

The Gospel of Hosea.

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A sermon preached at Westbourne Park Chapel on Sunday morning, April 9.

"Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her. And I will give her her vineyards from thence, and the Valley of Achor for a door of hope; and she shall make answer there, as in the days of her youth, as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt."—Hosea II. 14, 15.

This is Hosea's "exceeding great and precious promise" for men in trouble. It is the prophet's Gospel—his teaching as to the ways we must take to reach the highlands of the spiritual life from the valleys of affliction and humiliation.

Hosea is a patriot prophet sorely distressed by the condition of his fellow-countrymen. They are suffering for their sins. A long period of material prosperity has issued in the degradation of their ideals, the enfeeblement of their faith, and the destruction of their loyalty to the God of their fathers. They are sunk in idolatry, and must needs bear the penalties of their transgressions. They are led into the wilderness, separated from the fertile fields and prosperous farms, from the customary comforts and simple joys of social life, subjected to hardships and penury, and driven into the gloom of deep ravines instead of dwelling on the sunny wind-swept uplands of their fatherland.

THE MEANING OF PENALTY IS LOVE.

But, the prophet tells them, God is in their trouble. It is he who has led them into the "wilderness." This is the Lord's doing. These penalties are his appointment, and it is because he rules their life and loves them that they are subjected to these chastisements. Yes, he has brought them into these desolate places "to make love to them," to speak comfortably to them, to win them back to himself, to restore them to their allegiance to duty, to prepare them for and conduct them to, a better future; to make the Valley of Achor—that is "the valley of trouble"—a doorway of hope, a valley of teaching and training, yea, a valley of songful triumph which shall lead to the broad tablelands of communion with the God of forgiveness and love.

The promise of the Valley of Achor for a doorway of hope is a poetic figure and rich in suggestion. For the gorge to which he refers calls up some of the gloomiest associations of Israel's life. Worse than Sedan and Waterloo to the French is Achor to Israel! It is the spot where Achan fell into transgression and involved his people in a succession of defeats. Its memory was a menace. The name chronicled wrong and failure, disaster and death. Evil ones crept amongst its stones and bushes. And yet so full is the faith of the prophet in God, and in the Gospel he has given him, that he tells the people of God that at the very worst spot in the wilderness of their experience there is a door of hope; that God himself leads them and woos them, and therefore the dark vales of sorrow, as in times past, will become a school of illumination and discipline, a preparation for a purer and larger life for a truer conception of God, for more affectionate and quickening relations to Him for the ascent of men to the highlands of spiritual peace and spiritual joy and spiritual service.

THE TRUE SOLACE IN TROUBLE.

Now note that Hosea's Gospel recognizes the reality of the trouble, and meets it with a real solace. He does not minimise the pressure that is upon Israel, nor seek to disguise from them that the penalties from which they are now suffering are penalties inflicted by God. These are people whose troubles are nearly all imaginary, and it would be well for them if they could have a few real ones. They are dream troubles; they come out of their forecasts of the future, are not based upon accurate and careful observation, nor upon the presence of real causes of sorrow. These people cripple themselves by yielding to the tyranny of these imaginings. Still for most of us, trouble is a reality, and we never learn the geography of our personal planet completely until we have gone through a spiritual Valley of Achor. At some time or other we find a deep gorge opening in front of us, into which we have to go. God is infinitely wise and good and holy, and he has so fixed the order of our living that it is almost impossible for us to escape the burden of sorrow, the afflictions, the trials of human life. It is well for us to recognize their reality, and to remember that some of these afflictions come from God. He does not afflict willingly, but he does afflict; and to know that God has "led us into the wilderness," that he is detaching us from all, or from most, of our former joys, and that he has placed us in this land of penury and of want, that he himself has brought us here—well, to know that is to get very near to the Gospel, is to be within earshot of the good news from the very heart of the Eternal.

The Valley of Achor runs through the life of the world. Trouble is not young. The story of the earth is full of tragedy. Sin and penalty crowd into the experience of man. God leads us into struggle and difficulty. We ought to be glad, and we are glad when we are wise, that it is part of the order of human living, that God does not suffer us always to be in the presence of a weakening, enervating, and destructive prosperity. When we have been emancipated by our continuous successes, he breaks the thread, and flings us upon defeat, so that we may learn that truest success is in character, not in fortune; in the building

up of manhood, not in the accumulation of coin; in the discipline of the will and the subordination of our spirit to him, and not in fleeting and transitory pleasures. Hosea does not try to hide from us that the Valley of Achor is a valley of trouble by calling it by some other name. You do not change facts by changing the terms in which you describe them; and though you may assert that the sorrow is unreal, that it is entirely imaginary, if the iron is going into your soul, all such assertions will be simply an increase of irritation, an increase of pain. We cannot, when the pressure is heaviest, and the burden is bearing us down to the earth so that we cannot stand on our feet—we can not accept illusory terms, as if falsehood they altered actual facts. Not trouble is a reality in life, and the sin that causes the trouble, that is the spring of it, that makes the penalty inevitable, compel, if I may so speak, the God of righteousness and order to inflict it, is a horrible reality—a "moral catastrophe." No Oscar Wilde painting will do for us; we must treat it for what it really is, and then, and then only, is there a chance of our hearing and welcoming the good news of redemption.

THE VISION OF GOD IS CLEARER THROUGH THE MIST OF TEARS.

II. Again Hosea, besides recognizing the reality of the trouble, attributes the awakening of the mind to the object of the trouble to the illumination of God. "I will lead her into the wilderness, and I will speak comfortably to her, and I will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope."

I say that God does afflict willingly. The compulsion of God are the sources of the penalties that overtake sin. The heavenly Potter has the clay in his hands. He moulds and shapes it into a vase of richest beauty, but it must go into the seventimes heated furnace to be baked in order that it may abide a thing of beauty for ever; and since it is to be perfect the heat must be at the highest, the better the vase, the intenser the flame. The husbandman will prune the branches of the vine so that they may bring forth more fruit. The teacher will subject the pupil to exacting tasks so that his faculties may be drilled, that he may get the mastery of himself, and be able to use himself precisely as he wants. So God says, "I will lead her into the wilderness, and I will speak comfortably unto her." I will utter words of soothing messages that dispel fear, glad tidings that create faith and hope, and so win her back again to myself.

The prophet is talking out of his own heart, is laying that heart bare. This is the utterance of experience; he is telling us what he himself has gone through. He had married a sweet and lovely girl in her purity and charm, and she had become an unfaithful wife. She had been the guardian of his home, the spring of his happiness, the source of his strength, was disloyal; she was an adulteress, and the man's heart was rent, and in anguish he looked up to God. But how had he borne it? He had come out of the great tribulation and washed his robes and cleansed his heart from all hatred and revenge and ascended to loftier heights of spiritual power than ever he had known before, to larger conceptions of God's pity and love. The Valley of Achor, that is the valley of troubling, had been the door through which he ascended to the highlands of the spiritual order—the heavenly places of God. One of our best teachers says:—

He saw God in the tragedies of his life. He heard the voice of God in the sorrow and shame of his own home, and so, led by the love he still bore to his sinful wife, he became the messenger of divine love and mercy to God's sinful people.

Thus Wellhausen interprets the experience and action of the prophet. Yes, it was through the prophet's tear-filled eyes that he gained this vision, this fresh and helpful vision of God. It was because his own heart was broken with the grief that came into his home that he was able to receive the message of the infinite pity and tenderness, the compassion and forgiveness of God, and could take to Israel in its trouble and sorrow the glad tidings of God's great redeeming love. The man laid bare his own soul, the tragedy of his life, and translated it into a gospel for Israel. He had been led into the wilderness, and God had made love to him afresh, spoken comfortably to him, given him vineyards where he looked for a desert, and songs of victory where he expected lamentation and death, and now he finds in those experiences the material and motive of his Gospel. God has turned the Valley of Achor into a passage through which he has ascended into the highlands of the spiritual life; and as God has done for him, so he will do for Israel. Therefore he cries: "Let not your heart be troubled. Believe in God, he is your Leader; he has taken you out of your prosperities and given you these hungerings, these yearnings, these aching for something better and greater, and he will bring you at length into the full enjoyment of his revelation."

It is the utterance of one man's experience, but it is the one great gospel written away through the experience of men. Touch human life at any point and you come upon it. Wherever that life is real and in precisely the measure in which it ascends to the highest so you find the clear, rest-giving language of this Gospel. Moses goes into the wilderness and God woos him for forty years. God is teaching him, preparing him for his great emancipating and nation-building work. The wilderness, the Valley of Achor, is a preparation for these forty years of work for the

world that he does with such splendid success after he is eighty years of age. Joseph is thrust into the Valley of Achor! It is a prison; God leads him there, and God with him in the Valley of Achor, and brings him out and puts him on to a throne of service to Egypt and Israel; and once, he has got to the highlands. Where does your sweetest, your most inspiring song come from? From the Book of Psalms. "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want, He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside the still waters, he restoreth my soul, yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." It is the song of a soul won back to God. Scarcely is the great pattern Man baptized and dedicated to his great reforming and revolutionary work before he is summoned into the wilderness. Led of the Spirit he goes, and for forty days is tempted of the devil, and then he is led out to the uplands of his service and on them he distributes the good seed of the kingdom and their harvest fill the world.

THE FRUITFUL VALLEY OF HUMILIATION.

John Bunyan, in his "Pilgrim's Progress," talking about the Valley of Humiliation, says that "it is the most fruitful valley that ever grew flower on." So it is. Where do we look when we want to feed our faith; when we ask for something that shall enable us to set our feet down firmly, stand loyal to our conviction, true to our principle. Where do we look? We go back to the Valleys of Achor, to the men who suffer like heroes, passing through, rising high, doing their work whole-heartedly; and are we stiffened in conviction, and sustained in conflict? Yes. "Call to remembrance the former generations, look into your Puritan gospels, turn over the history of the Free Churches, and what do you come upon? Valleys of Achor. The greatest, the best souls go through them, and through to the widest service of mankind. John Morley asks:—

To what quarter in the large historic firmament can we turn our eyes with such certainty of being stirred and elevated to thinking better of human life, and of the worth of those who have been most deeply penetrated by its stress, as by the annals of those intrepid spirits who, Protestant doctrine of the indefeasible personal responsibility brought to the front in the sixteenth century in land?

Yes, despite the Puritan as you may to-day, when you want to get at a real man, a man with a soul in him, able of doing Divine work, you go to the Puritans of the seventeenth century, you go back to the wilderness into which God led them, you see them there, and as you see them, you become ashamed of the meanness and cowardice that afflict our times, and you ask for grace that you may play the man!

In one of the cells of Newgate in the year 1592 a coffin was placed with this inscription upon it. "This is the corpse of Roger Rippon, a servant of Christ who is the last of sixteen or seventeen, which the great enemy of God, the Archbishop of Canterbury, with the High Commissioners, have martyred in Newgate, within these five years, manifestly for the testimony of Jesus Christ."

Come along to the reign of Charles II., and note that more than eight thousand persons died in confinement as a penalty for their dissent. I wonder whether, when you are riding on the top of a bus and going by the Marble Arch you ever have any visions? I scarcely ever go without them. It is one of the sacred spots of our country. Concerning that particular spot I read, that within one hundred yards of the Marble Arch, "Henry Barrow and John Greenwood, charged with holding opinions which impugned the queen's ecclesiastical supremacy, and conducting worship contrary to law, were doomed to die by the hands of the common hangman, and when the ropes had been fastened to their necks, and the bitterness of death seemed past, a reprieve was sent, not in good faith, but in mockery, and on the next day they had again to summon up their Christian fortitude, thus paying the penalty of a two-fold death for their allegiance to conscience and to God." Our Churches were born and nourished in the Valley of Achor; and the valley has been and still is the doorway of hope of liberty and justice, for order and progress, for righteousness and peace—both for our own country and the world.

DARKNESS BRINGS OUT THE STARS.

"It is in the wilderness that men grow to the tallest stature and develop the most splendid heroism." "Darkness shows us worlds of light we never saw by day." I remember well at the beginning of my experience as a pastor being wonderfully fortified by coming into contact with a modest Puritan, a true hero, who in consequence of his loyalty to conscience had been driven out of his farm, lost nearly the whole of his goods, and soon after that had to stand at the open grave of his wife; and, again later, he had to witness going down under the auctioneer's hammer the old arm-chair and other precious things, and then becoming dependent on others; and yet that man said—I hear it now as though it were only yesterday—"The Lord hath done great things for me whereof I am glad." "I was brought low and he helped me. My heaviest troubles have been my best friends, and the things that went directly against me have been made to work together for my good." "What, I said, thinking of his history as I knew it, "What great

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