

Lesson 7 **Our Forgiving God**

After the Feast of Tabernacles was completed the people gathered together. They had just experienced a festival which was not known since the days of Joshua, and it was then time for them to bear their sins to God in repentance. The people humbled themselves at the beginning of the month, at the feast of trumpets, when they wept as the law being read to them. But they were bid to restrain their grief at that time because they were keeping a festival. Although they had kept the Day of Atonement, the only fast day prescribed by the law, they felt a sincere desire for services of a more special kind. One in which the united expressions of repentance and renewed covenant with God would lay the foundation for a life more in harmony with the law.

The meeting and its exercises were to be strictly for the Israelites and therefore they separated themselves from all foreigners. They could not really have fellowship with them in their recital of God's dealings with their fathers and their nation, nor share their sorrow or new resolutions. The Jews therefore "separated themselves from all strangers. A mixed congregation has its advantages, but there are times when Christians will desire a closer fellowship than it affords, and which can be found only in the meeting of those who are like-minded. In addition to fasting, these Jews wore sackcloth, and put earth on their heads. These were signs of humiliation existing at the time for expressing and promoting real feelings of penitence. In the cultivation of our religious character, *one kind of service should alternate with another*—the contemplative with the social, the spiritual with the practical, and the joyous and congratulatory with the penitential. Confession of sin was the key-note of this entire service. It found utterance in two ways.

Monday **Beginning of Prayer**

After the reading of the law the eight Levites, "with a loud voice" led their devotions, calling on the people to "stand up and bless the Lord their God for ever and ever." They were to stand in an attitude of praise fitting posture for this part of Divine worship. They were to offer praise to the true and living God, eternal and immutable; the God of Israel, the One who revealed himself especially to them, took them into peculiar relation to Himself, made them the objects of special care and discipline, and gave them special promises. Christians have still greater reasons for calling Jehovah their God, and giving him praise for ever and ever. They were to praise God's name as revealed and declared by His works and word. To them a name was not just what they were called, but more importantly, it gave them their identity, and revealed their character. Even so words cannot sufficiently express the majesty and infinite Excellency of God, and no thoughts or emotions are worthy of them, and not only is *our* praise inadequate, but "*all* blessing and praise." However, this is not a reason for withholding our worship, for then no praise would be offered in heaven or earth, but for striving after nobler thoughts and feelings and language, and offering all with deepest humility. God condescends to accept the poorest worship, if sincere, and the best we can present. When we give praise of God we should speak of His mighty power, His wisdom, goodness and the work of creation should hold a prominent place.

Unlike the Jews we have the privilege of praying for people of other nations and other faiths. The Jews had not this satisfaction in respect to any other people. They alone worshipped the true God, and they had not learned to think and feel as to heathen worship that it was about equivalent to their own. All the more gladly did they recognize that their God, unknown and un-

worshipped by the rest of the world, was adored and praised and served by hosts of exalted intelligences in other worlds? To us, also, this is an inspiriting truth, adapted to stimulate and elevate our worship. The greatest beings God has made bow down with lowliness before him and with all the ardour of their seraphic nature celebrate his praise. We need not be ashamed to be like them, but should seek to make our worship resemble theirs as nearly as possible, and be thankful that, through the mediation of our Redeemer, in whom heaven and earth are united, it is as acceptable to God. The multitude, led by the Levites, now begins the recital of God's gracious dealings with their race beginning with Abraham. By the words, "Thou art Jehovah God," they allege that it was the only living and true God, the Creator of all things, who distinguished Abraham, and through him their nation, by his favour. They then recount His choice of Abraham; of His own gracious will in separating him from his own land to place He would give him.

Abraham obeyed God and was counted as being faithful in heart and that before God. He trusted God, and continued to trust him through all the trials of his faith. He was faithful in maintaining the worship of God in the midst of idolaters, and in teaching his household to "keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment" (Gen. 18:19). And God marked and rewarded his fidelity. The blessings we receive are the result of God's grace freely given, and yet rewards us according to our faithfulness to Him. His righteousness, as well as His goodness assures us that He will fulfill all the promises made to us. Like the Jews we too have a reason to praise God for the grace shown to Abraham, for he is our spiritual ancestor, "the father of all them that believe" (Rom. 4:11). "The Father seeketh such," and rejoices to find them even though it is accompanied with imperfections, as in the case of Abraham. God honours and rewards those who honour Him and is gracious to them. To the faithful He will show Himself faithful and they shall at length be addressed, "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord. This was followed by confession, noting that their fathers were proud, law breakers who refused to obey commandments, and refused to obey, neither were mindful of thy wonders that thou didst among them" they "wrought great provocations" (ver. 18); "they were disobedient, and rebelled against thee, and cast thy law behind their backs" (ver. 26); "they did evil again before thee" (ver. 28); "they dealt proudly, and sinned against thy judgments." There was ample and unreserved confession of their own and their fathers' guilt, positive and aggravated transgression, dealing proudly, working great provocations, rebelling against God, casting law behind them, Our confession should be (1) ample and unconstrained, including (a) shortcoming, (b) transgression, and, if called for, (c) backsliding; it must be (2) sincere, not a mere repetition of becoming words which other penitents have employed, but the utterance of what our own heart feels.

The enemy said, "They shall not know, neither see, till we come in the midst among them, and slay them, and cause the work to cease" Here was force combined with subtlety; the enemy would surprise and slay them. Here we see *The faint-heartedness of its friends*. Judah, from whom better things might have been expected, said, "The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed," and the neighbouring Jews who had come in to help kept saying that they must return, fearing the wrath of the Samaritans. In every work of God there are sure to be some if not "many adversaries" (1 Cor. 16:9). This we must expect whenever we "put our hand to the plough" in the field of Christian labour. And happy shall we be if we have not to contend with the feebleness and pusillanimity of our friends, fainting long before reaping-time (Gal. 6:9), or even shrinking

at the first alarm, and talking about "giving up."

The first thing to do when the work of the Lord is threatened is that which Nehemiah did. . . "We made our prayer unto our God" Remember the Lord, who is great and terrible. An appeal to him for help, and the recollection of the fact that "greater is he that is for us than all they that can be against us." "Call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee," (Ps. 50:15). There was general realization of the great issues which are at stake "Fight for your brethren, your sons," When we are working or fighting for the cause of God we are engaged on behalf of the truest, highest, and most enduring interests of those who are dearest to us, and of our own also. The cause of Christ is the cause of ourselves, of our families, of our country, as well as of our race. We must fight as well as pray and work. Nehemiah's servants wrought with their weapon of defence in one hand and their instrument of labour in the other, Or, while one was building, his fellow stood ready behind with a spear to put at once into the labourer's hand. Usually our work is rather to build than to strike, but there are times when we must be ready to fight our foes or aid those who are engaged in conflict. In the wide field of the Church's work there is always some work for the Christian soldier as well as for the Christian labourer. Let the one be the cheerful and appreciative co-operator with the other. The spear and the trowel are both wanted. The apologist and the preacher, the theologian and the evangelist, are both accepted servants of Christ. We "set a watch against them day and night." The Christian motto must ever be the memorable words, "Watch and pray." "We laboured in the work from the rising of the morning till the stars appeared." "No one took off his clothes. Everything was done in perfect order. Men were placed where they were most needed and those whose homes were outside came in, arrangements were made to concentrate in case of attack. All must work cordially under the human as well as under the Divine leader.

Tuesday Lessons from the past

It is often said that unless we know where we are coming from we will not know where we are going. Having praised God for His faithfulness the people began to recount their history. They proceeded to celebrate the power and goodness of God as displayed in the deliverance of their ancestors from Egyptian bondage. While it may have seemed that God was either silent or had forgotten them His eye was on them; their condition interested him; and at length, in the fullness of time He acted to rescue them. He sent divers plagues, including the saying of the first born, which inflicted both the ruler and the people of the land. He heard "their cry" at the Red Sea and He divided the waters, led the Israelites safely through, and overwhelmed their Egyptian pursuers. The Jews never wearied of proclaiming in their Psalms the name of their God who redeemed them from Egypt so marvelously; and, in recalling this great redemption to mind which renewed, from time to time, their confidence that God who had done so much for them would not forsake them.

These events were of great importance for the Israelites, not only for their immediate effects; but they gave the nation birth, separated them from the spiritual perils of Egypt, its idolatry, its cruelty. Their passage through the Red Sea was their national baptism unto Moses, and unto God by him (1 Cor. 10:2), consecrating them to be the people of God, to learn and practice His laws, maintain His worship, preserve the knowledge of Him for the benefit ultimately of the world. It is through their recollections that we come to fully know and appreciate the display of the power

and goodness of *our* God, His mindfulness of His people in their sorrows, and sure deliverance of them, though they may long have to "wait for him." It is also significant for us as a pledge of the final triumph of His Church over all its enemies. And as one of the most marvelous of that series of interpositions which had for their object the enlightenment and salvation of the Gentiles as well as the Jews. Our redemption is, like that of the Israelites, is a deliverance from slavery into freedom, from degradation into honour, from misery into happiness, with the prospect of a settled and blessed rest; but vastly superior in respect to the marvels by which it was, and is, wrought. Thus He declared Himself to be "God" both creator and sustainer of all creation. To them He was The Almighty, All-wise, All-good, the Holy, Just, Faithful, Merciful, Terrible, Father and Saviour of all, especially of believers, and He remains the same for us today. The character, teaching, and works of Christ present a perfect revelation of the invisible God. "I have declared thy name, and will declare it" (John 17:26).

They recalled the miraculous guidance through the desert, the miraculous provisions of food, and the giving of the laws were on Sinai. In general they are described as "right judgments and true laws," and in particular, the institution of the Sabbath is mentioned as one of the greatest and best gifts of God to them. The command to enter Canaan virtually included a renewed promise. God had "sworn to give them" implying that God would give them possession if they obeyed his call. Even though God made many and wonderful manifestations amongst them, they remained proud, stubborn and disobedient, often wanting to return to Egypt. Just on the borders of the promised land they refused to advance into it, terrified by the report of most of the spies, and not exercising faith in the power of the One who had wrought for them many mighty deeds. Not only did they want to return to Egypt, they even "appointed a captain" to lead them back.

Their actions greatly provoked God and as a result many of them were heavily punished and only two of all who came out of Egypt were allowed to enter Canaan, the rest died in the wilderness. Those who entered continued enjoying Divine guidance and sustenance, so that "they lacked nothing." God showed Himself "ready to pardon," and displayed his "manifold mercies," and did not forsake them. The history of Israel, as the history of the world, is filled with the goodness of God and the depravity of man. Just as after the deliverance from Egypt, the desert had to be traversed before Canaan could be enjoyed, so is it in the Christian life. This world is a desert in comparison with heaven, and the journey through it is difficult and perilous. But it lies between conversion and heaven, and must be crossed. Through this desert, however, God conducts His people. He guides, provides, protects, instructs, governs, and thus trains and prepares them for the promised inheritance. This is our comfort amid all the discomforts and dangers of the journey. In ordinary mercies the agency of God is as real as in the miraculous. Our food, drink, clothing, are as truly His gifts as the manna, which He bestowed on Israel. Amongst God's best gifts are His revelations of Himself and His laws, and His crowning gift of His Spirit. Under the Christian dispensation all these are far superior to the similar blessings vouchsafed to Israel. Our responsibilities are, therefore, greater; our moral and spiritual state should be far higher, our thankfulness more ardent. We have a promise of a better inheritance than Canaan, with a command to journey steadily towards it; let us beware lest we come short of it through unbelief and disobedience.

Without the Spirit no other Divine gift would avail for our highest and everlasting well-being. This renders all other blessings truly blessed. The good Spirit makes all things good to us, even

those which we call evil, yea, those which in themselves are evil. Each one of us may have the inestimable advantage of a Divine Teacher who not only speaks to the ear, or the eye, but enters the heart, and whose instructions are the most essential to our welfare. He makes "wise unto salvation." The only conditions are faith in him and his teaching, willingness to learn and practice his lessons, and prayer for his influences. In proportion to the value of God's gifts are the responsibilities they impose. No responsibility can, therefore, be so heavy as that which arises from the gift of the Holy Ghost; the presence amongst us, the influence upon us, of a Divine Person proffering and pressing his aid to lead us to God, goodness, and heaven. Happy those who receive him into their hearts as a permanent guest and guide. Let us take heed lest we 'grieve the Holy Spirit of God,' or "do despite unto the Spirit of grace," and He departs from us leaving us to the "sorer punishment" which falls on those to whom God comes most nearly and graciously, and is rejected by them.

Wednesday **The Law and the Prophets**

Although only two of those who left Egypt went into the promised land, their children were multiplied "as the stars of heaven." Through the mighty power of God they captured their enemies and took possession of Canaan. The perpetuation of the nation of Israel reminds us of the perpetuity of the Church of Christ. Notwithstanding the death of successive generations of Christians, the ravages of error, worldliness, even disbelief, its continuance is guaranteed by the promise, "The gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." The fulfillment of the promise of Canaan, after so long a period, should assure us of the fulfillment of all the promises of God. "He is faithful that promised," and he is almighty to overcome all obstacles and opposition. God is the Giver of all, and should ever be praised for all; and we should be concerned lest by godlessness and unrighteousness we forfeit our inheritance. Christians are heirs of "a better country." Heaven is like Canaan, as the gift of God, according to His promises; as a "rest" after much wandering and unrest, and as abounding in whatever can minister to enjoyment, and cause its inhabitants to "delight themselves in God's great goodness." But it is vastly superior, as a country never polluted by idolatry and wickedness; whose inhabitants are all holy; which no foe can invade, no sin, suffering, or death can enter; whose enjoyments are all pure, spiritual, and without peril; and from which is no expulsion. It is "an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and which fades not away," an eternal possession.

God had blessed them with every good thing, and one would assume that they would be grateful and thankful; but they became disobedient and forget the laws of God. Not only that they became tired of the messengers God sent to them and finally killed them. True, there were some partial reformation but they did not last long and the people soon relapsed into the old ways. Yet even in their stubbornness when they rebelled against Him, He still had compassion on them. Yes! He allowed them to go into the hand of their enemies but He did not abandon them. He showed Himself in repeatedly answering their prayers for deliverance, in bearing with them so long, although "they wrought great provocations. Whenever He acted against them it would be with the intention that they may once again be subject to the law. Sin and suffering are indissolubly linked together, suffering is inflicted that sin may be subdued. The goodness of God is shown in the testimony he maintains against sin, and the chastisements he inflicts on the sinner. God is faithful to his promises, even when men prove unfaithful. The history of Israel is a mirror in which all may see their own likeness, nations and individuals; some more, some less.

Thursday Praise and Petition

The people having gone through the history of their nation, their wickedness now admits that God is Just. The words express a just and salutary conviction, and make an acknowledgment suitable to accompany an appeal to the Divine compassion. We should daily acknowledge our inadequacies and seek God's approbation and mercy. A review of our past lives should excite humiliation, penitence, and resolutions of amendment just as the Israelites were warned of the consequences of their rebellion against God so it is with us. What we suffer is no more, is indeed less, than we were warned to expect.

All suffering is intended to do its proper work in humbling us and making sin odious when we recognise the justice of God in inflicting it. It is to lead us to appeal to the mercy of God for deliverance. Finally, observe that the goodness of God is as conspicuous as His justice in the sufferings He inflicts in this life. They have in view "our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness," and be of true and everlasting blessedness. Thus the people appealed to God that He would once again come to their aid. This was a direct appeal to the pitifulness of God that he would have compassion on them who were slaves in their own land, their persons and their property being at the mercy of a foreign ruler. It was also an indirect appeal to His faithfulness and justice, for not only did He chasten them, but He had also promised to forgive them their iniquities when they returned unto Him.

They desired to "see the beauty of the Lord" that they might be "made glad according to the days wherein he had afflicted them, and the years wherein they had seen evil" (Ps. 90:15, 17). In making our appeal to God there are two things which will ever be the substance and burden of our plea, the soreness of our necessity and our weakness; the greatness of God's goodness: His promised mercy, and faithfulness. We may come hopefully to His throne because He is "a gracious and merciful God," pleading His great mercies. But more than that, we may come "boldly" to the throne of his grace, because He is One that keeps "covenant" as well as "mercy." Not only that but also because He has pledged his word to us in Christ Jesus, and though all men fail He will be "faithful to His promise, and will forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."