

THE Union Seminary Magazine

VOL. XVIII

APRIL—MAY, 1907

No. 4

THE ELDER AND THE DEACON IN SCRIPTURE.

By REV. T. R. ENGLISH, D. D.

The most primitive form of government known to man is that in which authority is exercised by those superior in age and wisdom, "elders;" and the first who filled this office was Adam, the natural head and ruler of his house. Traces of this primitive custom are still to be seen in the names applied to rulers at the present time, such as, "senators," "alderman," etc.

The term "elder," as an official title, occurs first in Genesis 1. 7, where mention is made of "the elders of Egypt." At the time of the Exodus we find "the elders of Israel" exercising authority over that people, nor was the institution by any means confined to that people, as we find mention also of the elders of Moab and Midian, (Num. xxii. 4, 7). From this time on to the close of the Old Testament, we find constant mention made of these "elders of Israel," and, besides these, each tribe and city and village seems to have had its own elders, who exercised a local and subordinate authority.

These elders were primarily civil rulers, as is manifest by their functions, but they had also their religious and ecclesiastical functions as well. When the synagogue made its appearance after the Exile, we find that each synagogue had its bench of elders, and while they apparently still exercised certain civil functions, it is evident that they were primarily ecclesiastical rulers. They are referred to in the New Testament as "the rulers of the synagogue" (Mark v. 22; Acts xiii. 15; Cf. also, Luke vii. 41), and also as "the elders of the Jews" (Luke vii. 3). Apparently, there was one of their number who acted as pre-

THE YEARS THAT THE LOCUST HATH EATEN.

BY REV. RUSSELL CECIL, D. D.

“And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten.”—Joel ii. 25.

The prophet Joel, in the first part of his book, describes the coming of a plague of locusts upon the land of Israel. The scourge seems to have appeared in his day. It was like an invading army which destroyed everything before it. “The land,” he says, “is as the Garden of Eden before them, and behind them a desolate wilderness.” (Ch. ii. 3.) “The field is wasted, the land mourneth,” (i. 10) “the vine is dried up, the fig tree languisheth,” “because joy is withered away from the sons of men.” (i. 12.) The ruin is so great that even “the meat offering and the drink offering is cut off from the house of God.” (i. 8, 13.)

This plague was no doubt a real occurrence, and yet it had a symbolical significance. It was not an accident or a simple event in the course of nature any more than the plagues of Egypt in the days of Moses and Pharaoh were accidents or simple natural events. It was designed in the Providence of God as an affliction upon the land for some wise purpose, and that purpose had in it, as the purpose of God always does, the rebuke of sin and the encouragement of righteousness. The plagues in Egypt were a punishment to Pharaoh and his people, but they were a blessing to the children of God, so the great scourge of locusts which Joel describes in such graphic language, while a chastisement for the land, had in it also a blessing. It was intended to bring the people nearer to God.

It was also emblematic to Israel of scourges that would come upon their land in the future, and did come by invading armies, all of which were permitted by Jehovah on account of their unbelief and sin, and which were overruled for their good. The course of Providence in one instance was the same in all—the scourges were all typical of the last Day.

After the description of the plague of locusts the prophet calls the people to repentance. “Therefore also now,” saith the Lord, “turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God; for he is

gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil." (ii. 12, 13.) He urges them to proclaim "a fast," to "call a solemn assembly," and let "the priests and ministers of the Lord weep between the porch and the altar," and pray to God to spare his people and let not the heathen rule over them.

Then he says the Lord will "pity his people," and answer graciously; he will remove the scourge and send them abundant harvests to satisfy their need. Among other promises we have that of the text, "And I will restore to you the years that the locusts hath eaten." "And ye shall eat in plenty, and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, that hath dealt wondrously with you; and my people shall never be ashamed." (ii. 25, 26.) Then follows that famous passage in which the prophet describes a great outpouring of the spirit—the passage which Peter quotes at length in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, and which he says was fulfilled in the events of that day. There is a precious promise in the text: "And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten." Let us consider it to-day for our spiritual profit.

1. This promise is for those who feel that in one way or another some part of life for them has been lost. Most people who have lived to mature age, in surveying the past candidly, are convinced that some years of their life have been comparatively fruitless, perhaps even sinfully wasted.

This is the outcome of a life of ungodliness. However enjoyable the pleasures of sin may be as one is passing through such experiences, the years thus spent do not look well when one reaches the serious thought of mature age and reflects upon them. Robert Burns, after many years of dissipation and folly, once said: "My e'en look back upon a prospect drear."

When Jacob was presented to Pharaoh by his son Joseph, the king, impressed with the patriarch's venerable appearance, asked, "How old art thou?" The question was simple enough, but Jacob's reply was pathetic: "The days of the years of my pilgrimage are an hundred and thirty years: few and evil have the days of the years of my life been, and have not attained unto the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their pilgrimage." (Gen. xlvii. 8-9.) There were many dark places in Jacob's memory as it traversed the century and more of years

behind him. He could not fail to recall the deceit and treachery of his youth which made him an exile from his father's house, and made his only brother a life-long enemy, and which had indeed stained so much of the pathway over which he had travelled. Many others, who, like him have chosen a crooked course, have had similar experiences. Years of dissipation, of dishonesty, of impurity, or of worldliness and folly are not a cherished recollection to the man or the woman whose hair is silvered with age, whose mental and physical powers are gradually but certainly weakening, and whose path in the not distant future inevitably leads through the valley and the shadow of death. Then it is that the years of irreligion, ungodliness and unfaithfulness in duty, of selfishness, pride, hardness of heart, and impenitence in sin; of rejection of Christ and his service begin to look like "years that the locust hath eaten," and one can not reflect upon them with emotions of pleasure. They seem to have been lost irretrievably, and one wishes they had never been.

Sometimes, also, one's life has in it a large percentage of years of apparent failure. This may be the case even with the Child of God. I suppose that Moses, as the years multiplied upon his head to the great number of four score, before the day that God called to him out of the burning bush in the Mountain of Midian, must have regarded his life as virtually a failure. He had started upon his career with brilliant prospects, but one rash act had dashed all those prospects to the ground, and he who had been reared in a king's court, "learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians," and "mighty in word and deed," and whose heart had burned with the high and holy ambition to do a great work for God in the deliverance of his people from slavery, had fled for his life and spent forty precious years in exile feeding the flock of his father-in-law in the wilderness. Surely he might have thought the locust has eaten those years up, and they are gone, and such a thought could have been only fruitful of pain and regret. Nor was this a singular experience of Moses. The past in the lives of many before me is full of failures and disappointments. Few, if any, of you have attained to your ideals. You have tried this and you have tried that, sometimes rashly, sometimes timidly, sometimes with high hope and courage, sometimes with the energy of despair, but success has been ever eluding your grasp, and the ideal is still an unrealized fancy. It

has been so in material things and also in spiritual. Many a faithful and earnest Christian feels that his spiritual life has been a failure. It appears so barren and unproductive, and so far short of what it might have been that he cannot regard it with satisfaction. Lord Kelvin, one of the most celebrated scientists of this age, and an humble Christian, in answer to the congratulations of his friends on the fiftieth anniversary of his professorship in the University of Glasgow, said that his principal regret was that he had accomplished so little and had fallen so far short of what he had hoped to do in life. And that is the feeling of all earnest, faithful hearts as they contemplate their service for the Master.

The lives of others are ravaged by affliction. Like Paul, they have "sorrow upon sorrow." Sometimes a great block of years is eaten up by personal ill health, or the ill health of some loved one who demands constant care. Job passed through a whole avalanche of troubles, as calamity after calamity came crashing down upon him. His life was full of tragedy, and that has been true of many others besides him. Perhaps there are some here who, when they think of their own experience, feel like saying, as the prophet Joel did about the scourges of Israel, "That which the palmer-worm hath left hath the locust eaten; and that which the locust hath left hath the canker-worm eaten; and that which the canker-worm hath left hath the caterpillar eaten." (i. 4.) And all is wasteness and desolation. But, however painful may have been your experiences, and whether it has been sin or failure, or sorrow, or all of these combined which has eaten up so many years of your past, the gracious promise of the text is just as much for you as it was for ancient Israel.

2. Observe that the promise is for restoration. "And I will restore to you," saith God, "the years that the locust hath eaten, the canker-worm, and the caterpillar, and the palmer-worm, my great army which I sent among you."

This promise reveals the infinite goodness and love of God. It could not have arisen from any other source. It is of a piece with his purpose through which the scourge was permitted to come upon the land. That did not indicate that God had forgotten them or that in anger he had turned away from them. It was only a practical illustration of the spiritual truth, that "whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son

whom he receiveth." It means that if God in his love finds it necessary to wound his people he is always ready to heal their wounds; if he finds it necessary to punish the guilty, he is always ready to forgive the penitent.

The conditions on which this promise is to be fulfilled are just the same with us as they were with Israel, for whom Joel was especially writing. He called the people to repentance and to prayer. If they would "turn unto the Lord with fasting and with weeping," and "would rend their hearts and not their garments," then they would find that "he was gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness," and if "the priests and ministers of the Lord" would pray, "Spare thy people, O Lord, and give not thine heritage to reproach that the heathen should rule over them," "then," the prophet assures them, "will the Lord be jealous for his land and pity his people," then will he answer them in peace and bless them, and "restore unto them the years that the locust hath eaten."

This is one method of approaching God that never fails. Many have called upon him in anger, or in the pride and vanity of a wicked heart, or in rebellious grief, and the heavens have been as brass to their petitions, but no broken-hearted penitent, no anguish-stricken spirit humbled by failure and disappointment, and no soul burdened with sorrow ever turns to him for relief in vain. "Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." "Blessed are they that mourn; for they shall be comforted." When we discover the wretchedness, the uselessness, the aimlessness, the sinfulness of the godless life, and when we come to him in all humility and penitence and conscious weakness, then we are sure to find him, for then he is waiting for us, and waiting to be gracious. Then he stands ready to make good the losses which we have incurred by sin out of the riches of his grace. For Paul assures us that "where sin abounded grace did much more abound." He is abundantly able and abundantly willing to repair the waste places in any life which has been scourged by the locusts and canker-worms of unbelief and sin and sorrow.

3. Much is involved in this promise of restoration. There is forgiveness for the sins and failures of the past. "Let the wicked forsake his ways and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon

him, and, to our God, for he will abundantly pardon." Sin is wiped out in forgiveness; it is remembered against the transgressor no more forever. When it has been forgiven, it does not rise up again, like Banquo's ghost, to torment the sinner. It may be remembered by him, but it has been blotted out of God's eternal book of accounts, and there is an end of it. When a criminal has received executive pardon, the law can never bring another action against him for that crime. It may, and will, remain a dark spot in his own life and memory, but he is as free before the law as if he had never transgressed. This is true also of the pardoned sinner in the sight of God.

God restores by grace, as I have said, what has been lost by sin. The losses in Eden were made good on Calvary. When the work of grace in the redemption of the saved sinner is complete, and he awakes in glory, it will not be in the likeness of Adam, but in the likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ. The psalmist says in his prayer, "I shall be satisfied when I awake with thy likeness." We would not be satisfied, neither would the Saviour, if, as the result of his redeeming work, we were only restored to the image of the unfallen Adam. He shall see of the travail of his soul and be satisfied, and we also shall be satisfied, when we shall be like him, and shall see him as he is. "Paradise Regained" is better than "Paradise Lost." The redemption life is to be grander, fuller, and more glorious than the innocent life in the garden of Eden.

This restoration involves the mastery of many hitherto unlearned lessons, and much needed discipline of character. Think of the effect of forty years wandering in Midian upon Moses! He overcame the rashness of youth and learned self-control. By years of quiet mediation and prayer he learned to wait till the mind of God was revealed to him and not to run before the Almighty. His body accustomed to luxury, became inured to hardship and exposure. He became acquainted with the mountains of Nebo and with the adjacent countries lying between Egypt and Palestine, through which the people of Israel would necessarily pass in their journey. He also heard the voice of God in the burning bush, and, altogether, he was better prepared at the end of that long and painful experience for his great task than he was at the beginning of it. Think, too, of the effect of his manifold afflictions upon Job! That experience was a crucial

test of his faith in God and of the integrity of his character. He was so humbled before God that he came to the point of saying, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." (Job xlii. 5, 6.) Then the Lord literally restored to him the years that the locusts had eaten, for the record says, "So the Lord blessed the latter end of Job more than the beginning." His possessions were double what they were before his afflictions, and another family of seven sons and three daughters were given to him. It is in such incomprehensible experiences as these of Moses and Job that men learn the most valuable lessons of life and their characters receive that discipline which is essential to their proper development.

This restoration promised in the text involves also the blessing of the Holy Spirit. There is nothing more instructive and interesting in this remarkable passage than the verses immediately following the text. "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh," and then follows the passage made use of by Peter on the Day of Pentecost. How strange the connection of these words with the text, and yet how suggestive of important spiritual truth! "Afterward," that is, after the repentance and the prayers and the blessing of God in restoring the years which had been lost in the plague, then came the outpouring of the Spirit. Is that not the recognized order of God's procedure in grace? The Spirit comes after Gethsemane and Calvary; after the humiliation of the disciples by apparent failure and defeat; but also after ten days spent in supplication and prayer. So he comes to us not in seasons of sinful gayety and folly, not when every carnal desire of the heart is gratified, not when we are strangers to all anguish of soul, but when the heart has been broken for sin and the spirit by sorrow, when we have found the crucified Saviour to be the propiation for our sins and in him our souls are satisfied. "Afterward," the Spirit is poured out upon us in great abundance and we begin to "dream dreams" and to "see visions." If to-day, my friends, any of you look back upon some years which the locusts have eaten out of your life, and if you have learned the lessons which those bitter experiences were designed to teach, I am sure those years may be, if they have not already been, restored to you by the riches of God's saving and comforting grace and by the blessing of the Holy Spirit in your heart and life.