

SERMON XLIX.

THE DUTY OF EXAMINING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES.

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"Watchman, what of the night? The morning cometh and also the night."—ISAIAH xxi. 11

THE prophecy to which these words belong is both brief and obscure. It stands, so to speak, apart and alone, disjoined equally from that which precedes, and from that which follows it. It is like a voice uttering, suddenly and solemnly, at the dead of night, some ominous ejaculation, startling us out of sleep, and gone before we have well awaked. We feel that there is in it a depth of meaning which we would fain investigate, but the mysterious messenger who gave it forth has withdrawn, and has left us no clue to his dark saying. It is not my intention to occupy much of your time with any attempt to explore it. Instead of indulging in fruitless conjecture and speculation, I shall content myself with shortly stating that which alone can with any certainty be gathered out of it; and having done this, shall proceed at once to consider and use it as a call to examine the signs of this present time.

The prophecy in which the text occurs is entitled the "burden of Dumah." From this circumstance, and from the fact that the inquiry which it puts and answers is represented as coming "out of Seir," there can be no doubt that the prediction refers to Edom, or Idumea, for which Dumah is another name, and of which the chief city and stronghold was in Mount Seir. That country, as well as the land of Israel, was destined to fall under the yoke of the King of Babylon, when he should come up, as the staff of the Lord's indignation, to execute his righteous judgments upon a backsliding and disobedient people. From that oppressive yoke, long and heavily as it was to lie on the Jews, they were at length to obtain a signal and glorious deliverance. The Prophet whom the Lord had set as a watchman, and had commanded to declare what he saw in vision, had explicitly foretold Babylon's overthrow, and the rescue of afflicted Israel. Was Edom to share in its neighbour's triumph? Was the blow that should strike the fetters from captive

Judah, to bid the dwellers in Mount Seir also to go free? "Watchman, what of the night?" How long has its gloom and darkness still to endure? Is the Heavens still curtained with clouds and tempests? Is there no star of hope beginning to twinkle in the opening firmament? Does no ray of gladsome light streak the horizon's verge? Is there no blush, however faint, suffusing the Eastern sky, and telling of the coming dawn? Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?

To this repeated and earnest call the watchman replied, "The morning cometh and also the night." Yes, the day will soon break, already it is struggling with the darkness, and ere long will chase its thick shadows away. A season of returning light and liberty is at hand. The "morning cometh;" but let not Edom therefore exult in fancied security. It shall be but the transient gleam of sunshine before the black and bursting storm. The *night cometh also*—a night after which no morning shall ever dawn. "For my sword," saith the Lord in another chapter (the 34th) of this same book, "shall be bathed in Heaven; behold it shall come down upon Idumea, and upon the people of my curse to judgment. * * * For it is the day of the Lord's vengeance, and the year of recompences for the controversy of Zion. And the streams thereof shall be turned into pitch, and the dust thereof into brimstone, and the land thereof shall become burning pitch. It shall not be quenched night nor day; the smoke thereof shall go up for ever; from generation to generation it shall lie waste; none shall pass through it for ever and ever." What a terrible significancy do these words lend to the brief but ominous announcement! "The morning cometh, and *also the night*." Nettles and brambles have come up in the palaces and fortresses of Mount Seir. Her once magnificent capital has become a habitation of dragons, and a court for owls. When the adventurous traveller makes his way into its rugged and awful solitudes, the only sound that falls upon his ear is that of the vulture, or the cormorant, or the bittern, calling to her mate by day, and the great owl, or the screech owl, calling to her mate by night. With the sacred volume in his hand, as he gazes on the desolation around, he hears the Lord's own voice challenging him to compare the one with the other,—the prediction uttered twenty-five hundred years ago, with the facts spread out before his eyes. "Seek ye out of the book of the Lord, and read; not one of them shall fail, none shall want her mate; for my mouth it hath commanded, and his spirit it hath gathered them. And he hath cast the lot for them, and his hand hath divided it unto them by line; they shall possess it for ever, from generation to generation shall they dwell therein." *Is. xxxiv. 16-17.*

It is in the contemplation of such things as these that we recognise

the appropriateness of the Psalmist's call, to "Come and behold the works of the Lord, what desolations he hath made in the earth;" and it is when the impression of their awfulness is filling and solemnizing our minds, that we enter into the full meaning of the words which the Lord himself subjoins, "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth." Psalm xlvi. 8-10.

And now, brethren, without attempting to penetrate further into the words before us, in their prophetic application to Edom, let us proceed to consider and use them as a call to examine "the signs of this present time." Our Saviour charged it as a sin against the Jews, that while they could "discern the face of the sky and of the earth," they did not discern *that* eventful time. May not a like condemnation be justly pronounced against the men of our own day? Out of the multitudes who so closely watch every indication of change that appears on the ever shifting horizon of the commercial and political world, how small, comparatively speaking, is the number of those whose hearts and minds are similarly exercised as to the signs and prospects of the kingdom of God. For the thousands and tens of thousands everywhere, whose eyes are intently turned to the discussions of senates, the deliberations of statesmen, the councils of kings, to gather some intelligence bearing on the security of property and the interests of trade, there is but one here and another there tremulously alive to the safety of the ark of God, and putting forth in deep solicitude the inquiry of our text, "Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?"

I. Now the first thing which, in reference to this inquiry, the words before us suggest, is the undoubted and important truth that it is of the Lord himself the inquiry must be made. His eye alone seeth under the whole Heaven; and he only knoweth the end from the beginning. Nothing can be more utterly fallacious and worthless than any mere calculation of human probabilities in regard to the future progress of Divine truth—in regard to the course it may be destined to run. When Jesus of Nazareth had been put to an ignominious death, his few and obscure disciples dispersed in terror, and when the handful of peasants and fishermen who had been the companions of his ministry were shut up, unnoticed and unknown, in an upper chamber at Jerusalem, who could have foreseen that the blast of the trumpet, blown by this small and feeble band, was to shake down the mighty Jericho of that universal heathenism which then overspread and enslaved the benighted earth? When, fifteen hundred years thereafter, a poor emaciated Augustinian monk was wearing himself out in his gloomy cell in the terrible conflict of an awakened conscience, which all his self-righteous austerities

could not satisfy or soothe, who could have foreseen that in that single man the Lord was training a soldier, who should confront, single-handed and alone, the gigantic power of the Man of Sin, and liberate the half of Europe from his galling and destructive yoke ?

But, on the other hand, if human sagacity would thus have been baffled on the one hand by unlooked for triumphs to the cause of truth, would it not have been equally confounded on the other by unexpected defeats ? When the day of gospel light was breaking forth in such glorious splendour upon the world in Apostolic times, shedding its blessed beams in one single generation from sea to sea, and from the river almost to the ends of the earth, who would have ventured to anticipate that so bright a day was to be succeeded by the dark ages, the long dismal, dreary centuries during which the few remaining witnesses prophesied in sack-cloth, amid bonds and stripes, and imprisonments, and death ? Again, when the Lutheran Reformation, like a strong wind out of the clear north, was sweeping off from the nations the dense cloud of Papal superstition, and revealing once more to their wending eyes the long-hidden Sun of Righteousness, who would have thought that the horrid cloud would again return to spread its murky folds over so many of its ancient fields, and that men choosing darkness rather than the light, would love to have it so ?

But though human skill be thus impotent to unveil the future, we have a more sure word—a word of Divine, and therefore unerring foreknowledge, to which we do well to take heed as unto a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawn. It is to the Lord we must turn, if we desire to know what is in the womb of time, and say to his inspired seers, in the words of the text—“ Watchman, what of the night ?— Watchman, what of the night ? ”

II. And this leads me to observe, as the second thing of which the text, as now used, may remind and assure us, that however discouraging the aspect of things may, in many points, appear—“ the morning cometh ”—a day of unprecedented brilliancy and joy, when the kingdom and dominion, under the whole heaven, shall be given to the Son of Man ; and when, emancipated from the strife and turmoil of incessant wars, and enjoying and exhibiting a foretaste and emblem of the heavenly state, the rest of Zion shall be glorious. Yes, the Lord’s watchmen, not once or dubiously, but explicitly, and a thousand times, have proclaimed that such a “ morning cometh ”—the morning of that millennial day when there shall be nothing to hurt nor to destroy in all God’s holy mountain, and when the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

To define the exact period that has yet to revolve before that "morning" shall come, is hard, perhaps impossible. I shall not attempt the task. It would take greatly more time and space than this discourse can at all afford, to make intelligible even the data on which any such calculation must rest. Suffice it to say, that there is at least a marvelous amount of harmony among those who have been longest and most earnestly searching what time the Spirit did signify, when, by the prophets, he foretold the blessed era in which "the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil and Satan," shall be laid hold on and bound a thousand years, and shall be cast into the bottomless pit, and shut up, and a seal set upon him, "that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years should be fulfilled." (Rev. xx. 1-3.) I do not mean that there is no discrepancy among them; but this much must be allowed by all who have studied the subject, that they are to a great extent agreed in the conclusion, that the night is far spent, and that the day is at hand. The mighty image in which Nebuchadnezzar beheld, in vision of old, an emblematic representation of those great revolutions the kingdoms of this world were successively to undergo, previous to their becoming the kingdoms of our God and of his Christ, has already seen its entire length visibly and palpably reflected in the history of the world. The Babylonian empire, then subsisting gorgeous and magnificent in its wealth and grandeur, was the head of gold. The breast and arms of silver found their antitype in the brilliant dynasty of the Medo-Persians. The belly and thighs of brass were the very picture of the dominion of that race whom their own poets have been wont to designate the brazen-coated Greeks. And finally, the legs of iron were realized to the full in the iron strength and resistless energy of the Roman power—a power whose decay and dissolution was at the same time prefigured with equal significance in the feet, that were part of iron and part of clay—a power, the breaking up of which into ten distinct kingdoms, as illustrated by the ten toes of the image, the ten European sovereignties that sprung out of the ruins of the Roman empire have abundantly and conspicuously explained. It was in the days of these kingdoms that another power was to arise, diverse from all the rest, and before which three of these kingdoms should fall—a power that should have eyes like a man, and a mouth speaking great things—a power that should speak great words against the Most High—that should wear out the saints of the Most High—that should think to change times and laws. And who, by these marks, can fail to identify the Papacy—that tremendous scourge and dark apostacy into whose oppressive hands dominion was to be given for "a time and times, and the dividing of a time," or, as it is elsewhere explained, for three prophetic

years and a half—a day for a year—that is, for one thousand two hundred and sixty years. Could we settle definitively when that dismal reign of the antichristian tyranny began, there would be no difficulty at all in now gathering the answer to the enquiry—“Watchman, what of the night?” We could then tell to an hour how far the night had run its darkling course, and how soon the morning dawn must appear. It is chiefly on this point that enquirers are not at one. But still the limits within which a fair historical investigation must fix the commencing point are so very narrow, that, begin where we will, if we have any due regard to ascertained and undoubted facts, the time and times, and dividing of a time, the sand-glass of the hour and power of darkness reigning in the Papacy, cannot now have long to run. I repeat it, therefore, as a thing not to be reasonably questioned, that the prophetic image of Nebuchadnezzar has seen its entire length, all but to its very lowest extremities, reflected broadly and palpably in the actual history of the world. And it is therefore no hap-hazard conjecture, no arrow shot at a venture, but a fair and reasonable deduction from Scripture evidence, we offer, when we venture to say, that already the angel may be gathering up the energies of his collected strength for that sudden and tremendous stroke, by which, with the Stone cut without hands, he shall smite the image upon his feet, that were part of iron and part of clay, and break them in pieces; and then shall the iron, the clay, the brass, the silver, and the gold (every form and kind of the antichristian power), be broken in pieces together, and become like the chaff on the summer threshing-floor, and the wind shall carry them away, and no place shall be found for them, and the stone that smote the image shall become a great mountain, and shall fill the whole earth. (Daniel ii. 35.) In the full confidence that such a glorious event is in store, we can take all the comfort of the watchman’s glad and grateful announcement—“the morning cometh.”

III. And this brings me to the third and last thing which the text, as now used and applied, suggests; and it is, that we must rejoice with trembling, for while the morning cometh, there cometh also the night. But here a marked distinction must be made from the case of Edom, to which the text directly points, and to which we, in the outset, referred. When the year of recompense for the controversy of Zion shall have come, it will be night to her adversaries and oppressors; but to Zion herself it will be a bright and glorious day. In the application, therefore, we are now making of the text, we must reverse the order in which those events shall arrive, of which the watchman spake, when, in answer to the question, “What of the night?” he

briefly replied, "the morning cometh and also the night." Edom's morning has come and gone, and the long night of unending darkness, that was to follow, has settled down upon Seir. Zion's morning is still future, however near. Her night still endures. If we would read the text so as to pourtray her destiny, we must read it thus—"The night cometh, and also the morning." Yes, the night—a darker, gloomier, heavier night than heretofore, has brooded over the Church of God. Scripture seems to proclaim as yet, and perhaps soon, to come. For though, in the blessed assurance that the morning cometh, the heavens must rejoice, and they that dwell in them, there is a woe to the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea, because there cometh also, and cometh first, the night—because the devil cometh down in great wrath—in wrath all the more bitter and intense, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time.

In looking abroad upon the earth, we must never forget, though we are ever prone to do so, that amid the endless diversity of names, and sects, and nations, we see contending together, on the subject of religious truth, there are really but two parties engaged in the war—the powers of darkness and the powers of light. The contest is as old as the days of Cain and Abel, and must endure till that glorious time when the enemies of Christ shall at length be made his footstool. There is an enmity inherent between those who are spiritually allied to the promised seed of the woman, and those who are the children of the wicked one. The spirit and principles by which they are respectively animated and directed are irreconcilably opposed. Satan, the strong man armed, dwells in the one, and when they are unassailed, all may seem to be tranquil, because his goods are in peace. Christ is the victor, stronger than he; and it is when he comes to bind the strong man, the fiercest and most desperate struggle begins. It is this fact which explains why a season of revival in the Church is always a season marked by the bitter enmity and busy hostility of the world. Such a spiritual awakening is a note of alarm sounded through the camp of the enemy of souls. It is a call to arms—it is a warning to stand upon his guard—it is a threatening of danger to his kingdom—and he is too vigilant to neglect the admonition. Your time will not allow that I should attempt to trace the marks of such an awakening in the Churches which these later years have witnessed. They are more or less familiar to all, and my fathers and brethren must know them well. This only will I venture to say, that never perhaps since the days of the memorable Reformation did Satan's empire feel more distinctly beneath it than now the first heavings of that spiritual earthquake which is destined, at the set time, to shake it into hideous ruin.

It were, however, grievously to misunderstand the actual state of things, to imagine that this pleasing picture has no dark reverse. The principle already noticed must prepare us to anticipate that this onward march of the good soldiers of Jesus Christ would neither be unnoticed nor unopposed. They only who are ignorant of Satan's devices can be blind to the subtle and formidable agencies he has been incessantly organizing and steadily bringing into the field. Not one point where danger menaced his territory has been left unprovided with means of resistance. Calling to his aid the alarm which the growth of an infidel democracy had been instilling into the cabinets of the leading continental powers, he has employed it to produce that all but universal reaction in these kingdoms in favour of Popery, by the help of which the Man of Sin and Son of Perdition is again climbing up into the seat of his ancient ascendancy. In Ireland, the generous spirit of freedom has served to enable him to clothe once downcast Romanism with the insignia of office and power. In England, the desire to protect, against threatened innovation, the ancient institutions of the kingdom, has opened for him a way by which suddenly to revive the Popish dogmas and lordly pretensions of High Church bigotry, under the venerable pretext of restoring the Christianity of primitive times. And has Scotland escaped, in this general and too successful display of Satanic strategy, put forth to counterwork, and, if that could be, to overturn and destroy the cause and kingdom of our Lord? Let recent events furnish the reply. The Church of our fathers, visited, in a measure at least, with times of reviving and refreshing from the presence of the Lord, had begun to live and breathe—to put on her beautiful garments—to loose the bands of her neck—and to come forth in the face of the world, a faithful, uncompromising witness for God. She had begun to look with other feelings, and to speak with other words than heretofore, in surveying the errors and corruptions that prevailed. She had begun to cry aloud, and not to spare. Abuses *within* the Church, that once were not only tolerated but loved, she had set herself openly and uncompromisingly to condemn. While, on the other hand, the ungodliness of the world—its infidel tone—its luxury—its selfishness—its love of gain—its encouragement of errors—its invasion of the sanctity of God's holy day—against these and similar sins and defections she had begun to lift up her voice with some measure, at least, of that divine energy and faithfulness which is communicated by that Spirit whose office it is to convince the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment. He must have been deaf indeed who has not heard the world's angry tones in reply. And, as we look around us, every day seems more clearly to shew that the husbandman is coming, with his

fan in his hand, and that, ere long, there will be a yet closer and mightier sifting on his threshing floor. The world will not endure the Church. The more spiritual teaching of all evangelical churches—their more faithful discipline—their purer communion—will be an offence to multitudes within their own pale. They will seek shelter either in some lower and laxer denomination of Christians, or join perhaps the Romanist and the infidel, in undisguised warfare against the true followers of the Lamb. It is in that direction things seem rapidly to be tending; and, in studying holy Scripture's prophetic page—in asking the inspired watchman, "What of the night?"—there are things set before us which seem plainly to foretell that this sifting process will gradually go on, till the Church and the world stand fairly apart, and are made ready for the battle of the great day of God Almighty. And blessed be God, though in the first fell encounter the Witnesses shall be slain, and their dead bodies be dragged about the streets of the city, ere long they shall arise and mount up to heaven, and then shall that great cry be heard—"Now are the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever!"

Meanwhile, fathers and brethren of this reverend Synod, what are the duties to which the prospect of such events as have now been alluded to specially and urgently calls us?

1. It calls us, in the first place, to cultivate a spirit of brotherly love towards all who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity, and to draw closer the bonds of communion with all evangelical churches. If the enemies of truth and righteousness be thus manifestly and rapidly collecting their forces, and combining them for a grand assault upon the Redeemer's kingdom, it is surely high time that the friends of the gospel should be coming to a better understanding with one another. It was, accordingly, with no common interest I read, this very morning, of the proposal which has just been made by the distinguished author of "The History of the Reformation," and adopted at a large meeting of the evangelical divines and clergy of Switzerland, that steps should be immediately taken, by correspondence with the friends of the truth in Germany, France, Holland, Britain, and America, to embody, in a common confession of faith, the grand fundamental doctrines on which they are agreed, and thus to manifest their real and substantial unity to the world, and to lend new force and energy to their testimony to the truth as it is in Jesus.

2. In the second place, the signs of the times solemnly and urgently call on us to redeem this present time. It is perhaps but a breathing-time before the conflict begin—a time, therefore, when the faithful

soldiers of Christ must be burnishing their armour, and strengthening their defences, and making ready for the battle. To be at ease in Zion at such a moment—to give way to sloth and indolence—were to be traitors to Christ's cause. It is now, if ever, we are called to make full proof of our ministry—to be instant in season and out of season—always abounding in the work of the Lord.

3. And finally, in the third place, the times call us to “pray without ceasing.” It is not in our own might and prudence we can be enabled to withstand in the evil day, and having done all to stand. And if we would endure hardness as good soldiers of Jesus Christ, it must be by living near to him who hath said—“My grace is sufficient for thee; for my strength is made perfect in weakness.” And if there be anything that will strike terror into the heart of the great adversary, and paralyze all his movements, it will be the sight of the Churches on their knees, crying mightily unto God, giving him no rest till he arise and remember Zion.