

An Exposition of Isaiah xxiv-xxvii.

V.

THE CHURCH OF CHRIST (CHAP. XXVI. 17-20).

WE admire the genius of historian or of poet whose patient research and powers of intuition and of sympathy make the dead past live again, and who, in their pages, speak to us with the voices that are gone. This fine quality of the human spirit, wherever it exists, is the workmanship and the gift of God. It may well be that the prophet Isaiah, who was both poet and historian of his times, was naturally so endowed, and therefore providentially fitted to receive and to record a revelation of the future. With the prophet, revelation of the future takes the place of the historian's observation or research, and his natural powers of intuition and of sympathy are so quickened, so purified, so possessed by the Spirit of God, as to enable him to exhibit in the highest degree, and with the most perfect accuracy, the features of the time of which he is speaking. As it has been beautifully said, "Herein they were not like harps or lutes, but they felt, they felt the power and strength of their own words. When they spoke of our peace, every corner of their hearts was filled with joy. When they prophesied of mournings, lamentations, and woes, to fall upon us, they wept in the bitterness and indignation of spirit, the arm of the Lord being mighty and strong upon them." ¹

So we have heard our prophet speaking with the voice of the men of that far-off world to be, identified already with their experiences, chastened with their chastening, confessing with their confession, for he felt the power and strength of the revelation made through him.

But a nearer, though still distant, future is also revealed to the prophet's sight, a cycle of human experiences to take place before that supreme and final visitation which shames the adversaries of Jehovah, and makes the inhabitants of the world to become His people. And with these two, in the swiftly changing moods of the human spirit, the prophet is identified.

Like as a woman with child, that draweth near the time of her delivery, is in pain and crieth out in her pangs, so we have been before Thee, O Jehovah. We

¹ Hooker, *Sermon on St. Jude* 17-21.

have been with child, we have been in pain, we have as it were brought forth wind; we have not wrought any deliverance in the earth; neither have the inhabitants of the world fallen.

Who are these people? They are evidently some whose aim is to effect deliverance in the earth. They hope for the fall of the inhabitants of the world. They suffer agonies of pain in their endeavour. They have brought forth something indeed, but not what they had hoped. Their whole effort has been before Jehovah, but it has ended in wind.

Who can these be but the Church of Christ? This is the only Society the world has ever seen whose declared aim has been the deliverance of the earth. These are the only people who summon every knee to bow to their Lord and God. This is the only faith that claims to overcome the world. This is the mother that holds in her womb the kingdom of God.

And if so, these words contain a revelation that a time will come in the history of the Church of Christ when her long travail shall seem to have been in vain. Christianity will seem to have failed, not only in the scornful phrase of the outsider, but also in the sinking heart of the Christian. Have the powers of the age to come, borne in the Church's womb through two millenniums of this present age, brought forth but wind? Even so, the earth is not delivered, the man of the world ¹ remains erect.

But hark! another Voice is speaking through the prophet, a Voice also of that time, but the Voice now of the Lord of the Church, answering the cry of His people—

Thy dead shall live; My dead bodies shall arise. Awake and sing, ye that dwell in the dust; for thy dew is as the dew of herbs,² and the earth shall cast forth the dead.

Thy dead, O My people,³ shall live. Their lives and deaths in the world have not been in vain. They shall all live again, and see the world delivered, and the adversaries of their Lord fallen. Your dead bodies are My dead bodies. They shall arise and stand with Me upon the earth. Awake, ye that dwell in the dust, awake and sing. As when the tender grass springs out of the earth through

¹ The phrase *inhabitant of the world or earth* throughout all this context seems to denote men of the world as distinguished from *the people* of God. So also frequently in the Book of Revelation, e.g. vi. 10; xi. 10; xiii. 8; xiii. 12, 14; xvii. 2; xvii. 8.

² Or *light*.

³ Cf. just below, *Come, My people, enter thou. . . .*

clear shining after rain ; or as in the light of the morning, when the sun ariseth, a morning without clouds, dewdrops sparkle on the green, and the slumbering grasses raise their heads to the light — so ye My people who sleep in the dust shall arise and sing, when the Morning comes, and it is near ; the earth shall cast forth the dead.

This is " the first resurrection," ² and blessed and holy is he who has part in it.³

Let us now recall that later Word of the Lord, also occasioned by a present sorrow of His Church.

" We would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning them that fall asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as the rest, who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also that are fallen asleep in Jesus will God bring with Him *when the kingdom comes*. For this we say unto you by the Word of the Lord, that we that are alive, that are left unto the coming of the Lord, shall in no wise precede them that are fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trump of God, and the dead in Christ shall rise first ; then we that are alive, that are left, shall together with them be caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air, and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words." ⁴

Be of good cheer, O travailing people ; thy dead shall live, thy living shall be changed, together they shall be caught up to meet Me in the air ; thy chambers are prepared, the many mansions made ready.

Come, My people—quick and raised together—enter thou into thy chambers, and shut thy doors about thee ; hide thyself for a little moment until the indignation be overpast.

Your work of testimony and travail is over, and shall not be in vain, your Lord Himself will carry it to completion. You shall be sheltered for a little moment till the indignation is overpast, and then shall see His glory.

¹ 2 Sam. xxiii. 4.

² Rev. xx. 6.

³ The phrases *to arise from the dead, the resurrection from the dead*, and the like, which occur some fifty times in the N.T., except when they are applied to the miracles of raising to life again or of spiritual conversion, are used *only* of the resurrection of our Lord and of those who sleep in Him. See e.g. Luke xx. 35 ; Phil. iii. 11. The general resurrection is spoken of as *the resurrection of the dead*.

⁴ 1 Thess. iv. 13-18.

Who would not share in the travail pains that he may hereafter share the glory? Who would not fall asleep in Jesus to be one of Jehovah's bodies? Who would not be awake in that glorious morning of the world?

"But take heed to yourselves, lest haply your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that day come on you suddenly as a snare; for so shall it come upon all them that dwell on the face of all the earth. But watch ye at every season, making supplication, that ye may prevail to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man." ¹

A VINEYARD KEPT BY JEHOVAH (CHAPS. XXVI. 21-XXVII. 5).

The voices of the future are now hushed, and the stream of prediction flows once more in explanation of their closing accents. "Hide thyself for a little moment," the Voice had said, "until the indignation be overpast."

For, behold, Jehovah cometh forth out of His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity; the earth also shall disclose her blood, and shall no more cover her slain.

In an earlier communication to the prophet Jehovah had declared His intention to "be still, and behold in His dwelling place" while the blaspheming Assyrian power grew to maturity, but that before the grape-harvest, when the blossom is over and the flower becomes a ripening grape, He would intervene with His sickle and scatter both sprigs and spreading branches on the earth.² So through all our ages of earth's growing iniquity Jehovah has been still, beholding from His place, but now, "behold, Jehovah cometh forth out of His place to punish," not one nation only, but "the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity."

"The transgression of the earth,"³ "the sin of the world,"⁴ who can measure or recount it? But "the earth also shall disclose her blood, and shall no more cover her slain."

Here the Lord, through His prophet, seems to make the first primeval sin the representative of the whole dark catalogue of crime. "Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him. And Jehovah said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not; am I my brother's keeper? And He said, What

¹ Luke xxii. 34-36.

² xviii. 4.

³ xxiv. 20.

⁴ John i. 29.

hast thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto Me from the ground, which hath opened its mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand." ¹ "Cain slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his works were evil, and his brother's righteous." ² And this is the story of the sin of the world,³ while Jehovah has not yet come forth out of His place. But, behold, Jehovah cometh "with ten thousands of His holy ones, to execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their works of ungodliness which they have ungodly wrought, and of all the hard things which ungodly sinners have spoken again Him." ⁴

But behind the dark phenomenon of human sin stands the more sombre figure of the great Adversary. "Cain was of the Evil One." ⁵ He is the begetter of the liars and murderers of the earth.⁶ *He* is the sower of tares in the field of the world. *He* is the enemy of the Son of Man.⁷ And shall he escape in that day when Jehovah comes out of his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity and earth discloses her slain? He shall not escape.

In that day Jehovah with his hard and great and strong sword will punish leviathan the swift⁸ serpent, and leviathan the crooked⁹ serpent.

The reference of these words cannot be mistaken. Leviathan is indeed the Hebrew name for the crocodile, although not restricted to that reptile.¹⁰ But here Leviathan is the serpent; and this, as well as the whole context, plainly marks the word here as symbolic of the Old Serpent, which is the Devil or Satan. The magnificent description in the Book of Job,¹¹ where Jehovah depicts the invincibility of Leviathan—

If one lay at him with the sword, it cannot avail;
Nor the spear, the dart, nor the pointed shaft—

gives special significance to the "hard and great and strong sword" of Jehovah Himself, which will at last avail to punish this "strong man armed," this "Prince of this world," this "King over all the sons of pride." ¹²

It may well be that the prophet here, under the Divine guidance,

¹ Gen. iv. 8-10.

² 1 John iii. 12.

³ John iii. 19.

⁴ Jude 14, 15.

⁵ 1 John iii. 12.

⁶ John viii. 44.

⁷ Matt. xiii. 39.

⁸ Or, *gliding*; or, *fleeing*.

⁹ Or, *winding*.

¹⁰ Ps. civ. 26.

¹¹ Job xli.

¹² *Ib.* v. 34.

takes the great serpentine constellations of the sky as figures of the Captain of "the host of the height on high,"¹ who shall be punished in that day. The "swift" or "fleeing" or "gliding serpent" is most descriptive of the long-drawn-out constellation of Hydra, the Water-snake, which stretched itself for one hundred and five degrees along the primitive celestial equator; while "the crooked" or "winding serpent" vividly pictures the Dragon, coiled about the poles of the ecliptic and equator.² These are apt emblems of "the principalities and powers, the world-rulers of this (present) darkness; the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places,"³ whose malign influence, under their leader, ever thwarts the laws and the statutes and the covenant of God, and plunges men again and again into iniquity. Jehovah with His hard and great and strong sword shall punish him in that day. "I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold on the Dragon, the Old Serpent, which is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and cast him into the abyss, and shut it, and sealed it over him, that he should deceive the nations no more, until the thousand years should be finished."⁴

And He will slay the monster that is in the sea.

This is an additional circumstance of that day. If we have interpreted rightly, the emblems of the Evil One are taken from the sky, while this emblem is taken from the earth and sea. Leviathan is the Old Serpent on high, this is the monster that is in the sea. Leviathan, moreover, is punished, while the monster is slain. So that an additional, and in certain respects contrasted circumstance seems to be indicated.

Now in a later prophecy through Isaiah the Egyptian power which enslaved Israel is termed "the monster,"⁵ while in Daniel's prophetic visions gigantic forms of living creatures rising from the sea are symbolic of great world-powers,⁶ and in this sense then we take the expression here. The prophet has already told us that in that day Jehovah will punish not only the host of the height on

¹ xxiv. 21.

² See Maunder, *Astronomy of the Bible*, Ch. v. In Job xxvi. 13, "the swift serpent" evidently denotes a constellation.

³ Eph. vi. 12.

⁴ Rev. xx. 1-3.

⁵ li. 9; cf. Ezek. xxix. 3; Ps. lxxiv. 13.

⁶ Dan. vii. 3, 17, "four kings" = four kingdoms, see v. 23; and so Rev. xiii. 1, cf. ib. xvii. 15.

high, but also "the kings of the earth upon the earth." In that passage indeed their punishments are not distinguished, but in the present passage the spirit-power is "punished," while the world-power is "slain," a distinction which must, we think, be intentional. For in the later revelation the Seer saw "the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies" engulfed in the lake of fire, but Satan cast into the abyss. There was an end of one upon the earth, but the other must after the thousand years be loosed for a little time.¹ So Isaiah proclaims that the serpent is punished and the sea-monster slain.

And now once more through the prophet speaks the Voice of God—

In that day: A vineyard of wine, sing ye unto it. I Jehovah am its keeper, I will water it every moment; lest any hurt it, I will keep it night and day. Wrath is not in Me; would that the briers and thorns were against Me in battle: I would march upon them, I would burn them together. Or else let him take hold of My strength, that he may make peace with Me; yea, let him make peace with Me.

The indignation is overpast, the usurping Prince of this world is banished, Jehovah reigns in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem; all nations serve Him, and all nations enjoy His care. The whole world, and no longer one nation,² is the Vineyard of Jehovah. The whole world is a vineyard of wine, yielding its full and finest fruit.

"I Jehovah am its keeper." Jehovah God planted a garden of old in the earth, and there He put the man whom He had formed to dress it and to keep it, but Paradise was lost. Now, says the voice of promise, I Jehovah am its keeper; I will water it every moment; lest any hurt it, I will keep it night and day. No invading spirit of evil shall enter this vineyard now, no cumbering brier and thorn shall again be tolerated within it, when Jehovah is the keeper.

"Wrath is not in Me," says the Divine Speaker; for the ground is no more cursed for man's sake, the sweat and toil of labour is relieved, the sorrow of conception is removed, the age-long conflict with the Adversary passed and gone; Divine blessing rests on all, as at the first creation. "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth."³ Creation has waited for the manifestation of

¹ Rev. xix. 19-xx. 3.

² v. 1-7.

³ Gen. i. 28.

the sons of God, and is delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God.¹

But while the earth is renewed, and the tempter banished, and men are blessed, evil is not at an end. Briers and thorns may appear, even in this Vineyard of Jehovah. But He Who is the vineyard's Keeper has no fear. Let them appear; they shall not take root, they shall not mar the soil. "Would that the briers and thorns were against Me in battle!" It is not as in the old days when Jehovah kept still in His place, and the earth brought forth her thorns and thistles unchecked, and the ungodly were as thorn thickets that could not be taken with the hand, but the man that touched them must be armed with iron and the staff of a spear.² Now the Keeper of the Vineyard is present, and mighty and alert. He will march against them Himself, He will burn them at once and together; "or else let him," the incipient solitary rebel, "let him take hold of My strength," abandoning his futile opposition and clasping My almighty power to save even him, "that he may make peace with Me; yea, let him make peace with Me."

A vineyard of red wine indeed; sing ye to it! sing ye to it!

Let the peoples praise Thee, O God;
 Let all the peoples praise Thee.
 O let the nations be glad and sing for joy;
 For thou wilt judge the peoples with equity,
 And govern the nations upon earth.
 Let the peoples praise Thee, O God;
 Let all the peoples praise thee.³
 The earth hath yielded its increase;
 God, even our own God, will bless us;
 And all the ends of the earth shall fear Him.³

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(To be concluded.)

¹ Rom. viii. 19-23.

² 2 Sam. xxiii. 6, 7.

³ Psalm vi. 7.

