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→*SERMONS*←

THE GOD OF JESHURUN.*

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The God of Jeshurun, who rideth upon the heaven in thy help.—DEUT. xxxiii., 26.

THESE are farewell words from the parting benediction with which Moses, the man of God, blessed the children of Israel ere he took his final journey into the land of Moab, where the divine hand laid him to rest in a sepulchre of which "no man knoweth unto this day." The form of the language seems to indicate that the twelve tribes passed successively in review before him, and as each standard approached he pronounced upon its tribe a benediction, suggested partly by the device upon the standard and partly by a prophetic foresight of the future history of the tribe. The concluding words, however, of which the text forms a part, seem to have been spoken, not to a particular tribe, but to the whole camp of Israel, and through that ancient and typical encampment to the vaster and more spiritual one of all ages constituting the true Israel of God.

Viewing these words in this light, the character of the blessing pronounced is eminently instructive. You will observe no promise of exemption from the fatigues and hardships, from the trials and conflicts of the desert way.

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The "great and terrible wilderness," with its weary leagues of arid sands and scorching suns, is still to be traversed. Hordes of the desert born to pillage are to hang upon the flank of the marching host, whilst in front will be the armed hosts of Amalek, and beyond, the Anakim and the cities walled up to heaven. The promise to the tribes then, as to the tribes of the true Israel now, is not of exemption, but of shoes made of iron and brass; of strength proportioned to the day; of Jehovah riding upon the heaven in their help, and of the upholding of the everlasting arms.

From this full circle of divine promise, so inspiring to the "Church that is in the wilderness," I cut out a single segment for consideration to-day. I ask you to meditate with me upon these brief but fruitful words, "the God of Jeshurun, who rideth upon the heaven in thy help."

I. Let us consider first the appellation given to Jehovah by His inspired servant when he designates Him as the "God of Jeshurun." The term Jeshurun is a collective used, just as Israel, Jacob, etc., are used under similar circumstances, to designate the covenant people—the people who, like Israel of old, have received a divine call to come out from the world and be separate; who, in obedience to this divine call, have separated themselves unto the Lord, and have entered into a solemn and public covenant with Him in which they have engaged to be His, and in which He has been graciously pleased to receive them, so that they now constitute His *peculium*, His little flock, a people separate and peculiar to the Lord.

Jeshurun is, in other words, a symbolical designation of the Church. For no better definition of the Church can possibly be given than that it is the body of people in covenant with God. The invisible Church consists of those who were given to the Son in the eternal covenant of grace, and who in due time have received the seal of that covenant in the inward baptism of the Holy Spirit. The visible Church consists of those, together with their children, who have dedicated themselves to God in the covenant which was originally made with Abraham and his household, and which was afterwards enlarged and extended at the personal coming of Christ, and who have received the seal of this covenant in the initial rite of circumcision under the Old Economy, or of baptism under the New.

This text, therefore, in common with many others, represents God to us as being in a high and peculiar sense the God of the Church; as sustaining to those who are members of the Church a relation that He does not and cannot sustain to one who is outside its fold. I ask especial attention to this thought of God as the God of the Church. We have fallen upon times when there is a great tendency to disparage the visible Church as an institute of God in the world. Men go about the land in the garb of evangelists, decrying church membership, confounding denominationalism with sectarianism, aiming to break down not only the distinctive lines between the different branches of the Church, but the church lines themselves. They deny the efficacy and depreciate the value of the sacraments. They would have us substitute for the solemn covenanting of the Church with its impress-

ive sacramental seals a mere personal acknowledgment of Christ which implies no church relations and involves no covenant obligations.

In the face of this incipient heresy of the day it is needful to make prominent the truth that God is the God of the covenant people; that He sustains to the church-member who is faithful to his covenant vows a relation that He bears to no one else; that when I, as a sinner, accepted the terms of the covenant which He has been pleased to lay at the foundation of the visible Church, and in token of this acceptance received the seal of that covenant, I was brought into intimate and endearing relationship to Him. He became in a peculiarly blessed sense my God and my Father, so that I can now look up to Him and say "My God," "My Father," as they cannot do and dare not do who refuse to come within the pale of the visible Church. And so, when in its tender infancy I brought in my arms my little babe and presented it before the altar of God, and claimed for it the provisions of the covenant of redemption, and had the outward seal of that covenant impressed upon it, it was my privilege to look up and feel, as I do this day look up and feel, that God is the God of my child in a sense in which He is not and cannot be the God of any child that has not thus been brought by birth and baptism into covenant relationship with Him. As Presbyterians we rejoice this day with exceeding joy that God is the God of Jeshurun, the God of the covenant people, the God of the Church.

But there must be special reason for using this particular term to designate the Church. Inquiry into the meaning of the word will doubtless indicate lessons that it may be profitable and proper for us to study. Viewed etymologically we find Jeshurun to be derived from a root signifying uprightness. In grammatical form it seems to be the plural diminutive of the word *upright*. It may, therefore, probably be best translated *the children of uprightness*. This is God's designation of the Church, indicative of its true character and mission in the world. Constituted of those whose natures once fallen have been through God's mercy again, to some extent at least, set upright, it is God's institute for the establishment and promotion of uprightness. Its mission is through the power of divine grace to set upright that which has fallen.

Its first work is to lift truth out of the dust; to free it from the incubus of error and superstition under which it has been borne down; to maintain it, to vindicate it, to defend it against all assaults of error, and to preserve it pure from all the inventions and sophistries of men. This is a grand mission by virtue of which it is the "pillar and ground of the truth," so that it may say in the words of its divine and adorable Head, "To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth." And whilst, like Himself, it bears to some extent this relation to all truth, yet there is a high and peculiar sense in which the Church is the custodian of the truth. It has received from God by inspiration a great body of truth, historic truth, prophetic truth, doctrinal truth, ethical truth, experimental truth, truth for the practical guidance and government of life. This body

of inspired truth, constituting the "lively oracles" of God, has been committed, as a most sacred trust, to the keeping of the Church. She is responsible to Him for the preservation and maintenance in its integrity and purity of this written Word. Every segment of its truth she must guard with sedulous care. She must see that not one jot is added to it, or one tittle taken from it. Her testimony must be borne, clear and decisive, against the application to it of any principles of interpretation that are fallacious or dangerous. All her authority must be exercised, and all the power of her discipline brought into requisition, if necessary, to prevent the inculcation within her bosom, and with her apparent sanction, of theories of inspiration and rules of hermeneutics which tend to impair the confidence of the common people in the accuracy and inerrancy of plain, simple statements of the Word of God.

In this effort to "hold fast the form of sound words" the Church will of course encounter the opposition and incur the ridicule of the men of the world. There will not only be "oppositions of science, falsely so called," but the cry of bigotry, persecution, priestcraft, etc., will be raised. The secular press will be clamorous as a Toy, a Swing, a Thomas, or a Heber Newton is cut off. We shall have to stand the threadbare reminders of Galileos and thumbscrews, and inquisitorial fires. But what of all this? The truth of God is more precious than the plaudits of men. The plenary inspiration of the Scriptures, their interpretation according to just and necessary laws of exegesis, and the trustworthiness of all their statements upon all subjects, historical and scientific, as well as doctrinal and ethical—these are redoubts which the Church of God cannot sacrifice without giving up all to the enemy. "If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?"

That which we have seen to be true as to the office of the Church in reference to the truth is equally true in reference to the ordinances and ceremonies of the house of God. The Church is charged with the duty and responsibility of maintaining them in their simplicity and purity, free from all the innovations and superstitions of men. There is not the same danger at present from this source as from the one alluded to above; but in those stormy days when our fathers beyond the sea contended for "Christ's crown and covenant," this was one of the issues for which they "loved not their lives to the death"; and the heroism with which, in the face not only of ridicule and scorn, but of imprisonment, exile and death upon the scaffold or at the stake, they stood firm to their convictions and steadfast to their faith, may well bring the blush of shame to our cheeks if we prove recreant or fainthearted in these degenerate days when the inspiration of the Word of God and the trustworthiness of its historic narratives are being called into dispute.

Broader, even yet, is the mission of the Church in establishing and maintaining uprightness in the earth. Its office has respect not only to the integrity of the Christian faith and the simplicity and purity of the Christian cultus, but also to the development and perfecting of individual character in all uprightness of conduct and holiness of living. It is designed of God to be the great conservator of virtue, the great bulwark of morality, the efficient

safeguard of the rights and liberties, of the intelligence and virtue, of the beneficence and charity that now beautify and gladden the world. And this in fact it is, and has been through all the ages. Whilst it has now, as it has had in every generation, many unworthy members, many whose lives are very inconsistent, some whose lives are positively vicious and vile; whilst it has thus in every age given occasion to the cavils of those who delight to nourish their own unbelief, feeding it upon the inconsistencies of Christian people, and thus, as the ancient prophet says, "eating up the sins of God's people," yet it cannot be denied that the most potent of all agencies for private and public virtue, the one a hundredfold more potent than all others combined, is the Church of God. Take it away, and the humanitarians who now deride or disparage it would find themselves confronted with elements of lawlessness and violence which would walk the earth like lions that in the absence of their keepers have slipped their chains.

II. We notice, in the second place, that this God of Jeshurun is said to "ride upon the heaven." Living, as we do, in an age in which the current of "advanced thought," as it is called, runs strongly towards materialism, it may be well for us to dwell for a few moments upon this thought. We cannot enter the favorite walks of philosophy at the present time without realizing that the atmosphere about us is different from that in which our fathers lived. Whether or not it be more intensely scientific, there can be no question that it is more essentially godless. It is true that the infidelity of the present day has lost somewhat of the boldness and hardihood of that of the generations past. It no longer comes out with frankness and says, "there is no God;" but, with great affectation of modesty, it says, "We do not say there is no God; we only say that, if there is one, we have never seen any evidence of His presence or power. We have, with the aid of the telescope, penetrated to the furthest realms of the universe, as known to us. We have, through the microscope, searched the atomic world to its depths of infinitesimal minuteness. We find nowhere any scientific evidence of His existence. We find at every point the presence and domain of natural law. We trace all effect and all cause in the play of physical forces, which, though apparently many and varied, are all at last resolvable into a single primordial physical force. This is the only God we know. Of infinite personality, intelligence or will we know nothing, and we decline to believe that of which we have no scientific proof." Sagacious men! We take our stand in the midst of one of our great exposition halls. Around us are thousands of mechanisms, each of which is at work, producing its own peculiar results, and apparently moving independently of all the rest. But upon closer inspection we find these apparently independent mechanisms connected with each other by bands and shafts and pulleys, and as we trace back these agencies for the communication of power, we come at last to a single shaft of a single great central engine, which in its revolution gives the impulse that keeps the whole acres of machinery in motion. As we stand by this great Corliss engine, neither inventor nor engineer is in sight. The immense shaft moves as if it were instinct with

life and conscious of power. Shall we say that back of this single, automatic, self-adjusting force there is neither intelligence of inventor nor will of engineer? And shall I not be equally foolish if, back of that primordial force, which, however automatic and self-adjusting it may appear, is nevertheless purely physical, I fail to recognize the hand of a personal God, setting the shaft in action, regulating the rapidity of its movement, and arresting its motion when He will?

In contrast to this "advanced thought," the aim of which is to thrust God forth, as a living presence and power, beyond the limits of the universe which He has made, I present for your emulation the faith of those grand men of God who wrote these inspired Scriptures. David, as he sat in his summer palace at the foot of the hills of Lebanon, and watched the fleecy clouds as they climbed the mountain side, saw in them God's buckets in which, with invisible windlass, He drew the water from the sea with which He "watereth the hills from his chamber;" and although modern science has taught us much of the nature of that invisible windlass and the laws of its operation, intelligent faith now, as truly as in the days of King David, recognizes the unseen hand that holds the windlass and draws.

And so Moses, in the passage before us, by an exquisite piece of imagery, represents natural law, not as the substitute for a personal God, but as the imperial chariot in which He rides upon the heaven. It is the same bold figure, so often used by the inspired Psalmist, as when he represents Jehovah as "making the clouds His chariot," or as "riding upon the wings of the wind." It is the glory of natural law that it is the power which God wields, the chariot upon which God rides. The more wonderful and majestic modern science shows it to be, the more do our hearts rejoice in it as a fitting vehicle for the triumphant progress of our King. Let the agnostic blindly worship the material chariot if he will, his eye dazzled with the effulgence of its glittering wheels, and his ear fascinated with its music as it glides over the celestial pavement; be it ours to pay our homage to Him who rides upon it, whose eye of intelligence looks down into ours, whose heart of love beats in sympathy with ours, and whose firm hand upon the rein assures us that all things are working together for our eternal good.

III. But it is time we should pass to the consideration of the third and last thought of the text, viz: that this riding of the God of Jeshurun upon the heaven is in His people's help. The chariot was the most formidable of all the implements of ancient warfare. The celerity with which it swept across the field of action; the momentum with which it crushed its way over the prostrate forms of opposing hosts; the vantage afforded to the warrior by its elevated platform and protecting rail, and the carnage wrought by the sharp blades upon its axles as they hewed their way through the masses like scythes through the ripened grain; these made it of all engines of war the most effective and the most terrible. The children of Israel fled in dismay as they heard the rumble of Pharaoh's chariot wheels. When intercepted by the waters of the Red Sea they stood cowering with affright as they saw the gleam of the chariots in the

sunlight. Moses therefore introduces an element of encouragement peculiarly appropriate to the circumstances and experiences of the people when he represents Jehovah as an infinite charioteer riding majestically forth upon the heaven, keeping ever near His people in their wilderness journey, and ready in the hour of their conflict and peril to appear for their relief, and for the discomfiture of their foes. It was just the assurance needed by a host who felt the inferiority of their equipment and resources to those of the enemies with whom they would have to contend. But without discarding from our view the special symbolism of the text, what can be more inspiring to the Church in this age, and in the midst of her present conflicts, than this thought of her Jehovah-Jesus, sitting upon the circle of the heavens holding in His hands the reins of God's providential government; keeping pace in the march of His providence with the progress of the Church; then always nearest, when she is in her times of greatest peril; holding all the powers of heaven, earth and hell in subjection to Himself, and plucking His grandest victories over the powers of darkness out of the very jaws of apparent defeat? What has all her history in the past been but a record of these signal interpositions, when her great Captain has appeared upon the field of conflict in the hour of her apparent disaster, and has turned for her her mourning into the victor's triumphant shout?

In the march of His providence the winds and waves of the sea, the lightnings and tempests of the sky, the stars of the firmament, the legions of heaven, and the kingdoms of earth have alike been brought under His control and made subservient to His will. Before the advance of His chariot-wheels the most powerful empires have been overthrown, as the tall cedars of Lebanon are uprooted by the storm; crowns have fallen from the heads of kings; armies in mightiest array have been vanquished, and nations, though leagued with nations, have been extinguished from the earth. Such has been the help to the Church of Him who "doeth according to His will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay His hand, or say unto Him, What doest Thou?"

That which is true of His presence and power in the domain of providence is equally true in the kingdom of grace. It is the invisible and spiritual presence of the great Captain of her salvation which makes the Church invincible; which renders the weapons of her warfare "mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds; casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ." In this conquest of souls the presence of her Lord is more to her than the might of numbers; more than the equipments of chariot and horse. All other elements of strength are but as weakness compared with this. When He has gone forth with her, riding upon the heaven of His spiritual power in her help, making bare His invincible arm in her behalf, her march has been one of incessant victory. Her foes have been slain by the power of the truth; they have been laid on heaps, as when the angel of the Lord breathed upon the armies of Sennacherib. But when



she has presumed to go forth without the conscious presence and indwelling Spirit of her King, she has found herself, like Samson in the midst of the Philistines, shorn of her locks, her great power gone, in her blindness and impotence giving occasion to the uncircumcised to blaspheme.

Not only in its relations to the corporate life of the Church, but as bearing upon the personal experience of the individual Christian is this truth most precious. There are periods when evil seems so dominant and vice so triumphant, that we are almost ready to conclude that this world is abandoned to the government of the prince of darkness, and that our only hope of success in life is in effecting some measure of compromise with his claims. The young man entering mercantile life or beginning a professional career, the politician looking to position and power, how prone to conceive that success is attainable only in the use of artifices or devices which a sensitive conscience and a high sense of personal honor condemn! Be not deceived. God reigns. The highest success, that which alone deserves the name, comes only with the help of God; is found only in the path of unswerving rectitude and honor. The child of affliction, watching the dark storm-clouds as they lower, imagines that heaven is shut out by them. They are so thick and turbulent, so full of all the elements of grief and gloom, that he imagines them driven by the hand of some unfriendly and unfeeling spirit. How precious to him the doctrine of the text! The darkest storm-cloud of adversity is the chariot on which our Jehovah-Jesus rides upon the heaven. Its blackness is only on the side exposed to our earthward view. On the heavenward side it is a chariot of light, more resplendent than the most glorious dawning of the day. The light affliction which is but for a moment is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. In all times of temptation and trial, in all times of discouragement and doubt, in all times of sorrow and care this is our comfort and hope, this our security and joy: the God of Jeshurun rises upon the heaven in our help. And when at length the hour shall come in which we find the sands of time crumbling beneath our feet, the gates of death unfolding, and eternity, with its visions of the coming judgment and the great white throne, pressing in upon us, that which shall not only disarm us of all fear, but shall kindle the fading eye with lustre and overspread the pale face of death with the glow of triumph, will be that, between us and all the visions of the judgment and the throne shall appear that nearer and serener one—that which has been the “glory of our brightest days and comfort of our nights”—the God of Jeshurun, riding upon the heaven in our help.

VALIANT FOR THE TRUTH.

Fight the good fight—lay hold
 Upon eternal life;
 Keep but thy shield, be bold,
 Stand through the hottest strife;
 Invincible while in the field
 Thou canst not fail—unless thou yield.

Great words are these, and strong:
 Yet, Lord, I look to Thee,
 To whom alone belong
 Valor and victory:
 If God be for me in the field,
 Whom can I fear? I will not yield!

—*J. Montgomery.*