write I unto thee*” says the inspired Apostle, “*that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth*” (1 Timothy 3:15).

Departure from the Pattern

From such historical evidence as is available, it seems that New Testament churches continued in this vein for as much as one hundred years after the close of the Biblical canon. But by the middle of the Third Century there is evidence of a change – only accelerating after the adoption of Christianity as the state religion of Rome, in the days of Constantine. Within the writings of the so-called ‘church fathers’, one begins to find references to ‘clergy’, ‘priests’ and ‘altars’. Artistic representations of religious leaders, and buildings, show them with ever more elaborate decoration and adornment. Ecclesiastical hierarchy and bureaucracy become apparent, with all manner of titles and offices, presbyteries and councils. A liturgical form of worship arises, with its modes and manners, tropes and traditions, and accompanying calendar of fasts and feasts. In the space of a few decades, the practices going by the name of ‘Christianity’ are utterly unrecognisable from anything described in the New Testament – so different, in some cases, as to be almost directly in opposition. The casual student of history might be inclined to say with Paul of the churches, “*I marvel that ye are **so soon removed** from Him that called you into the grace of Christ unto **another gospel***” (Galatians 1:6). For indeed, an entirely ‘other’ religion had by then come into being.

It might be enquired from whence these strange doctrines came. They are alien to the Gospels, Apostles and Epistles – so were these all novelties and new inventions, occurring for the first time to the minds of men? This was not the cause either; three particular streams of

pollution may be traced to their sources. The first was the erstwhile Roman Empire itself, whose secular methods of administration and government, geographical organisation and hierarchical structures were quickly adopted by the ‘Romanised’ church. The second was the example of paganism and false religion, which abounded on every hand. Since ancient times, these systems had their priests and prophets (cf Genesis 41:45, 1 Kings 18:19), sacrifices and altars (Deuteronomy 32:17, 1 Kings 16:32), rites and rituals (1 Samuel 5:5, 2 Kings 5:18); it was all too common for God’s professed people to be allured by these aberrations, and adopt ‘the way of the heathen’ (cf Jeremiah 10:2). But the third was surely the resumption, or emulation at least, of the practices of Jewry. To what extent the Old Covenant forms of worship were an inspiration, or a convenient justification, for the errors of Romanism, it is difficult at this distance of time to ascertain. Suffice it to say that a Judaising faction had vexed and troubled the New Testament church since its inception; agitating for Levitical ordinances (cf Acts 15:1), Jewish feasts (cf Galatians 4:10) and even dietary stipulations (cf Galatians 2:12) to be retained. Against this, the Lord’s servants had been constant in their condemnation – but clearly the problem persisted. By the Fourth Century, several ‘Christian’ authors are shamelessly appropriating the language of the Old Testament in defence or support of their practices.

One can almost imagine the arguments: “Solomon’s Temple was gilded and decorated, with veils and carvings and altars and images of cherubim – why should not our churches?” “Moses anointed priests, with their garments and mitres and ephods, exclusively to administer worship – why ought not we?” “There were Levites and singers in their courses in the Jews’ religion – why not in ours?” “Jewish feast days had their appointed dates, and set Psalms to be sung, and scriptures to be read, in former times – why not now?” There is a straightforward answer to these questions, given in Hebrews 9. All the paraphernalia of the Levitical system in combination, only served to show that they could not make their devotees perfect, and that the way to God was **not** by these.

They merely served, “for ***the time then present*** . . . meats and drinks, and divers washings, and carnal ordinances, imposed on them ***until the time of reformation***” (Hebrews 9:10) – namely the New Testament age.

Consequences

To attempt to re-establish that which – like the city of Jericho – God has Himself pulled down, is folly in the extreme, and sure to be a doomed enterprise (cf Joshua 6:26, 1 Kings 16:34). Though God at one time instructed a brazen serpent to be set upon a pole, to provide both bodily deliverance and spiritual typology – the continued veneration of that same artefact seven hundred years after its purpose had ended, constituted as much idolatry as the worship of Asherah, and was worthy of the same condemnation (cf 2 Kings 18:4). Paul likewise, in censuring the Galatians, makes no distinction between their pre-conversion adherence to false gods, and their attempted resumption of Jewish practices (cf Galatians 4:8-11). So also Christ, in His discourse with the Samaritan woman, made it clear that in the New Testament era, the temple at Jerusalem was as incompatible with the true worship of God, as the heretical temple on Mount Gerizim (cf John 4:20-24).

The long and darkening shades of Judaism did not terminate at Galatia, nor yet at Rome, neither were they eradicated by the ‘Protestant Reformation’; they continue to fall heavily across presbyterian and episcopal denominations, and on into those which call themselves ‘independent’ or ‘evangelical’. They are apparent to the present day – in clerical and hierarchical attitudes towards church office; in grandiose religious buildings filled with imagery and symbolism; in the liturgical observance of ‘days and months and times and years’; in places where choirs and ensembles are made the custodians of worship; in the exclusive singing of Psalms – all of which represent an exchanging of the marvellous light into which New Testament believers are called, for the shadows of the past.

– to be continued, D.V. –

R. J. Steward

REFORMATION HINDERED

Sad it is to think how that Doctrine of the Gospel – planted by teachers divinely inspired, and by them winnowed, and sifted from the chaff of outdated ceremonies, and refined to such a spiritual height and temper of purity and knowledge of the Creator, that the body, with all the circumstances of time and place, were purified by the affections of the regenerate soul, and nothing left impure but sin; faith needing not the weak, and fallible office of the senses to be either the ushers or interpreters of heavenly mysteries, save where our Lord Himself in His sacraments ordained – that such a Doctrine should, through the grossness and blindness of her professors, and the fraud of deceivable traditions, drag so downwards, as to backslide one way into the Jewish beggary of old cast rudiments, and stumble forward another way into the new-vomited paganism of sensual idolatry...

The inward acts of the spirit [were brought] to the outward and customary eye-service of the body, as if they [must] make God earthly and fleshly, because they could not make themselves heavenly and spiritual ... Urgently pretending a necessity and obligation of joining the body in a formal reverence and worship circumscribed; they hallowed it, they fumed it, they sprinkled it, they bedecked it, not in robes of pure innocency, but of pure linen, with other deformed and fantastic dresses, in palls and mitres, gold and gewgaws fetched from Aaron's old wardrobe, or the Flamines' vestry* ... Instead of the adoptive and cheerful boldness which our new alliance with God requires, came servile and thrall-like fear.

John Milton (1608 – 1674)

Excerpt from: *'Of the Reformation in England and the causes that hitherto have hindered it'* first published 1641. Spelling and punctuation amended.

* = A 'Flamen' was a priest for one of the numerous gods in ancient Rome.

HOW TURN YE AGAIN?

“But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?” (Galatians 4:9)

The question asked in the latter clause of this verse has sometimes seemed perplexing because of its appearing to imply that the Galatians had had an earlier knowledge of the law, to which they are here said to be “*again*” desirous to return. With an intentional emphasis, the word ‘again’ is repeated also for the evident purpose of impressing them more deeply with a sense of their folly in departing from the living God, in favour of empty and pernicious vanities. The point of his argument is evidently this: delusions are of many forms, but all stand equally opposed to truth. They had as idolaters been in bondage to vanity, doing service to an open lie. They are now desiring to return to a system not a whit less vain and empty, albeit originally of divine institution, because vacated by fulfilment in the person of the law’s great Object.

Legal teaching was, as he has shown before, rudimentary and incomplete in its very nature and intention. The law made nothing perfect, least of all the conscience of the burdened worshipper. But if this be so, then legal devotedness is of no more value than ignorant idolatry. Hence the boldness and peculiar force of the apostle’s words. The law can do nothing towards the justification of a sinner; for it is weak through the flesh (cf Romans 8:3). Help in it for a mortal there is none; for it gave as we have seen, no life, and therefore righteousness could never be by law (cf Galatians 3:21). Yet it was full of conditional promise, which left the enlightened slave of sin more wretched in his knowledge than the Gentile in his natural ignorance of God, deluding by specious but impossible conditions the self-confident, and making empty of all hope the soul that truly felt its force (cf Romans 7:9). Weak and beggarly alike were those ‘elements’ which taught men nothing truly but their

own poverty and helpless guiltiness in the presence of their Judge. God only is rich, and His gospel is the pouring of His wealth, in all its lavish fulness, into the hungry bosom of an adoring faith. The Galatians had once known this, and bore witness to it in their glad reception of the truth. And should God's children and Christ's fellow heirs desire voluntarily to descend from opulence to penury, from glory to dishonour, from hope to despair, and from holy confidence and joy to guilty restlessness and fear? For all this, and more also, is involved if he insists in a return to that which God has left. They make themselves transgressors if they meddle with the law (cf Galatians 2:18).

"Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years" (Galatians 4:10). As a proof of their disposition, he now cites an example of their practice. They were diligently observing obsolete Levitical ordinances, instead of by faith, gazing in satisfied and restful trust on Him to whom those ordinances testified. But a question here arises: Was it then wrong positively, on their part, to regard those earlier observances? The answer must undoubtedly be **yes**.

As Gentiles who had never borne the legal yoke, they were both wrong and foolish to desire it: wrong because the covenant of works was made with the circumcision only, and God now speaks no longer by His servant, but solely by His Son; and foolish because of the hideous contrast between the free grace and its resulting glory into which they had been called, and the miserable bondage to which they were ignorantly wishing to return. A believer of the circumcision might pardonably then adhere to the customs of his forefathers, yet under a warning caution from the Spirit of grace (cf Romans 14:3f); but for a converted heathen to embrace them was to manifest a fundamental ignorance of the grace in which he stood, and to dishonour the royal law of liberty by which God's lasting peace, as the fruit of His own righteousness, had been proclaimed in the gospel of salvation to his soul.

A. W. Pridham (1815 – 1879)

EDITORIAL

Recent months have witnessed solemn and grievous events in Britain, when in quick succession, legislation was passed for the decriminalising of abortion (repealing the Offences Against the Person Act), and shortly thereafter, a bill to legalise ‘euthanasia’ received further Parliamentary approval, all to general public acclaim. That any mortal human being – limited to a few decades of fragile existence which they cannot perpetuate – should promote death, or desire its furtherance, is a contradiction almost too great to credit. The concurrence of these two events serves only to emphasise the severity of the situation, and prove beyond doubt that, *“even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient [or – unbecoming]”* (Romans 1:28).

To crave death has ever been viewed as the resort of those who are beyond hope, devoid of deliverance, or cast off by God. Such was the state with Job at the worst pitch of his calamities (cf Job 7:15-16); while of the impious Jews upon whom God’s judgments fell, it is said: *“And death shall be chosen rather than life by all the residue of them that remain of this evil family, which remain in all the places whither I have driven them”* (Jeremiah 8:3). Though the current discourse may be dressed up in the language of humanism and progress, it nevertheless reveals the true condition of modern society, which is now utterly abandoned, *“having no hope, and without God in the world”* (Ephesians 2:12).

This would be hotly denied by atheistic liberals, who instead argue that the utilisation of death as a tool or treatment is proof of social advancement and the betterment of humanity – that they have merely harnessed it to their own ends. Such was the foolish and arrogant opinion of those who once said: *“We have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we at agreement; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us”* (Isaiah 28:15); ‘we are in league with death, and

can use it as a means of escaping our problems and evading judgment'. God quickly declares the futility of their thinking (vs. 17-19). Theirs is a fatal delusion. To re-imagine the curse as a blessing, sin's penalty as a prize, does not change the dreadful reality. The 'King of Terrors' (cf Job 18:14), the Last Enemy (cf 1 Corinthians 15:26), will never be in subjection to mortal men.

In Proverbs chapter eight, 'Wisdom' is personified, and made to talk in the first person, concluding a speech with this profound statement: "*all they that hate me love death*" (Proverbs 8:36). The converse is also clear: to look with any degree of favour upon death is contrary to wisdom, and opposed to all sense or reason. But the meaning of this remarkable passage of Scripture goes much deeper. For the wisdom here described is not abstract or isolated, but refers distinctly to Christ – He who is "*the Wisdom of God*" (1 Corinthians 1:24), "*In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*" (Colossians 2:3). The 'love of death' is entirely antithetical to Him, from whom all life proceeds (cf Colossians 3:4), who bears it as His name (cf John 14:6), and who came to this dying race for the very purpose, "*that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly*" (John 10:10).

The enlightened Christian knows that this present existence is brief and fleeting, and must soon be exchanged for the life hereafter. But he also knows that, as the prelude to eternity, it is the only place in which Christ may be sought and found, the only opportunity for grace and salvation, and thus always to be valued and preserved. Death in all its forms – physical, spiritual, and eternal – is a terrible curse. Life in all its forms is a supreme blessing – which God alone can give, and man ought never dare to take away. "*I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: **therefore choose life**, that both thou and thy seed may live: that thou mayest love the Lord thy God, and that thou mayest obey His voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto Him: for He is thy life, and the length of thy days*" (Deuteronomy 30:19-20).