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Capernaum

by Robert Murray M'Cheyne

"Then began he to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not: Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you. And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say unto you, That it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee. (Matthew 11:20-24).

On the north-west border of the lake of Galilee, there is a beautiful little plain, which was called in ancient times 'the land of Gennesaret'. It is in the shape of a crescent, and is about four miles in length, and two in breadth at its broadest part. It has two fine streams which rush down from the mountains, and it has, besides, two large fountains; so that it is well watered and very fertile. On that little plain stood long ago the three cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum. At the northern corner, almost at the sea, there is a fine fountain, and beside it a heap of ruins half buried by the reeds and thorny bushes that spread over them.

This is believed to mark the site of Capernaum. Of the other two not a vestige remains, and no man can tell in what part of the plain they stood. And yet it was there in that little plain that Jesus did most of his mighty works. But the woe which he pronounced over them has fallen with silent but exterminating power. It is more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for Chorazin and Bethsaida; and Capernaum, long exalted to heaven, has been brought down to hell. Tell me, brethren, is there no voice of warning rising from these blasted ruins addressed to this favoured land? Is there no warning here for you and me? You, too, have been favoured like Capernaum, and if you do not repent, you will be brought down to hell.

I. Capernaum was exalted to heaven.

The reason why Capernaum is said to have been exalted to heaven was because of Christ's preaching and performing so many of his miracles there. When the people of Nazareth rejected him, and wanted to cast him over a precipice, 'he came and dwelt in Capernaum'. Whenever he came to Galilee, he seems to have dwelt in Capernaum. It was his home more than any town on earth, so that it is frequently called 'his own city' (Matthew 9:1). He seems to have loved that spot more than other places.

Here he performed most of his miracles.

He healed the centurion's servant here (Matthew 8:5-13). Here he raised up Jairus' daughter, and cured the woman of the issue of blood. Here they brought their sick friends, and laid them down at his feet, and he healed them all.

Jesus preached here.

He spoke the most of his parables here. The parable of the sower, and those that follow, were spoken in the hearing of the people of Capernaum.

He prayed here (Mark 1:35).

So that it was a glorious opportunity to be saved. It was a day of salvation. It was an effectual door. The gate of heaven was, as it were, thrown open there. The Son of God, and the Saviour of the world, was living among them, healing and preaching among them.

Because the Holy Spirit descended here.

The Holy Spirit is the author of conversion in the soul, and without his work even the preaching of Christ does not convert

t souls. Now we know that the preaching of Christ in Galilee was not in vain. Though many were not converted, yet some were. Where did the centurion get that great faith that made Jesus marvel? Where did the woman, who came at last to Christ, get grace to leave all other physicians? Doubtless there were many drops of the Spirit given around that silent lake.

Although the Spirit was not fully given, because Christ was not yet glorified, yet drops of the Spirit were given, upon the credit of his laying down his life a ransom. Many a time when Jesus rose a great while before day, and went up into some of the deep ravines of the mountains around, he obtained showers of the Spirit, which came down at evening as he taught the people out of the boat on the lake. I believe there are many in heaven that were born again during these sermons, under the open canopy of heaven, beside the Lake of Galilee. It was this that exalted Capernaum to heaven - the presence of the Saviour, and the falling of the Spirit.

Scotland, in like manner, has been exalted to heaven.

By the preaching of the gospel.

We have not had the personal presence of Christ, like Capernaum, but we have had the same message which he carried. Faithful ministers come from Christ. They are his gift. They are sent by him. Wherever they go, they go in his name; so that Christ may be said to dwell where they dwell.

Never, since 1560, has Scotland wanted faithful pastors. There were nearly a hundred years of spiritual death; but even then there were here and there a believing remnant. I suppose this town has never since then wanted some faithful pastors, even in its worst times. Dundee has been exalted to heaven. When Christ went to Sychar, he stayed only two days among them; and yet many of the Samaritans of that city believed on him. These were two days of merciful visitation. Jesus spent but a single day in the coasts of Syrophenicia, and yet that was the birth-day of the Syrophenician woman's soul. You have had a thousand such days of mercy, yet how few of you have improved them!

If you take up a map of the world, it is wonderful to mark how few spots have a preached gospel. Almost all Asia is sunk under the wicked delusions of Mahomet, or under the idolatries of Paganism. Africa is given over to Mahomet and witchcraft. South America, to idolatry and Popery. Europe is, for the most part, covered with the thick darkness of Popery. Oh! what grace is it to pass over the fairest provinces of the world, and come to this bleak island, with an open Bible, a quiet Sabbath, and a preached gospel! My friends, you will never know till eternity the greatness of the mercy of having a regularly preached gospel. It is the gate of heaven thrown open.

By the pouring out of the Spirit.

We have had more of the Holy Spirit poured out than ever Capernaum had. I do not know that any country in the world has been visited this way, as Scotland has been.

The first remarkable time in Scotland was from 1625 to 1630, when for five years there was an open window of heaven over Scotland. Under the ministry of David Dickson at Irvine and Stewarton, hundreds were brought to Christ; and under John Livingstone, at Kirk of Shotts, five hundred in one day.

The second time of love was exactly a hundred years ago, in 1742, when the windows of heaven were opened over Kilsyth and Cambuslang, and about twenty or thirty other parts of Scotland shared in the blessing.

The third time of love in Scotland was from 1798 to 1800, when the parish of Moulin and some neighbouring parishes were visited in a remarkable manner.

The last is in our own day, beginning in 1839, when God opened the windows of heaven and poured down a blessing, till there was no room to receive it. This congregation has been exalted to heaven. You have had such an opportunity of being saved as you may never have again. Christ has done mighty works in the midst of you. Every sinner converted is a greater miracle than all external miracles put together.

By the Spirit being poured on your heart.

No doubt this was the case with many in Capernaum. The Holy Spirit strove with them; but they vexed him, so that he was turned to be their enemy, and fought against them. This has been the case with some of you. The Spirit has been pou

red on you, convincing you of sin, making you lie in the dust because of sin, giving you glances of desire after Christ. Ah! this is an amazing opportunity for being saved. If ever any man was at heaven's gates, it is that man with whom the Spirit has been striving.

2. Capernaum repented not (verse 20).

It would be interesting to know the secret history of the people of Capernaum. When Christ came among them, they were 'a people that sat in darkness, in the region and shadow of death.' A few were taken out of them, jewels for the Redeemer's crown; but the most repented not.

Some would not go to hear.

Their neighbours told them that a great prophet had come to dwell in their town; that he spoke as never man spake; that gracious words proceeded out of his mouth; that he spoke with majesty, and heavenly power, and holy love; that he healed all that came. They heard of the centurion's servant being healed, of Jairus' daughter being raised, and the nobleman's soil. The whole town rang again. Their neighbours said, Will you not go and hear him? They made light of it, and went their way - one to his farm, another to his merchandise. 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them; I pray thee to have me excused.' And so they repented not. In darkness he found them, in darkness he left them.

Some went for a while.

They wondered when they saw his miracles. They followed him from place to place. They sat down on the grass to eat the bread he gave. They stood on the shore and listened to his preaching, and for a while they seemed taken with it. But when he pressed them that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood - a personal closing with Christ - they said: 'This is a hard saying, who can bear it?' They went back, and walked no more with Jesus. They repented not.

Some followed him all the time.

They would not miss a sermon by the lake for all the world. They ran on foot round the lake when he sailed to the other side. They stood breathless to hear; and yet they lived in some damning sin. They were hearers of the Word - not doers. They repented not. So it is in this place. If Christ were now where I am, he would upbraid this nation, because it has repented not. Instead of repenting, our nation is evidently like Capernaum, becoming more dark and wicked.

But with regard to this place:

How many will not come to hear, but live on in their unrepented sins! Although God has opened his house of mercy here, although the door is open, notwithstanding all that God has done in this place, notwithstanding all the souls that have been saved, notwithstanding all the mighty works Jesus has done, multitudes have never come. They repent not. The taverns are as many as ever, these dens of iniquity are not diminished; the number of brawlers on the Saturday night and Sabbath is not smaller. If Jesus were here, he would upbraid you.

Some have come, and gone away offended.

Many came for a while, but when pressed to close with Jesus, were offended. It seems as if ministers must not speak the truth nowadays, but mince their words and make them sweet and sugary, that sinners may swallow them without offending their palate. We must not call black, black, and bitter, bitter, or some will be offended. All this shows that you have not repented.

Some have done many things, but still have not repented.

Some follow from sermon to sermon, and, like the multitudes that stood by the lake, drink in the word greedily. You have wondered at Christ's mighty works; but still you have not left your sin, your idol, your unlawful attachment. You are still a covetous man and an idolater who shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. You repent not.

3. Capernaum was brought down to hell.

The inhabitants of these cities have long since passed away, and now the woe of Christ has taken hold of them. You must either have Christ's blessing or his woe. These cities were to sink lower than other cities, lower than Tyre and Sidon, I

ower than Sodom.

The whole Bible shows that there will be degrees of suffering in hell. Some will suffer more, some less, and yet all eternally. Just as there are degrees of blessedness in heaven; some being scarcely saved, some having an abundant entrance; others having an exceeding weight of external glory; one having authority over five cities, another over ten cities; all vessels being full of glory and joy, but some being more capacious: so in hell, there will be degrees of agony. 'He that knew his Lord's will, and did it not, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did it not, shall be beaten with few stripes.' Those who have sinned against gospel light shall receive greater damnation. The people of Capernaum went far deeper into the lake than the people of Tyre and Sidon and Sodom. 'It shall be more tolerable.' The hell of these people will be infinitely dreadful, but it will be more tolerable than yours.

According to justice.

It is to satisfy justice that there is a hell at all: 'Because the righteous Lord loveth righteousness.' If it be just that there be a hell, then justice demands that those who have sinned against greater light should have a deeper place. So that as surely as gospel sinners go to hell, so surely will they go to the deepest place of all.

According to truth.

God says it will be so; therefore it must be so. Some people please themselves with the fancy that there is no hell, that God is too kind and merciful. But is he a true God? If he be a true God, then there is a hell, and the deepest part is for gospel sinners.

In the nature of things.

One of the bitterest parts of a sinner's eternity will be memory. As it will increase the joy of God's people when they sing the song of Moses, so it will increase the misery of the damned, when they remember all God's kindness and their own sin. And, oh! what kind of memory will you have who have lived on under this ministry unconverted and unsaved? Oh! if you could pluck memory from its seat. Oh! if you could blot out the memory of these quiet Sabbaths. Alas! it may not be.

'It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you. And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.'

Re: Capernaum -mcheyne, on: 2006/12/23 23:26

This is so good. Thanks for sharing it.

It's sobering to think now of the spiritual state of Scotland and the entire UK. This could also well be a message preached to my nation which has been blessed by God. Canada too is a nation that God has touched in revival.

We need the Holy Spirit to work in our midst...