

Jude 1 (Charles Henry Mackintosh) 147061

Handfuls of Pasture: Volume 1, Malachi and Jude, The Closing Scenes of (1)

In comparing these two inspired writings, we find many points of similarity, and many points of contrast. Both the prophet and apostle portray scenes of ruin, corruption, and apostasy. The former is occupied with the ruin of Judaism; the latter with the ruin of Christendom. The prophet Malachi, in his very opening sentences, gives, with uncommon vividness, the source of Israel's blessing, and the secret of their fall. "I have loved you, saith the Lord." Here was the grand source of all their blessedness, all their glory, all their dignity. Jehovah's love accounts for all the bright glory of Israel's past, and all the brighter glories of Israel's future. While, on the other hand, their bold and infidel challenge, "Wherein hast thou loved us?" accounts for the deepest depths of Israel's present degradation. To put such a question, after all that Jehovah had done for them, from the days of Moses to the days of Solomon, proved a condition of heart insensible to the very last degree. Those who, with the marvelous history of Jehovah's actings before their eyes, could say, "Wherein hast thou loved us?" were beyond the reach of all moral appeal. Hence, therefore, we need not be surprised at the prophet's burning words. We are prepared for such sentences as the following: "If then I be a father, where is mine honor? and if I be a master, where is my fear? saith the Lord of hosts unto you, O priests, that despise my name. And ye say, Wherein have we despised thy name?" There was the most thorough insensibility both as to the Lord's love, and as to their own evil ways. There was the hardness of heart that could say, "Wherein hast thou loved us?" and "Wherein have we wronged thee?" And all this with the history of a thousand years before then—eyes—a history overlapped by the unexampled grace, mercy, and patience of God—a history stained, from first to last, with the record of their unfaithfulness, folly, and sin.

But let us hearken to the prophet's further utterances, or rather to the touching remonstrances of the aggrieved and offended God of Israel. "Ye offer polluted bread upon mine altar; and ye say, Wherein have we polluted thee? In that ye say, The table of the Lord is contemptible. And if ye offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? and if ye offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? offer it now unto thy governor; will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person? saith the Lord of hosts... who is there even among you that would shut the doors for naught? neither do ye kindle fire on mine altar for naught. I have no pleasure in you, saith the Lord of hosts, neither will I accept an offering at your hand. For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same, my name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto my name, and a pure offering; for my name shall be great among the heathen, saith the Lord of hosts. But ye have profaned it, in that ye say, The table of the Lord is polluted; and the fruit thereof, even his meat, is contemptible. Ye said also, Behold, what a weariness is it! and ye have snuffed at it, saith the Lord of hosts; and ye brought that which was torn, and the lame, and the sick; thus ye brought an offering: should I accept this of your hand? saith the Lord."

Here then we have a sad and dreary picture of Israel's moral condition. The public worship of God had fallen into utter contempt. His altar was insulted; His service despised. As to the priests, it was a mere question of filthy lucre; and as to the people, the whole thing had become a perfect weariness—an empty formality—a dull and heartless routine. There was no heart for God. There was plenty of heart for gain. Any sacrifice, however maimed and torn, was deemed good enough for the altar of God.

The lame, the blind, and the sick, the very worst that could be had, such as they would not dare to offer to a human governor, was laid on the altar of God. And if a door was to be opened, or a fire kindled, it must be paid for. No pay, no work. Such was the lamentable condition of things in the days of Malachi. It makes the heart sick to contemplate it.

But, thanks and praise be to God, there is another side of the picture. There were some rare and lovely exceptions to the gloomy rule—some striking and beautiful forms standing out in relief from the dark background. It is truly refreshing, in the midst of all this venality and corruption, coldness and hollowness, barrenness and heartlessness, pride and stoutness of heart, to read such words as these: "Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another; and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name."

How precious is this brief record! How delightful to contemplate this remnant in the midst of the moral ruin! There is no pretension, or assumption; no attempt to set up anything; no effort to reconstruct the fallen economy; no affected display of power. There is felt weakness, and looking to Jehovah; and this—be it observed and ever remembered—is the true secret of all real power. We need never be afraid of conscious weakness. It is affected strength that we have to dread and shrink from. "When I am weak, then am I strong" is ever the rule for the people of God—a blessed rule, most surely. God is to be counted upon always; and we may lay it down as a great root principle, that, no matter what may be the actual state of the professing body, individual faith can enjoy communion with God according to the very highest truth of the dispensation.

This is a grand principle to grasp and hold fast. Let the ostensible people of God be ever so sunk, individuals who judge and humble themselves before God can enjoy His presence and blessing, without let or limit. Witness the Daniels, the Mordecais, the Ezras, the Nehemiahs, the Josiahs, and Hezekiahs, and scores of others who walked with God, carried out the highest principles and enjoyed the rarest privileges of the dispensation, when all lay in hopeless ruin around them. There was a passover celebrated in the days of Josiah such as had not been known from the days of Samuel the prophet. (2 Chron. 35:18.) The feeble remnant, on their return from Babylon, celebrated the feast of tabernacles, a privilege which had not been tasted since the days of Joshua the son of Nun. (Neh. 8:17.) Mordecai, without ever striking a blow, gained as splendid a victory over Amalek as that achieved by Joshua in the days of Exod. 17 (Esther 6:11, 12.) In the book of Daniel we see earth's proudest monarch prostrate at the feet of a captive Jew.

What do all these cases teach us? What lesson do they tell out in our ears? Simply that the humble, believing, and obedient soul is permitted to enjoy the very deepest and richest communion with God, spite of the failure and ruin of God's professing people, and the departed glory of

the dispensation in which his lot is cast.

Thus it was, as we may see, in the closing scenes of Malachi. All was in hopeless ruin; but that did not hinder those who loved and feared the Lord getting together to speak about Him and to muse upon His precious name. True, that feeble remnant was not like the great congregation which assembled in the days of Solomon, from Dan to Beersheba; but it had a glory peculiar to itself. It had the divine presence in a way no less marvelous though not so striking. We are not told of any "book of remembrance" in the days of Solomon. We are not told of Jehovah's hearkening and hearing. Perhaps it may be said, there was no need. Be it so; but that does not dim the luster of the grace that shone upon the little band in the days of Malachi. We may boldly affirm that Jehovah's heart was as refreshed by the loving breathings of that little band as by the splendid sacrifice in the days of Solomon's dedication. Their love shines out all the brighter in contrast with the heartless formalism of the professing body, and the venal corruption of the priests.

"And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him. Then shall ye return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not. 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."

We shall now give a hasty glance at the epistle of Jude. Here we have a still more appalling picture of apostasy and corruption. It is a familiar saying amongst us, that the corruption of the best tiling is the worst corruption; and hence it is that the Apostle Jude spreads before us a page so very much darker and more awful than that presented by the prophet Malachi. It is the record of man's utter failure and ruin under the very highest and richest privileges which could be conferred upon him.

In the opening of his solemn address, the apostle lets us know that it was laid upon His heart "to write unto us of the common salvation." This would have been his far more delightful task. It would have been his joy and his refreshment to expatiate upon the present privileges and future glories wrapped up in the comprehensive folds of that precious word "salvation." But he felt it "needful" to turn from this more congenial work in order to fortify our souls against the rising tide of error and evil which threatened the very foundations of Christianity. "Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints." All that was vital and fundamental was at stake. It was a question of earnestly contending for the faith itself. "For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation; ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ."

This is far worse than anything we have in Malachi. There it was a question of the law; as we read, "Remember ye the law of Moses my servant, which I commanded unto him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments." But in Jude it is not a question of forgetting the law, but of actually turning into lasciviousness the pure and precious grace of God, and denying the Lordship of Christ. Hence, therefore, instead of dwelling upon the salvation of God, the apostle seeks to fortify us against the wickedness and lawlessness of men. "I will therefore," he says, "put you in remembrance, though ye once knew this, how that the Lord, having saved the people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed them that believed not. And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day."

All this is most solemn; but we cannot dwell upon the dark features of this scene, space does not admit of our so doing; and besides, we rather desire to present to the Christian reader the charming picture of the Christian remnant given in the closing lines of this most searching scripture. As in Malachi we have, amid the helpless ruin of Judaism, a devoted band of Jewish worshippers who loved and feared the Lord and took sweet counsel together, so in the epistle of Jude, amid the more appalling ruins of christian profession, the Holy Ghost introduces to our notice a company whom He addresses as "Beloved." These are "sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ, and called." These He solemnly warns against the varied forms of error and evil which were already beginning to make their appearance, but have since assumed such awfully formidable proportions. To these He turns, with the most exquisite grace, and addresses the following exhortation, "But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life."

Here, then, we have divine security against all the dark and terrible forms of apostasy—"the way of Cain, the error of Balaam, the gainsaying of Core"—"the murmurers and complainers"—"the great swelling words"—"the raging waves"—"the wandering stars"—"having men's persons in admiration because of advantage." The "beloved" are to "build themselves up on their most holy faith."

Let the reader note this. There is not a syllable here about an order of men to succeed the apostles; not a word about gifted men of any sort. It is well to see this, and to bear it ever in mind. We hear a great deal of our lack of gift and power, of our not having pastors and teachers. How could we expect to have much gift and power? Do we deserve them? Alas! we have failed, and sinned, and come short. Let us own this, and cast ourselves upon the living God who never fails a trusting heart.

Look at Paul's touching address to the elders of Ephesus, in Acts 20 To whom does he there commend us, in view of the passing away of apostolic ministry? Is there a word about successors to the apostles? Not one, unless indeed it be the "grievous wolves" of which he speaks, or those men who were to arise in the very bosom of the Church, speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after them. What then is the resource of the faithful? "I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified."

What a precious resource! Not a word about gifted men, valuable as such may be in their right place. God forbid we should, in any way, depreciate the gifts which, spite of all the failure and sin, our gracious Lord may see fit to bestow upon His Church. But still it holds good that the blessed apostle, in taking leave of the Church, commends us not to gifted men, but to God Himself and the word of His grace. And hence it follows that, let our weakness be ever so great, we have God to look to and to lean upon. He never fails those who trust Him; and there is no limit whatsoever to the blessing which our souls may taste, if only we look to God, in humility of mind and childlike confidence.

Here lies the secret of all true blessedness and spiritual power—humility of mind, and simple confidence. There must, on the one hand, be no assumption of power; and on the other, we must not, in the unbelief of our hearts, limit the goodness and faithfulness of our God. He can and does bestow gifts for the edification of His people. He would bestow much more if we were not so ready to manage for ourselves. If the Church would but look more to Christ her living Head and loving Lord, instead of to the arrangements of men, and the appliances of this world, she would have a very different tale to tell. But if we, by our unbelieving plans, and our restless efforts to provide a machinery for ourselves, quench, and hinder, and grieve the Holy Ghost, need we marvel if we are left to prove the barrenness and emptiness, the desolation and confusion of all such things? Christ is sufficient: but He must be proved; He must be trusted; He must be allowed to act. The platform must be left perfectly clear for the Holy Ghost to display thereon the preciousness, the fullness, the all-sufficiency of Christ.

But it is precisely in this very thing we so signally fail. "We try to hide our weakness instead of owning it. We seek to cover our nakedness by a drapery of our own providing, instead of confiding simply and entirely in Christ for all we need. We grow weary of the attitude of humble patient waiting, and we are in haste to put on an appearance of strength. This is our folly and our grievous loss. If we could only be induced to believe it, our real strength is to know our weakness, and cling to Christ, in artless faith, from day to day.

It is to this most excellent way that the apostle Jude exhorts the christian remnant in his closing lines. "Ye, beloved, building up yourselves in your most holy faith." These words evidently set forth the responsibility of all true Christians to be found together instead of being divided and scattered. We are to help one another in love, according to the measure of grace bestowed, and the nature of the gift communicated. It is a mutual thing—"building up yourselves." It is not looking to an order of men; nor is it complaining of our lack of gifts; but simply doing each what we can to promote the common blessing and profit of all.

The reader will notice the four things which we are exhorted to do, namely, "Building"—"Praying"—"Keeping" " Looking." What blessed work is here! Yes, and it is work for all. There is not one true Christian on the face of the earth who cannot fulfill any or all of these branches of ministry; indeed every one is responsible so to do. We can build ourselves up on our most holy faith; we can pray in the Holy Ghost; we can keep ourselves in the love of God; and, while doing these things, we can look out for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But, it maybe asked, "Who are the 'beloved?' to whom does the term apply?" Our answer is, " To whomsoever it may concern." Let us see to it that we are on the ground of those to whom the precious title applies. It is not assuming the title, but occupying the true moral ground. It is not empty profession, but real possession. It is not affecting the name, but being the thing.

Nor does the responsibility of the christian remnant end here. It is not merely of themselves they have to think. They are to cast a loving look and stretch forth a helping hand beyond the circumference of their own circle. " And of some have compassion, making a difference: and others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh." Who are the "some?" and who are the " others?" Is there not the same beautiful undefinedness about these as there is about the "Beloved?" These latter will be at no loss to find out the former. There are precious souls scattered up and down amid the appalling ruins of Christendom, " some" of them to be looked upon with tender compassion, " others" to be saved with godly fear, lest the " beloved" should become involved in the defilement.

It is a fatal mistake to suppose that, in order to pluck people out of the fire, we must go into the fire ourselves. This would never do. The best way to deliver people from an evil position is to be thoroughly out of that position myself. How can I best pull a man out of a morass? Surely not by going into the morass, but by standing on firm ground and from thence lending him a helping hand. I cannot pull a man out of anything unless I am out myself. If we want to help the people of God who are mixed up with the surrounding ruin, the first thing for ourselves is to be in thorough and decided separation; and the next thing is to have our hearts brimful and flowing over with tender and fervent love to all who bear the precious name of Jesus.

Here we must close; and in doing so we shall quote for the reader that blessed doxology with which the apostle sums up his solemn and weighty address. " Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen." We have a great deal about " falling" in this epistle—Israel, falling—angels, falling—cities, falling; but, blessed be God, there is One who is able to keep us from falling, and it is to His holy keeping we are committed.

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