

BEHOLD, THE DAY COMETH

~Other Speakers M-R: G. Campbell Morgan:

"For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of Hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch. But unto you that fear My name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in His wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall. And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I shall do this, saith the Lord of Hosts. Remember ye the law of Moses my servant, which I commanded unto him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments. Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord; and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse" (Mal 4:1-6).

"With a curse" - so ends this prophecy of Malachi. After this there is to be no prophetic voice, no direct message from God for over four hundred years. It is of the utmost importance that the word shall be one that shall arrest attention, one possessed of the power to abide. What is it? The word "curse?" This is, moreover, the last word of the Old Testament, and that, I believe, of Divine purpose, with solemn intention. As we look at it a little more closely, we shall see, that behind the fact that the canon ends thus, lies the tenderness of the Divine heart. God's last message to these people is intended to arouse them, in order that the threatened curse may never rest upon them. Let us proceed to consider: -

- (1) The final word itself.
- (2) The Gospel of love by which it is permeated.
- (3) The great announcement: "Behold, the day Cometh."

The Final Word. - The whole history of man to this point is one of failure ; the only word therefore that is possible from the God of all perfection, as revealing His attitude toward this state of things, is the word "curse." Read that history from the standpoint of the Divine, and observe how constantly it manifests the faithfulness of God, the tenderness of His heart, and the ever-moving compassion of His nature toward all men; but side by side with the bright and wondrous story of infinite pity and untiring compassion, you have the record of human failure, disobedience, rebellion, murmuring. Every dispensation - the Garden of Eden, the Period of Conscience, the Patriarchal Age, the Mosaic Economy, the Days of the Kings, the Times of the Prophets - ends in failure, and when God looks upon the people whom he had called and created, in order that they might be a blessing to the whole earth, He says to them: "Lest I come and smite the earth with a curse." But in that first word of the last clause shines a ray of hope and of gladness - "Lest I come."

The Old Testament does not end with a curse pronounced, but with a curse threatened, not with a word declaring that hope is forever past, and that there can be no redemption and no deliverance, no further word, but with a statement intended to teach that God has not yet pronounced this curse, and that He does not desire to do so. "Lest I come and smite the earth with a curse." The word with which the prophecy and the old dispensation end - end, that is, so far as their teaching is concerned - is the last appeal of love, and is aimed at averting calamity, by announcing it as the natural sequence of disloyalty and sin.

The Jew always understood this as a message of love, and the Rabbis in the Synagogue from then until the coming of Christ, and in the days of Christ, and until this day, never end Malachi with its last verse. They conclude with the fifth verse (Mal 4:5). Reading the last: "And He shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children; and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse; "they revert to the fifth: "Behold, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord."

In the Septuagint, the fourth verse is lifted out of its place and put at the end, so that the Bible does not end with the curse. Take the verses five, six, and four, and read them in sequence: "Behold, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse. Remember ye the law of Moses, my servant, which I commanded unto him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments." The fact that the Rabbis read the passage in this way, and that the Septuagint has lifted the fourth verse without altering the number, and put it at the end, reveals most unmistakably the way in which the Hebrew nation understood this message. They did not regard it as a message of anger, but as a message of love; not the pronouncement of a curse, but a warning against an awful calamity which might befall

them. It is evident that they understood this final message to be a gospel, not of wrath but of love, and there is no room for doubt that their exposition was a correct interpretation of the meaning intended - that God, looking at this people in their apostasy, foolhardiness, and impertinence, yet gave them this last message before He sealed the prophetic book - a message not of anger but of infinite love.

II

This final word then, being a warning, and not a sentence, is a Gospel of Love, and is closely connected with a declaration of the possibility of escape from the threatened curse, and a statement of the condition of such escape.

In the promise of the coming of Elijah it is said that "He shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers." That turning of heart marks the condition upon which the curse may be averted. The mission of Elijah, as here indicated, is not social, but spiritual.

It is not that he will come to bring about reconciliation in the families of the people. "The fathers" are the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, from whose ideals of life and state of heart these children have so sadly wandered, and the mission of Elijah shall be that of turning these wandering ones back to those ideals, and to that state of heart.

Paraphrasing the statement, getting the inner thought of it, and putting it in other words, we may say, Israel shall be in that day Israel indeed, in spirit and inward life, and not in the mere outward tokens of their ritual and service. The existing position, as we have seen, was that of an altar set up, with sacrifices laid thereon, and feasts, and fasts, and all the externals strictly observed, which marked them off as the peculiar people of God, while their heart was far away; so that of them Abraham, if he had moved into their midst, would have said, "These are not my children; "or Jacob," These are surely not the sons of the man whom God called Israel." They had missed their way, and corrupted the covenant; but God's purpose could not be altered, and therefore if the curse threatened is not to become actual, then it will be because "their heart shall be turned back to the fathers, and the heart of the fathers to the children." When they shall go back to His principles, and be what He intended they should be: when the externals with which they have been satisfied shall be nothing in their eyes, save the outward expression of the inner meaning of the covenant of their God with them; then shall the curse be removed, and showers of blessing fall from opened windows. That is the gospel of love.

And how is this to be brought about? "Behold I will send you Elijah before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord (Mal 4:5). Elijah, another messenger, is to be sent. The prophecy is not fulfilled; the matter is still open, one other voice is to sound, one other message to be delivered, and that voice will sound and that message be delivered just as the King Himself is coming.

The fulfillment of that promise, we all understand, was in the coming of John the Baptist. But because there are apparently contradictory verses concerning it, let us make a digression to consider them.

Joh 1:21 : "And they asked him" - that is John the Baptist - "What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not." Mat 17:10-13 : "And His disciples asked Him," that is Jesus, "saying, Why then say the scribes that Elias must first come? Jesus answered and said unto them, Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things. But I say unto you, that Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them. Then the disciples understood that He spake unto them of John the Baptist." Here is an apparent contradiction. John says, "I am not." Jesus says, "He is." The interpretation of Scripture is always within itself, and the solution in this case is to be found in yet another gospel - Luk 1:16-17. The heavenly messenger in announcing the coming of the Baptist, says of him: "Many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before Him in the spirit and power of Elias" - mark how the very words and thoughts of Malachi's prophecy are taken - "to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." John said, "I am not." That was John's answer to the literalness of the outlook of the people of his day. They were in direct succession to those to whom Malachi spoke, living in externals, slavishly following the letter. When John came, they said, "Art thou really Elias?" He replied, "I am not." It was a negative to the literalness that had grown out of their apostasy of heart. But the King Himself said, "Elias is already come," and they knew He meant John. "With reference to his coming, the angel sang, "John shall come in the spirit and power of Elias," and it was in this spiritual sense that Jesus claimed John as the fulfillment of the word. John was perfectly right therefore when he corrected their literalness by saying he was not Elias; and the King was true when He said he was Elias, that there was in him a fulfillment of the last prophecy of Malachi. This is an interesting illustration of the comprehension of the old dispensation in the new, by a spiritual interpretation of

the things of God, which renders impossible that which is merely literal and external.

III

Between the time of Malachi and this coming of one in the spirit and power of Elias, four hundred years ran their course. During this period the Gospel contained in these final words was the only message to man. What was the forceful element therein? Wherever it was a word of power, transforming lives and changing conduct, as in the cases of Simeon and Anna, and doubtless many beside, it was so, by virtue of the promise of the dawn of the day of God. To those who looked for the time of Divine interposition, and lived as in hourly expectation of it, life became a new experience, and in their character the Gospel of Love wrought miracles of transformation and beauty. The first three verses of chapter four contain the words of that promise: "Behold the day cometh that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble; and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of Hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch. But unto you that fear My name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in His wings: and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall. And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the souls of your feet in the day that I act, saith the Lord of Hosts."

This is the great announcement, which abode upon the heart and consciousness of this people for four hundred years. Certain it is that they slighted it, and most probably argued against it, and tried to prove it was not literal; but it was the forceful element in the Gospel of Love during that whole period. When Jesus came, Simeon and Anna and a few wise shepherds forming God's Elect Remnant, were waiting for the day that should "burn as an oven"; for the "rising of the Sun with healing in His wings."

Notice particularly here that while two things are stated, they are in reality one: "Behold, the day cometh that shall burn as an oven; - but unto you that fear My name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in His wings." This is one event having two sides to it. It may be in the matter of time, reckoning things by human methods, that one will precede the other, but the succession is within the unity. The great announcement is that of the Divine activity of the future. God is leaving this people without a prophetic message for four hundred years; but His final word is, "I am not abandoning the earth; evil is not a triumphant force; while they who perform evil appear to be flourishing to-day, there is an end coming to all these things." God will act! The day cometh which shall burn; all against which the plaintive protest of love has been uttered in vain, shall be destroyed and swept away when that day begins. "But to you that fear My name" - the Elect Remnant - "the Sun of righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings."

And how will He act? As a fire of destruction to impurity and as a sweet balm of healing to those that fear His name. And this day will be ushered in, not by any gradual process, overcoming the evil of the age, but by a sudden, abrupt transition. Elijah first, with his last message, and then the King, coming suddenly to His temple, the day breaking, the "Sun rising with healing in His wings." How beautifully these things coalesce so far as the great central fact is concerned! "Behold the day cometh." "The Sun shall rise." The same thing. "The day cometh; the Sun shall rise." "A day shall burn as an oven." "The Sun shall have healing in His wings." It is all one day. "A day cometh." When will it come? "When the Sun rises." "The day that is coming will burn." How will it burn? The Sun shall be the scorching heat that will burn, but the Sun will also have healing in His wings. It depends on the character of the men upon whom His light falls whether they shall be burned or healed. It is the same day.

Look at it again yet more closely. The day cometh that shall burn as an oven." In the fifteenth verse of the third chapter (Mal 3:15) you find these words, "And now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up - they that work wickedness are set up. Now notice chapter four, verse one: "All the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble." Do you see the change? When that day cometh the old order of things shall be reversed. To-day you are setting up the wicked, calling them happy; but when God's day breaks the proud and wicked shall be as stubble. The "set-up" things of an apostate age shall be stubble in the day of God; stubble when the Sun of righteousness is shining.

But how can these apparently contradictory things be the same? They can be no other than the same. How is day ever made but by the coming of the Sun, and to follow interpretation finely, it is by the rising of the Sun that there shall be healing. What men shall catch daybreak first? Not the men who are wicked and are to be as stubble, but the watchers on the mountains; souls who have been tired of the apostate age and have been saying, "Lord, come! come!" They first will see the break of the day, and to them its rosy tints will bring healing, "and the Sun shall rise with healing in His wings"; and, then, when He is risen in the meridians, strong with scorching heat, all things stubble shall be burned up.

We all know the different effect the sun has upon different things. There is a tree planted by the river; the running stream waters its roots, and the summer sunshine, falling upon it, makes it spring to green and beauty; and here is a field of stubble, and the same sun that touches the tree by the river into beauty, burns the stubble with its scorching rays. The same thing brings in the one case life, and in the other barrenness and waste. God's message is, "My day is coming. I shall act." "Behold, the day cometh which will heal and burn." It will heal the souls that wait for Him, the wounded souls of the night. It will heal them, why? Because they are planted by the rivers of water, because all their springs are in God, and to them God's Sun comes with beauty, health, and light, and "healing in His wings"; but to those on this side, the men of stubble that are set up to-day, that have no springs outside themselves, that have not found their roots spreading out by the river's edge to the eternal waters, the Sun shall be a scorching heat; they shall be stubble in that day.

So the word ends, Malachi's voice ceases. He had described their condition, told them of God's infinite love; and he makes this final announcement, that God is not abandoning them nor the world, that the day is coming when the Sun will rise. He declares to them the different result produced upon two conditions of life, and then with pathos in every tone of his voice he utters the Divine words: "I will send you Elijah before that day to turn your heart to the fathers, and the heart of the fathers to the children, lest God smite the earth with a curse."

Before considering the application of this final message to the age in which we live, it should be noted that the second part of the Divine programme - second in order, though first named as most needed by the people to whom it was addressed, Mal 3:1 - has not yet been carried out. The King came and preached "the acceptable year of the Lord." There He closed the book. "The day of vengeance of our God" still lies ahead. For reasons that lie deep in the infinite wisdom of the Eternal He still waits, and while we sometimes sigh for day, we rejoice by faith in His "long-suffering," knowing that with Him our weary years are not, for "one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." Yet surely His first advent did scatter fire on the earth, which is even now at work amid all the upheaval and collapse of human might and wisdom, preparing the way for the new day of God, at the dawn of which the burning of the first kindled fire shall answer the new fire revelation, and leave of things wicked no root nor branch.

Point by point we have seen how solemn the application of this final word of the old prophetic age is to the age in which we live. Christendom is largely astray to-day, and I hope you notice I have been careful to differentiate between the Church of Christ and Christendom. The Church of Jesus Christ no man knoweth but Himself and the Father. No man can say this or that is the Church, or that it is here or there. The Church is a sacred entity that He alone knows, which is loyal to Him to-day and ever has been. Christendom, the mixed multitude that calls itself by the name of Christ, that says to Him, "Lord, Lord," and yet does not the things that He says, is sadly astray; and yet the Divine love is still brooding over all, and calling in words of infinite tenderness, complaining to His own people who are forgetful of the principles of righteousness by which He will complete His work in the days to come. Thank God, there is an Elect Remnant. He has never left Himself without a witness, and, I believe, there never were so many hearts loyal to Christ as there are to-day - men and women desiring that His kingdom should come to the earth, and realizing that it must come in their own lives and hearts; an Elect Remnant, fearing the Lord, hearkening to, and honoring the voice of the Master.

How ends the word of inspiration for this age? Will you turn to the last word of the New Testament? "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all." The Revised Version has an important alteration in this passage. "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with the saints," instead of "with you all." "With the saints." The last word of the Old Testament is "Curse"; the last word of the New, according to the revision, is "Saints." And yet in the inner thought of these two words there is an identity of meaning. The word translated "curse" in the Old is the word "devoted," as in the case of Achan and his treasure "devoted" to destruction. "Lest I smite the earth with a curse" - that is, lest I devote it to judgment. The last word of the New Testament describes the people of God as "saints," separated, set apart, devoted. The devotion in the two cases is as wide asunder as the poles, but the inner thought is identical; it is that of the sovereignty of God. "Lest I smite the earth with a devotion to destruction." "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with those devoted to the will of God;" God's sovereignty wearied by the old to be realized by the new - Moses and Jesus. God is behind and over all, and He asserts Himself in the closing words of both Old and New.

It is needless for me to say I believe in verbal and plenary inspiration. If we could only read from the writing of the original manuscripts we should find every preposition in its place, and the smallest words alive with infinite meaning. That is my stand with regard to this book of God, and I therefore see tremendous force in this fact concerning the closing words of the Testaments. What is the last word of the New? "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with the saints." What is grace? The law revealed. The grace of God is that which pleases God, and in its application to us it is the unmerited favor of God. What is the favor which is unmerited? It is the love which, stooping to our condition, teaches us how to obey the law, and not only teaches us how, but energizes

us for obedience. I am so anxious that men should understand that grace does not mean that God has put morality on one side, or excuses anybody for immorality or impurity. Grace means, we are to be all that God intended us to be. It means that Christ, by life and death, and resurrection and living power, will bring into our lives, poor, weak, wretched as they are, all the requisite force that we may obey every word that God has spoken in His declaration of His requirement concerning man.

And what is the element of force in this new Gospel of love? In the twelfth verse of the same chapter you have the announcement, "Behold, I come quickly, and My reward is with Me." Just as the old covenant ended with the voice that told of the coming of the Lord, so does the new. I am not going to attempt to deal fully with the subject of the coming of Jesus Christ. Let me simply say that what is before us to-day - the next thing - is His second advent. What was the last thing? His first coming and Pentecost. Nothing has happened since then! Write your history, total up your battles fought, and won, and lost, talk in praise of statesmen and politicians if you will - yet nothing has happened! As God watches the movements of men He counts upon the strokes of the great clock of Eternity, and the last was the birth of Christ and His work and Cross and Pentecost; and the next, "Behold I come quickly." There is nothing between. Some of us believe we are very near to the next. It cannot be very long before that voice sounds; but there will be a twofold aspect of this day of God, "The Sun rising with healing in His wings"; "A day that will burn as an oven," - following one another, but only one event, the coming of Christ - first the Sun of righteousness with healing in His wings, and then the day that follows it, a day that burns. Our eyes are toward that event, the eyes of the world should also be toward that event. Knowingly or unknowingly, humanity waits in its suffering, sorrow, and sin, in its baptism of tears and blood, - for what? For the King. Parties are leaderless, and nations are all at unrest.

"Broken lies creation,

Shaken earth's foundation,

Anchorless each nation:

Lord, come away!"

The Kingdom is waiting for the King. Men who do not realize it are nevertheless waiting for Him. What will His coming mean? It depends upon individual character. To those who fear His name - the Sun of righteousness and healing. To the proud and all who do wickedly - fire! burning them as stubble.

That is no pessimistic outlook: it is the only optimism. To hope for the conversion of the world by the preaching of the Word of God in this dispensation, is to hope against revelation and fact. People are multiplying by the natural laws of increase, far more swiftly than converts are being made. Nay, the King is coming and that is the final message.

I end with a question and I leave the thought for answering solemnly when we are alone. Rev 22:16-17 : "I Jesus have sent my angel to testify unto you these things in the Churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star." We, if we are in the Church, wait for the rising of that Star. "And the Spirit and the Bride say Come." Can I say, "Come" to Christ's announcement that He is coming? "Behold, I come quickly"; can I say "Come, Lord Jesus"? There is no test concerning holiness of life and character equal to that. "I cannot say 'Come,' "says one: "there are ties that hold me here." Well, the sooner the earthly tie is riven the better; and the sooner in harmony with the Spirit we can say to Him "Come!" the better it will be for us and the earth. Elijah came before the coming of Jesus long ago, and the hearts of the children were turned to the fathers by thousands through his preaching, and I believe that to-day the signs of the times point to the nearness of the coming of Jesus Christ. There never was a day when the hunger for spirituality of work and definite teaching concerning the Book of God was as keen as it is to-day. Everywhere churches are crying out for definite spiritual life. What does it portend? I believe it is the latter rain; and next: the King!

That we may not be ashamed at His coming, let us walk with persistent and never-ceasing care. The externals are of secondary import, and will, of a natural sequence, fall into true place, if in the deepest recesses of our inner life we are true to Him.

To lonely, personal, solemn heart-searching would I call the whole of God's people to-day, and if the thought that rises most easily be the one expressed in the olden day by the question WHEREIN? then in very deed is the need for humbling before God most sure.