1 Kings - Commentaries by John Gifford Bellett

Short Meditations, Altar at Bethel, The

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THE inspired commentary on idolatry, which we find in Rom. 1, teaches us to know that it had its source in the corruption of the human mind. The haughtiness of the intellect became the parent of it. (Vers. 22-25.) The apostle tells us also that the " heart of unbelief " is an " evil " one. (Heb. 3:12.) And at the opening of this scripture, we find that it was the love of the world that erected the idolatrous altar at Bethel. Jeroboam thought it was the only way by which he could secure the kingdom.

He corrupted the religion of the people. He did not, in infidel scorn, deny it-because he owned that God's people had been brought out of Egypt-but he corrupted it-as guilty a thing; for it was turning it to his own account, or making it serve his own ends.

We learn, at the opening of chapter 13, how the Lord deals with this corruption. It is according to His usual method. He sends His servant, under a fresh communication of His mind, and a fresh anointing of His Spirit, from the land of Judah, to the altar at Bethel, to denounce it, to deliver the judgment of God against all who had connected themselves with it; with a stay of the execution of that judgment until the time of Josiah the future king of the house of David. But He also gives a present pledge of such execution-for the altar was rent at the moment, and the ashes that were upon it were poured out.

This is His common way. He pronounces judgment, but delays the execution of it, giving present pledges of it. The interval is called " His long-suffering "-and we know it is " salvation," a time for gathering and' quickening. (2 Peter 3:15.) Enoch pronounced the judgment of the ungodly, and we know from Jude that the judgment is still to be executed-but the flood was as a pledge-fulfillment. The Lord pronounced the judgment of Jerusalem in Matt. 24, and we know, from the very terms of that sentence, that it is still to be executed-but the Roman invasion was as a pledge-fulfillment of it.

Jeroboam was indignant at the man of God who had pronounced this sentence against his altar, and he stretched out his arm, as commanding his servants to lay hold on him. But the hand of God laid hold on him, and his outstretched arm became rigid and withered. Then his mind is changed-he repents himself-to be sure he does-he is gracious when pangs come upon him-and he sues the man of God to pray for the restoration of his arm. This is done; and he invites the man of God to come home with him to his palace for refreshment and rewards. But he lets the king know, in the spirit of a Daniel, that he may keep his gifts to himself and give his rewards to another. He leaves the scene of God's curse, and sets himself on the way back to Judah, having done the business committed to him by " the word of the Lord." The altar and its priests are left to meet the judgment of God in its season.

Now, however, and from hence to the end, the scene changes. We have no further sight of the man of God and of the king together, but we are to see the man of God in company with an old prophet who at that time lived at Bethel.

We are exposed to special temptations, if we live on border-lands, or in equivocal circumstances and conditions.

The old prophet, saint of God as he was, lived (something in the way of a Lot in Sodom) near the altar. The devil uses him; and with a lie in his mouth, that he was bidden by an angel to do so, he brings the man of God back from the road that was leading him down to Judah, to eat and drink with him in his house at Bethel.

The man of God was not on the apostle's elevation, or in the apostle's strength. He could and would stand for the 'word of the Lord in the face of all pretensions or assumptions. He would pronounce anathema upon even an angel himself, if he dared to gainsay that word which he had received from God. He cared not who it was, so to speak, come he from earth, hell, or heaven. He would hold by the word of God in the face of them all (Gal. 1; 2)-just as he could turn his back upon Jerusalem, and rebuke the chief of the apostles, even Peter, and withstand him before all.

But this man of God was not in this vigor of Paul. He surrendered the word which he had received from God, to the word, as he judged it to be, of an angel; and he goes back to eat and drink in the place of which the Lord had said to him, Thou shalt eat no bread, nor drink water there."

And here another divine principle gets a very striking illustration.

God is judging according to every one's work. (1 Peter 1:17.) That is, He is disciplining His people now. Judgment at the house of God has begun. (1 Peter 4:17.) And so it is here. The judgment on Jeroboam and his priests is delayed; the judgment of this man of God shall be immediate. He shall now be judged of the Lord, that he may not be condemned with the world or Jeroboam by-and-by. (See 2 Kings 23:17, 18.) The word alights upon him, falls in judgment on him, as he sits at the table of the old prophet, eating and drinking—for he was eating and drinking condemnation of himself. And shortly after, as he resumes his journey home to Judah, and is on his road thither, a lion meets him and slays him.

How very arresting of our thoughts, and full of solemn meaning, all this is! The judgment of the world is stayed; the discipline of the saints is proceeding. So is it here. Yea, and more. There was a present pledge of the future judgment of the world, and there shall be now a present pledge of the future salvation of the saint. The altar was rent, as we saw, and the ashes poured out-and so now, the lion is not allowed to touch the carcass of the man of God, nor lay his deadly paw upon the ass that had carried him. His body is reserved for final honor, though his life was a present forfeit to the righteous judgment or holy discipline of God.

It would have been the nature of the lion to kill the ass as well as its rider, and to devour the carcass-but he acted as much under divine commission, in the death of the man of God, as the man of God himself had acted, when he pronounced judgment on the altar.

What varied and instructive illustrations of truth all these things are!

And the old prophet, too, is to be again before us.-There was in him that which was of God, as well as that which was of nature or the flesh. But he was now old, and gray hairs are sadly numerous upon this Ephraim, as the prophet speaks. He had lived carelessly as a saint. He had taken up his dwelling in an unclean place. He was too much like an old professor that needed reviving virtue. Satan uses him (as we have seen, but sad to tell it) to corrupt his younger brother, a freshly-anointed vessel of the Spirit. But still, he seems to have been a " righteous man," like Lot, though living in a Sodom. His lamentation over the man of God was genuine, and as that of one saint over another-genuine as the lamentation of David over Jonathan. It was the sorrow of a saint of God. And he charges his sons when he should die, to bury him in the same sepulcher where he was now religiously laying the remains of him whom he calls his " brother," the man of God.

All this bespeaks the better nature in him. And when the Lord comes to execute by Josiah the judgment He had now pronounced by the man of God; when the power of His hand comes to make good the declarations of His Spirit, and the day of the world's doom arrives, this Jeroboam-world of which we are speaking, the hand of God respects the old prophet as it does the man of God. Josiah saves the sepulcher of these men, and preserves the bones of each of them from the common penal burning under which he was putting all others found in that unclean place around the altar of Bethel-as we read so fully and strikingly in 2 Kings 23.

It is thus; and all this reads us a lesson of very various moral instruction. We see the way of God in the judgment of the world, and in the discipline of His saint. We see the danger of living near Sodom. And we learn afresh that God's word must be clung to in the face of all, and of everything.

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