

The Trial of Jealousy

Numbers 5.

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"His blood be upon us and upon our children," said the Jews of their betrayed and crucified King. And so it is with them unto this day. Their land, which should have been the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts, has become an Aceldama — a field of blood; and as they themselves loved cursing, so has it come upon them.

The Lord in His doctrine determined this — that we are the children of Him Whose works we do, and Whose ways we imitate (John 8). Hence it is manifest that, in the judgment of God, Israel at this day are not the children of Abraham (for they have not done the works of Abraham) but the seed of Judas, for they did his work, being one with him of old in the betraying of Jesus, and still in the disowning and rejection of Jesus (see Acts 1: 16, Acts 7: 52, 1 Thess, 2: 15). But Psalm 109 leads us directly to this mystery. There the rejected Messiah first complains of His adversary, and Judas, we know, is intended (Ps. 109: 8, and Acts 1: 20). But afterwards He speaks of His adversaries (ver. 20) calling for judgment on them as the children of His adversary; and the Jews, we may also know, are intended. For surely it could not have been the natural seed of Judas, the adversary (even if he had any), but rather mystically. And his mystical seed, as we have seen, are the Jews in their unbelief; for they it was who joined with him in his deed, and still in spirit imitate his evil way. Consequently the various judgments invoked in that Psalm, upon the children of the adversary, may be seen lying on the Jews to this day. They it was who persecuted the poor and needy man (v. 16); and they have their reward. They it was who delighted not in blessing (ver. 17), refusing to say, "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord;" and blessing is therefore far from them. They it was who "loved cursing," saying of Jesus, "Crucify Him, crucify Him;" so has curse come upon them: a curse and an astonishment, and a byword are they made, through all the nations of the earth unto this day.

But in the course of the holy complaint and invocation of vengeance by the disowned rejected King of the Jews, set forth in that Psalm, I may observe, that He makes reference to the ordinance of the "Trial of Jealousy" (see Psalm 109: 14-18, and Num. 5: 23-27); and therefore as to that ordinance I would speak more particularly.

This ordinance was for the discovering of unconfessed infidelity. A suspected wife was set by the high priest in the presence of God as the Searcher of hearts. Her head was uncovered, in token that on the present occasion she knew of no subjection to any but to the Lord; and therefore she removed the covering from her head, for that covering was the sign of subjection to her husband (1 Cor. 11: 3). The priest then put into her hand "the offering of jealousy." This was a meat-offering prepared by her husband, in a manner suitable to her approach to God, and which the priest afterwards took from her hand, and waved before the Lord, offering the memorial of it on the altar; by which action was signified, on both the husband's and the wife's behalf, the committal of this matter to God. Then holding in his hand a vessel containing holy water or water taken from the brazen laver mingled with dust (the sign of curse or fruit of sin; Gen. 3: 19), the priest solemnly abjured the woman, and read to her the curses that would come upon her if she were guilty. To this, if she pleased to stand the trial after all this warning, she said, "Amen, Amen;" and then the priest wrote the curses in a book, blotted them with some of the bitter water, and gave the rest of it to the woman to drink. The trial was then made. If she had been unfaithful, the water would enter into her and become bitter; her belly would swell, and

her thigh rot; and she would be made a curse among the people. But if her husband's suspicions had wronged her, none of these things would happen to her. For the curses in the book would all be blotted out, so as to be legible no more; and thus, being freed and avenged, she would receive strength of the Lord to conceive seed.

Now in the Psalm 109, the Lord appears as one Who had brought up Israel to this trial, and by it found her guilty. He was entitled so to bring her up for this trial, for He had of old married her (Jer. 31: 32), of old had spread His skirt over Jerusalem (Ezek. 16: 8), and at the time of the marriage had warned her of His holy jealousy (Ex. 20: 5). And time after time subsequent to the marriage He had been provoked to jealousy, but had forbore, and been patient, calling again and again for repentance and confession (Deut. 32: 21, Ezek. 8: 3). But at length He pleads with her by this ordeal, while she, like any hardened wife who would dare to stand the trial with the consciousness of sin upon her, defies divine justice. "His blood be upon us and upon our children," from the lips of Israel, was as the woman's "Amen" to the invocation of the curse. But their confidence has been their shame. The sin of their mother was not blotted out in the trial (Ps. 109: 14). The water entered in and did its deadly work (v. 18); and to this day they are under the penalties of convicted infidelity. Israel has been judged as a woman that breaks wedlock (Ezek. 16: 38).

Such is the end of their ways. But the Lord has His ways also, and if theirs ended in conviction and shame and judgment, His will end in mercy, in peace, and in honour. There is with the Lord forgiveness for Israel. As Jesus said on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." There is to be acceptance for this unfaithful one with her injured Lord. She has played the harlot, it is true, and so has the trial of jealousy found it; she has said, "I will go after my lovers," but the Lord has also said, "I will betroth thee unto Me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in loving-kindness, and in mercies" (see Hosea 2, 3). And when this comes to pass, the very blessing which is promised to the wife who stood acquitted in the trial of jealousy, shall be Israel's; for she shall then be made free, the free-woman and a joyful mother of children (see Num. 5: 28, and Isa. 54: 1).

But before she be thus married to her Maker and Redeemer in the bonds of the new covenant, she is to have a time of espousals, in which the Lord will discipline her and form her for Himself. She is never to be restored to the old covenant. Her ruins under that lie as enduring as the ruins of Sodom and Gomorrah; but God will remember His covenant with her and establish unto her an everlasting covenant (Ezek. 16: 55, 60). And her day of espousals will prepare her for this abiding union. In that day she will be brought to know her own ways and loathe herself for all her abominations, to be confounded and never open her mouth any more because of her shame. But she will also be taught to know the Lord's ways, and rejoice in the grace and the fulness of His love, whereby He will then be pacified toward her (Ezek. 16: 60-63). In that day He will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and then speak comfortably unto her. He will hedge up her way with thorns, and make a wall so that she shall not find her paths; but all this discipline will only be in order to lead her to say, "I will go and return unto my first husband, for then was it better with me than now" (Hosea 2). "She shall in that day seek again the Lord her God, and David her king" (Hosea 3). The Lord will give her "the spirit of adoption" (Jer. 3: 19). "She shall forget her own people and her father's house" (Ps. 45: 10) "She shall hearken and incline her ear, and the King shall greatly desire her beauty." Then shall the cry of "Ishi" be put into her mouth, and the Lord will delight in her, and call her His "Hephzibah" (Isa. 62, Hosea 2).

The book of the Canticles, and a large portion of the Psalms, give us the exercises of Jerusalem, the bride elect or the remnant of the Jews, during that day of her espousals and discipline. Ruth who first gleaned in the fields and afterwards lay at the feet of Boaz on the threshing-floor, is the type of Jerusalem thus in discipline and in espousals, as Ruth the wife of Boaz the mighty man of wealth is her

type in all that honour and estate to which she shall be brought when the day of espousals ends in the covenant. And these things are also variously celebrated by all the prophets. But in all that they notice of these things, and of the Lord's tender love to His Jerusalem, I must mark one feature which has its peculiar interest for us. It is this — when the Lord has brought her to Himself in the bonds of the covenant, He does not, refer to her former state as one of divorcement, but rather of widowhood. That is, He does not call to mind the shame, but rather the sorrow, of her former estate. Though it may be divorcement and shame (Isa. 50: 1), yet the Lord will not remember it as such. May we not, brethren, notice the perfectness of such love as this? Does it not sweetly and affectingly tell us that with our God there is forgetting as well as forgiving? the taking away the sting of rebuking recollections, as well as the covering of the multitude of sins? We see this in that beautiful chapter (Isa. 54). There Jehovah, re-married to Jerusalem, looks back as in pity on her widowhood, and not as in anger on her divorcement. All this is perfect in the ways of the divine love. The human expression of this we get in Joseph, who is the type of Christ in this His love to Israel. For when Joseph forgave and accepted his brethren, he would have the memory of all that which was their guilt and dishonour blotted out for ever. "Now therefore," said he, "be not grieved nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither; for God did send me before you to preserve life."

These are some of the ways of His grace, beloved; but the source of them all, which is in Himself, is unsearchable. Unmeasured heights, and lengths, and depths, and breadths of love are there — a love that no man knows, and that is preparing for us what eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived. Oh! that we drank more simply, more unmingledly of these waters. We should think much of the love of God, as it is in its fountains in Himself, and as it is in its streams spreading and diffusing itself among us, poor withered sinners. Let us not so much brood in sorrow, and complaint over thoughts of our narrow love to Him, but rather let His love be shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost, our enlarged souls entertaining the thought of it continually.

And here, for a moment, I would turn aside to express what I have felt at times touching the book of God, that in one respect it is indeed a melancholy saddening book. But I mean only as it is a record of man's ways. Open any historical portion of it, and there you will see man in his evil courses, going on in active enmity or reckless forgetfulness of God. Open any prophetic portion of it, and there you will hear the voice of God's minister exposing, rebuking, warning or threatening poor evil man. All this makes the book a melancholy and saddening volume. From Genesis, through Exodus, and onward to the end, as your thoughts are led through man's paths, your heart will be led into lamentation and mourning.

But it is a book of light and joy also, full of rest for the weary, and of refreshing for those who are thus sick of man and his doings. But I mean only as it is the record of God's ways. Open it in any place of it, and there you will find His grace meeting man's sin, His counsels correcting man's foolishness, His efforts of love essaying one method after another to bring man home to Himself; and in the end you will see Him though refused and slighted, in the sovereignty of His grace building up families for heaven and earth, and filling all things with creation's joy in His own praise. Thus, brethren, let one page of this wondrous book show man to us, and all is sorrow and shame; let another show God to us, and all is rest and joy. And this will be found to be just as it should be, that "according as it is written, he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord."

Let us return, and for a little while meditate on the church's more immediate interest in the truths I have been considering. I would observe that Scripture teaches us that the church knows of no marriage with her Lord, but of election and grace; and of that covenant which puts away sin, and preserves union for ever — in principle such a marriage as Jerusalem is to know in the latter day, and

not such as Israel knew when of old they came out of Egypt. The church has never been married by a covenant that rests on her own fidelity and strength. Indeed as yet there has been no marriage of the church at all. There will be, but as yet there has been no presenting of the bride to the Lamb. Nor indeed could there have been; for the church is not fully formed, nor has the scene of their union, the home and inheritance of Christ and the church, been as yet prepared. For heaven is the scene of union (Rev. 19: 7), and out of heaven the Lamb's wife is seen to descend (Rev. 21). But it was otherwise with Israel of old. There might have been a marriage between her and the Lord of Hosts, as we have seen there was, because Israel as a nation was manifested under Joshua; and Canaan was the scene of the union.

But the church has never yet been manifested, for she is not yet fully formed. She is passing now through the time of her espousals, the time of discipline and preparation, that when she is married, she may be ready for her Lord, and fitted for abiding everlasting union with Him. She is during this age or dispensation on her journey to meet Him. She is like Rebecca under the charge of Abraham's servant, having left her father, her kindred, and her country, as the espoused of the distant and as yet unseen Isaac. But she fears not, she suspects not. She has committed herself to the care of a stranger, One Who is not known in this Mesopotamia of ours, One "Whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth Him not, neither knoweth Him" (John 14: 17). But she knows Him, and trusts Him, and believes the report that He has brought her about her Isaac, and that His Father has given Him all the wealth of His house (Gen. 24: 36, John 16: 15). And though she, like Rebecca, has not seen Him, yet she loves Him; though as yet she sees Him not, yet believing she rejoices (1 Peter 1: 8). Her eye is toward Canaan, and her heart upon Isaac. But she has not yet reached Sarah's tent, Isaac's desired dwelling-place. She has goodly ornament upon her, brought out from Abraham's treasures, the pledges of Abraham's wealth, of Isaac's love, and of her guide's faithfulness; but she is still only on her way. And blessed is it, brethren, when our hearts are "in the way," when we are contented to know that to the end here it is but a journey. And we must take heed, lest, like Israel, we become discouraged because of the way. For the will of God must first be done, and then the promise (Heb. 10: 36).

Thus is it with us, beloved. It is a going still from strength to strength through the valley of Baca. It is the way before, as well as behind us, but still the way. So does the word of God describe it for us, and the word also describes this dispensation to us under the figure of the vestry to the church, if I may so speak, where the guests are putting on their wedding garments in preparation for the marriage. It is a kind of ante-room to the kingdom or the King's palace (Matt. 22: 11); a day of espousals, as we have already spoken, in which the church is learning the mind of the Lord, and the ways of His house; "I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ." Mark! that I may present you. The marriage is but in prospect. Personal individual union of the saints with their Head, so as to bring forth fruit unto God, there is now;* but presenting of the church unto Christ there is not as yet. Adam was cast into a deep sleep, and of the rib taken from his side while thus in sleep, was made a woman. But not till she was fully thus made, and Adam had awaked, was she brought to him. So in the mystery. The act of forming the church — the woman, is now going on; but the presentation cannot be till that act be finished, and Adam awakes; till "the whole body be fitly joined together and compacted," and the Lord arises, and shows Himself, and takes His prepared and loved one.

[*There is also the baptism of all by the Spirit into one body. — ED.]

And this mystery, the love and marriage of Christ and the church, in three stages of it, is beautifully disclosed to us in Eph. 5: 25-27.

I. — "Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it." That is, loving before the world was, He said "Lo I come"; and when His delights, as He speaks, "were with the sons of men." Then did He set His love upon the church, and in due time He gave Himself for it, sold all that He had that He might possess her — His pearl of great price.

2. — "That He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word." That is, during the present age, He is forming the church for Himself by the virtue and continuous ministry of His word and Spirit, till she is prepared as a bride for her husband.

3. — "That He might present it to Himself a glorious church." That is, after this age, in the coming kingdom, when He will have taken His bride, the church, then formed and ready, and made glorious like Himself; that He may find her His helpmeet, and be satisfied in her for ever.

We thus are taught that the church has not been, neither indeed could have been, as yet presented for the marriage in heaven (Rev. 19).

But the looking upon the church as though she had been already manifested and married has been, I judge, the occasion of giving her a very undue place and condition in the world. It has been a warrant for establishing her in the earth; for an establishment is an attempt to manifest or present the church. But this cannot be here, as we have seen. With Israel it might have been so, and was so; for the earth was Israel's home, but the church is a stranger here. And an understanding of this (and an understanding we should have in all things, 2 Tim. 2: 7) would have hindered this attempt. But there has not been in all this knowledge, and we have each of us, brethren, much of slowness of heart to bear with in one another, as the Lord with all of us a thousand-fold more than we ever estimate. And it is well to remember that it is written, "If any man think that he knoweth anything, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know."

But the understanding of this would, I judge, have hindered the Lord's people from ever consenting to the establishment of the church, which is the giving her a place and a dowry thus on the earth; as though the earth was her place, and she were as yet in this age, entitled to the form and the rights of a presented or married church. But the understanding of this would, not only as I judge, have thus hindered error, but have furnished comfort. For it would prepare the saints for the present distracted broken condition of every thing among them. And this would be no small comfort. It would teach them that they were not to expect in this age a perfect exhibition of the church, but they must look on it only as the time for forming and fashioning the church after the mind and counsel of God. And this would further lead them to know that things might be really better when apparently worse, worse as to their external general condition, but better as to the great ends of the dispensation. For the purpose of the divine Former of the church is to have the saints grow up in the life and power of communion with their Lord through the Spirit, rather than to assume any consistency and order, however good for present credit and security, which would not stand the light and purity of that day. For this would be answering the ends of the dispensation, bringing each of us into readiness for the day when we shall all be presented together without spot.

Oh! let us, dear brethren, have grace to cultivate this readiness for the Bridegroom. It depends on this communion with Him, while as yet He is absent; and on our minds being "kept in the simplicity that is in Christ," on their being formed only in and for Christ. Christ is our salvation, but Christ is our lesson also, the holy lesson we should each be diligently learning, careful and jealous that Satan be not teaching us another. When the Lord God was fashioning Eve, His design was to make her a helpmeet for Adam. His eye rested on Adam's joy, and on that only, all the while. Had any other design intruded, it would have been a corrupting of the fair workmanship. But the Lord God was true to the counsels of

His love toward Adam. And so Adam found it; for when Eve was brought to him, he said, "This is bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh;" expressing thus his complacency in her, and thus owning that the lord God had prepared her for him in perfect love and wisdom.

And so when Abraham's servant, Eliezar of Damascus, was getting Rebecca ready for Isaac, he clothed her with raiment, and adorned her with jewels which he had brought out of Abraham's house. Nothing of Mesopotamia was found upon her; for Rebecca was to be for Isaac, and not for her own people. And so with the Spirit now. The purpose of the Holy Ghost now is to get the bride ready for the Lamb. We have been espoused to one husband that we may be presented to Christ. And how jealous should we be lest any thing should be forming our minds for any one but for Him! The gifts that have been sent down are only for uniting us in the knowledge of the Son, and that in all things we may grow up unto Him. Any other attempt is but sleight of man and cunning craftiness (Eph. 4). It may be fair and boastful of great and good things; but it is deceiving an angel of light, if it be not forming us in Christ. That is the point of jealousy with the saint. It may appear to be wisdom, or knowledge, or religion, or order, or some other thing of esteem; but it matters not: — it is deceitful and corrupting, if it exercise any art but the art of making us to grow up unto Christ. We want the broken heart, dear brethren, the fragments of which Jesus can take up. We want to dismiss all confidence in the flesh, for Jesus cannot use the flesh. We want to know more of the widowhood, the longings of one who waits for her Lord. He is absent, and many things solicit us the while, but we are to keep ourselves for Him. We are to be preparing as Eve for Adam, that when he awakes he may see the fruit of his deep sleep and be satisfied — as Rebecca for Isaac, that when the solitary saint lifts up his eyes and sees her who had left her kindred and country for him, he may be comforted (Gen. 24: 62-67). And doubtless we shall then be comforted and satisfied also. Will it not be enough to find ourselves by His side for ever? will it not be enough to see Him rejoicing over us as "His pearl of great price," for the sake of which He had parted with all that He had? Oh! if the sweetest joy of a faithful wife be this, to know that she has the abiding and best love of her lord; will not this be ours, brethren, without fear of change for ever? May we be true to Him Who never can be false to us, Who nourisheth and cherisheth us as His own flesh! J. G. B.